

# School in the Forest : Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, Kerala

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The Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary is dedicated to the plants of the Western Ghats, a mountain range running down the western coastline of peninsular India. Founded in 1981 by Wolfgang Theuerkauf, the Sanctuary is a garden of wild plant species grown at the edge of a rainforest reserve. The intention is to rehabilitate endangered species and restore habitats in a highly fragmented landscape, in which only a fraction of original forest remains and a high percentage of species are rare, vulnerable or threatened by imminent extinction. The Sanctuary is run by a small group of resident gardeners, naturalists and educators, and supported by a wide circle of well-wishers. Together it offers an approach that is connected to the climate,



land, habitats, plants, animals and people of the Western Ghats.

Every

year around 2000 people walk up the three kilometres of dirt road, in rain and sun, to visit the gardens at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary. Around 80 per cent of these are local and regional folks—families on an outing, schools, youth groups, nature clubs, botany students, seminarians, tribes people, farmers and women's groups. All receive a free guided tour from one of the Sanctuary staff or residents. They are taken around the main garden areas which host an attractive and comprehensive collection of native and exotic plants, arranged in taxonomic order and landscaped under the natural forest canopy. For these visitors it is an occasion to learn a little about plants, the importance of conservation and regional efforts to maintain and protect biodiversity. Most are quite surprised and delighted even—and many fall under the spell of a colourful and bounteous tropical world, full of unusual and fascinating beings. Besides these casual visitors, the Sanctuary attracts several scientists, environmentalists, educators and students throughout the year. They bring with them wisdom, knowledge, techniques and insights and their visits are a wonderful chance for us to explore issues of common concern with a very wide and informal network of individuals. And in addition, we collaborate with NGOs in the region in holding workshops for local school children—using the land, plants and animals at the Sanctuary to demonstrate and explore questions in ecology with the very young. In this article, I would like to share some aspects of the Sanctuary's residential programmes with regional schools, with whom we have jointly developed the whole concept of a 'School in the Forest'. This term is in part derived from the title — Gurukula—and is very much the original inspiration under which the place was founded - as a forest retreat and a place of learning. In ancient India students went to live in the homes of their teachers which were usually in remote quiet places, perhaps in the woods. In this quiet and conducive natural setting, a variety of disciplines were explored —through the act of living and learning together. In our case, the Gurukula, or the 'house of the teacher' includes—the forest, the garden with its colourful assemblage of plants and animals, the river, the monsoon climate and also the community of humans in which children and adults can live, participate and share responsibilities for varying lengths of time. Thus, community life at the Sanctuary involves the daily care of other living beings and a consistent and playful enquiry about the wild natural community of which people are also a part. Children have come to the Sanctuary and made the place their home and a very critical aspect of all this is that they learn to listen and look and take great interest in the various creatures they share their daily space with. The main intent of 'The School in the Forest' programmes is to provide a diverse and challenging exposure to a way of life that is intimate with nature and natural processes. The stay at the Sanctuary includes a number of different and complementary aspects. Attention is given to the quality of the whole day, from dawn to dusk, to rhythms of other living beings, to chores and jobs around the garden and kitchen, quiet study of habitats or species, health and physical activity (swimming, tree climbing, outdoor forest games), investigation and discussion. Usually children join in with little or no resistance, especially on their second or third visits, by which time they have overcome their initial inhibitions with the wild and also established a rapport with the residents and the place itself. One reason why we have welcomed these residential programmes is that working, functioning and living in nature demand an alertness of the senses and the ability to look afresh at what is going on around one. We feel it is of critical importance for youngsters to develop a different quality of relationship with the natural world

