

Title: Otter Meet

Thank you all for asking me to preside over this inaugural.

It has indeed been a great privilege for me to be associated with the wild life and conservation program at NCBS for the past several years even though I am not a practitioner but just an aficionado.

My thoughts on otters and dolphins were always colored by my research interest in brain sciences and how wonderful their behavior was and how advanced their cognitive abilities were. Recently only I discovered how endangered they are and how badly they are threatened by poaching and activities similar to what brought rhinos and tigers near extinction. That prompted me on several occasions to ask my colleagues in DST and other fora why we do not have any good proposals on conservation of animals like otters and dolphins while we get dozens on tigers,

Saturday, 23 November 2013

leopards elephants and lions....even when we got a lot of projects proposals on wet lands they used to be mostly birds and a few on fish and frogs none as far as I remember on otters although we are home to almost a fourth of the otter species and all seriously endangered. I am proud to see that research in this area is considerably bolstered by our own wild life program students like Atira and faculty like Krithi Karanth and Ajith. I am so happy that this meeting has brought some stalwarts like S A Hussein who have brought to fore research in otters in India and highlighted that in the context of conservation. We began the wildlife program here precisely because most of us who practiced modern biology were enthusiasts but not experts on animals and our research interest began with our awe at the ways animals behaved and a deep desire to understand intricacies of such complex behaviour and underlying

common principles. We have gained considerably by our exposure to the faculty and students in wild life program that we now have started thinking of interdisciplinary programs like chemical ecology here at NCBS. It is the understanding that interesting biological thought has to start in the field that has impelled us to think of such programs as part of an other wise place for fundamental research more focused in the laboratory and analytical experiments.

Thinking of that...even if I am carrying coals to New castle as the expression goes...I have to say few lines.

Given our ratio of coast length to land area...we may be as close to some small islands particularly because of a large number of monsoon fed rivers flowing to the sea and consequently enhancing the length of coast...and our need to take care what is 16% of the

world's people with only about 4% land area of which only half is hospitable...also assuredly we have 16% each of mammalian species, birds and herpets...a bit perhaps even more by percent species wise of insects and fish but more interestingly also otters (four of 14 is good)...so it must be with wetlands. Conservation for us is not just a matter of fad like for some developed countries but a matter of survival..... conserving such an animal as Otter that is on top of the wetland pyramid we will have to start from preserving and enhancing wetlands, be it marine or freshwater and the collateral gain will be in the form of protection we get from the rigours of global warming. While we still have to fight for equitable use of the carbon currency, to help take our nation on the fast road of development...we can indeed achieve development with a clean face if we pay attention to conservation...and

otters and wetlands are a good thing to think of for a beginning. It took nature a million years to evolve these ecological systems and services...unbridled development and global warming threatens to undo this perhaps in a few hundred years and remedial measures contemplated and being done at billions of dollars of cost to the poorer countries is unlikely to be permanent. Real conservation efforts will hardly need a few years to implement and will be permanent as long as they are anchored on hard and honest Science and solid scientific analysis.

I come from Kerala ..it exemplifies all our problems...we have perhaps a lot of coast line and of course western ghats so much so it is a state which is virtually a four lane road , with one side the hills and the other side the Arabian sea. When the globe warms we are sure to be swallowed by the sea or a couple of years of missing monsoons in the

Saturday, 23 November 2013

hills will kill us by starvation. We are fortunate however to be literate and with enviable societal indices.....This cannot sustain without development because we hardly grow enough food for its people. I can see why wetland conservation will be critical herewe have three of the known otters and larger proportion of birds and amphibians...and even a whole district well below sea level..and with plenty of monsoon,...conserving wetlands makes sense...and it will be the only buffer to surging seas. They are planning to surround even New York City with wetlands and have succeeded a bit with wetlands around Silicon Valley to protect against sea erosion. In addition preserving wetlands will preserve precious water resources to protecting our state when global warming does hit. It goes so much less and it is really much more permanent.!

Saturday, 23 November 2013

I will end by saying conservation and in particular species like otters pursued in an integrative manner is not just important but a matter of life and death for us. It is indeed our great privilege to be hosting this workshop and I do hope it will generate even more enthusiasm for research in conservation of otters anchored in methodologies of basic sciences which is the forte of NCBS.