

Field Trip to Tadoba National Park 2017

This year, the University of Cologne continued its academic collaboration with the Bharati Vidyapeeth Institute of Environment Education and Research (BVIEER) in Pune with a challenging field visit to the Tadoba National Park and Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra in India. Seven students from the International Masters in Environmental Science programme, and from the Law Faculty of the University of Cologne travelled to India in late February, 2017 to participate in field research on wildlife law and park management.

The students from the University of Cologne worked with around fifty students of the Bharati Vidyapeeth Institute for the duration of the project. The students were divided into six groups working on different aspects of park management such as challenges faced by forest guards and officers in combatting poaching, evaluating the success of eco-development committees and examining the environmental literacy of local primary school students. BVIEER also organized several expert guest lectures which introduced the students to the history of wildlife conservation in India, the practical aspects of wildlife management and the biodiversity of Tadoba National Park. The students employed different methods of enquiry including field surveys, expert interviews, questionnaires, and Geographical Information Systems.

The students were fortunate to observe crucial species in the wild during jeep and boat safaris, such as the Royal Bengal Tiger, Indian Leopard, Crested Serpent Eagle, and Paradise Flycatcher. They were thus, able to pick up useful skills in ornithology and wildlife tracking from other students and the government forest guides. The students also attended an illuminating presentation by Mr. Mali (Assistant Conservator of Forests), on wildlife crime investigation and prosecution, including the importance of using cyber data in wildlife crime prevention. He also explained the compensation mechanisms put in place by the government in cases of loss of cattle or human life by wild animals in order to dampen the blow of inevitable man-animal conflict.

In keeping with the holistic approach to understanding wildlife management, the students visited a few villages in the area surrounding the national park to gauge the attitude of the local residents regarding the park authorities and conservation in general. Moreover, the students attended two ventures of the Eco-Development Committee: an incense stick manufacturing unit employing local women, and a 'khadi' cotton hand weaving loom where local women are trained to weave and market high quality handmade cloth. These visits underlined the importance of the participation of local communities in the wildlife the need for local communities' participation, and the need for self-sufficient livelihood opportunities for communities who have traditionally depended on forests for their survival. Through these presentations, village visits, and associated field work the students were able to hone their primary data-gathering skills while focusing on their research questions.

The research visit concluded with all groups making presentations of their findings before their peers and Professors. For the students of the University of Cologne, it was a unique experience to observe the customs and culture of people in Maharashtra, while also forging valuable friendships with the students of BVIEER. The trip was an excellent example of the vitality of international collaboration and exchange while addressing the pressing environmental questions of our time.