and this process requires time. Nature moves in unpredictable ways, never static, always new, revealing deeper patterns and principles. To engage fully with this involves looking and listening, an agile body and a quiet, non-judgemental and yet intensely alert mind. This takes time to develop and most children, whatever their background come upon this slowly if given some playful guidance and space. All of this is of value, wherever one is, in manual work, academic study, human relationship, travel...whatever. Our thesis is this: that the loss of such qualities is part of the severance of the connection between humanity and wild nature. We have been wondering—is it possible to draw out young people's inherent sensitivity and readiness to look and learn through observation of and participation in nature? Awakening the most primary mode of learning, direct experience and first hand awareness, is too often ignored in education, especially as the child grows older. Contact with the primary gets progressively shaded out as abstract learning takes over, too early in our opinion, and often with detrimental results. This may be one factor leading to disconnected, disoriented and uprooted 36 immediate environment, nor for things or people. We, thus, attempt to create a space for learning that enables the discovery of something new and original, of spontaneous perception, engagement and enquiry as can indeed happen when immersed in nature and natural processes—even for short periods of time. We don't begin by giving them lots of knowledge and information—rather we take them out first and let perception and wonder blossom into compassion, action and applicable knowledge. This 'back to nature' form of learning, has a second component that is of great relevance too. Making sense of the world around, articulating one's observations and concerns, raising questions and communicating are all critical aspects of learning. Seeing connections and reflecting upon them, expanding the capacity of the brain by allowing its very different intelligences to flower help to generate a 'rootedness' to the earth. There are so many fascinating dimensions to explore with the children as their own windows open—heightened awareness, body-kinesthetic abilities, interpersonal skills, linguistic and intellectual abilities, as well as aesthetic and artistic sensibilities. If direct experience is woven together with sharing and reflecting and enquiry it to do with being very close to a subject, so close that you suspend your own judgement and watch the subject free of ideation and pre-conceived assumptions—be it the river habitat, or the bird community, or the plant—until it tells you its story. This becomes extraordinarily intimate—if given time and space—and this intimacy with creation in its vaster aspects or its more minute details has the possibility to bring about a truer and more active compassion. If you add to this the incentive that children feel as if they are active participants in research, that they are assisting and enabling the work of the Sanctuary by bringing in their observations and questions, then the zest for nature study doubles. They are not to be underestimated in their acuity of perception nor in their abilities as field investigators. If you want to undertake a study of ants or birds or whatever, just invite a whole bunch of children to help you widen and deepen the pool of knowledge of local natural history. The children become your extended eyes and ears, assistants and junior scientists in a joint exploration and discovery of the natural world. Thus, the understanding of nature requires a direct involvement, in whatever way. This can happen in city parks, with a home garden, or trips out to the wilderness but what is essential is the building up of care, involvement, curiosity, activity, responsibility, over time, which begins with a slow tuning in to the cycles and rhythms of the natural world. Does observation really bring about learning? People differ in their opinions about this, especially in a world that is dominated by the intellect and technology, where individuals, even in rural areas, are subject to third-hand, trickled-down bits of information, which bear no relevance to their immediate world. We believe we have not even touched upon the potential of direct observation—which we suspect is vast—especially for the very young. The trend is to fill them up with colourful books and hi-tech films on nature very quickly and the electronic, virtual or printed media become the only gateway to a world that is vital, dynamic, rich and beautiful. Rather, we wonder, can the young mind be awakened to the muse of the forest, to the incredible complexity of tropical life, to the fragility of this ancient ecosystem and to the fact that there is no separation between humans and nature? And, once initiated, can this connectedness be sustained? By observation so far I have been including the action and involvement of all the senses—as the senses are a fundamental component of our earth-bound existence and of ourselves as physical beings. It is through the senses that we relate to the world at large. Looking, listening, touching, tasting, smelling—bringing these together through games, activities, explorations opens the doorway into a different and more integrated mode of functioning. This seems to give children a degree of selfconfidence, self-awareness and also a boost to their natural liveliness and spontaneity. Our residential programmes grew slowly, bit by bit over time—quite organically—as our main focus has always been on the local outreach programmes. Also, we never had the idea that it could build into anything significant as most schools are ready to send their children away on trips for a few days at most. However, one school took the initiative, because a few of the teachers were very struck by the beauty of the forest and the possibility that children could develop a more caring relationship with the environment. So they, Centre For Learning, asked if they could send about 10 students, (around 13 years of age) in 1993, for three weeks to the Sanctuary. They came along with books, teachers and homework, so that they wouldn't miss out on their regular curriculum. We essentially provided a kind of a physical support structure, took them on walks, and organized a few activities here and there. At first there was quite a lot of reluctance and fear that we had to deal with—the leeches, the immersion in wilderness, the lack of physical conveniences (we had no electricity, television etc.) the sheer over-powering quality of the forest. That was the first trip. It went well enough that they sent their children again, and again. Each time the programmes became more detailed and more investigative. They grew more comprehensive in the range of processes included, especially as our own skills improved. Other age groups came. And at one stage, the whole school visited the Sanctuary, in different groups, for varying periods of time, including all the teachers, the youngest 6 year olds and the seniors. Some very lovely documents came out at the end. Log books, stories, maps, caricatures, poems, tables, illustrations—very different representations of natural phenomena—but all valid and rooted in the perceived and perceptual field. For example: a one month stay of 11 year olds involved a detailed study of the bird life of the Sanctuary. Three to four hours of bird watching everyday over a month yielded huge amounts of information on diversity, behaviour, feeding, and habitats. Another group of 15 year olds investigated ants for a fortnight. We took their work into the entomology lab of Centre for Ecological Sciences in Bangalore and were told that this was excellent science. All observations were valid and relevant and the only thing we had to ensure was that we didn't mix up species, which is quite difficult to do with ants! This led to further projects on insects in general—the different orders, their peculiar life habits and cycles, habitats, movements and so on. Finally the oldest students at the school were sent for a three-month immersion in simple living—they built their own thatch hut, managed and took care of a piece of land, did lots of natural history observations, some craft work (as they made their own mats and tools and ladles). Into this physical, land based, natural context were woven in daily lessons in ecology, globalization, environmental and personal health, questions about careers and sustainable livelihood, the relationship between self and society, energy issues and farming. Lest you assume that all this is happening with only one school—I would like to add that although it took one school to develop the whole programme of nature education to such a comprehensive and sustained depth—the relevance of it has been picked up by other schools who are now ready to send their children for similar programmes. And in the last few years other schools have participated in our residential 'School in the Forest' programmes. This year a school for disabled children has asked to come, an NGO working with village youth, as well as arural school and a network of educators. Being small we can handle only certain numbers. Also as the programmes are so intensive they can only really happen with a maximum of 10–15 children at a time. However, it's extremely encouraging that schools in south India are increasingly seeing the relevance of this kind of learning, particularly as they are able to use it back home in different ways, and particularly as it doesn't in any way affect exam results! The really keen schools are the ones who are seriously concerned about the environmental crisis. They see the relevance of a learning situation where conservation is not an abstract idea, but rather a daily living reality through the care and interaction with other life forms and that this brings about a dynamic involvement with the environment.. Working with all these different individuals and groups, local, regional, young, old, on day visits or longer stays through all these years has brought about a wonderful spirit of learning and care and common ownership of the Sanctuary. Children turn up on holidays with parents and friends in tow—and introduce them to environmental issues. There is a slow but definite multiplier effect—young gardeners and budding ecologists, teachers, farmers and travellers—who not only take away with them this sense of a marvelous, beautiful and vital world needing care and responsible participation from its human members, but also bring with them a joy and enthusiasm that nourish the place itself. In a world that is otherwise dominated by the intellect and by increasingly unnatural and unsustainable pressures of living, there are few opportunities to explore a more basic and spontaneous mode of being. This, tragically and inexorably, leads to separation from other people, the environment,

[society and even oneself. It is this fragmentation and separation that we seek to address through the work with nature and young people at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary. First Published in](#)

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[Under the Title \*\*School in the Forest – Educating the Young at the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary\*\* \*Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary - And the forest came back!\* This film by the Swedish documentary filmmaker Boris Ersson is part of a series of films he is producing about people who dedicate their lives to saving some of the finest forests on earth. The film project is called "The Forest In Our Hearts". This film won the first prize in the nature and environment category at the Nashik International Film Festival in 2015. \[Read a more recent article on the\]\(#\)](#)

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