

# RESTORING NATURE

ARUN KRISHNAMURTHY





Chennai-based Conservationist, Arun Krishnamurthy founded the Environmentalist Foundation of India. Headquartered in Chennai and with chapters in 10 cities. He has since restored 107 water bodies including lakes, ponds, and temple tanks. The impact he makes at each location and the residents of the neighborhood is tremendous, involving youth, children and senior citizens alike. And yet, he is not looking to change anyone or the way they behave. People join him in his clean-up programs and upon seeing the impact of the work that they have accomplished; they are transformed and take charge. It is for being such a change maker that he has been that he has been recognized with International Awards such as the Jane Goodall Youth Leadership Award in 2010, Global Alumni Award in 2011 (Google) and the Rolex Award for Enterprise.

His Roots and Shoots program in collaboration with the Jane Goodall Institute was and continues to be one of his biggest achievements, bringing him

in association with school children and college students.

Ask a child what his ambition is, and it will be to be a doctor one day and be a pilot the next. Similarly, Arun too has in his student days, romanced ideas of becoming a cardiologist, a civil servant etc. Understanding one's place, purpose and progression is something that comes, early on in life to some and late to others. Being steadfast and established in it is a matter of passion in the purpose. The zeal and maturity with which Arun pursues his passion is amazing, as is the self-deprecating manner in which he talks about the path that got him to where he is today. He allowed people and circumstances to influence him positively and remains deeply grateful to all his mentors.

In his early childhood, he was raised to be a child who was observant of his surroundings and neighborhood, as the family lived away from the city. His neighborhood included two beautiful

water bodies, the Mudichur Lake and a smaller pond, which abutted his home; he would watch with fascination, the numerous life forms that originated in and thrived off these water bodies. In the years to come, the exploitation and pollution that they were subjected to would kindle the activist that resided in Arun. The young teenager got in touch with local authorities to clean up and cordoned off the lake. The young and charged activist would in the years to come be influenced by the works of Wildlife Conservationists like Dr Jane Goodall, Water Conservationist Dr Niyati Sareen, and Dr Supraja Dharini of TREE Foundation. Besides Water Conservation, he would also be involved in animal rescue operations, habitat restoration and reintroduction of flora and fauna that were on the verge of extinction.

We asked about his early inspirations, Arun talks about his school with adoration saying, "It was a small school, everyone knew each other. The long drives to and from school past farms and fields, streams and the Adyar River were delightful. The sense that everything belongs to everyone and we are all accountable came from here." It was in school that he first felt that, in the fabric of life, every being plays a role and their collective intention for being there at that point is to be in harmony with Nature. Good Earth School cultivated in him the spirit of oneness; in his words, "There is no me! It's one for all, and all for one."

At Madras Christian College, though he was a student of Life sciences, it was his innate Leadership that came to bloom. He was fascinated by the Principal of his college, a Professor of Political Sciences. Arun took part in socially relevant debates and movements, learned to campaign and stood for elections. He envisioned and executed his first clean-up programs involving ecologically sensitive water bodies and beaches. He got interested in studying the government's environment related

policies. He owes it to his college for the grooming he received in this direction, as a leader- you cannot tell people what to do; you need to make them see the necessity for it. Communication followed by collaboration works best!! A valuable lesson learnt here was that Development cannot be stopped, but making it sustainable is what matters. As the youth that were going to inherit the world, it was upto them to see that every species was protected and allowed to play its role in saving the environment.

Around 2007 he was recruited by Google and worked as an Account Associate. Arun owes it entirely to Google for infusing into him a rare resourcefulness; it was there that he learnt to manage money and time, think about his entrepreneurial ambitions, and learn the value of networking. Even as he worked at Google, he would spend hours at his clean-up programs and make sure to spread the word. Weekends would be spent in animal rescue operations including a collaboration with Dr Supraja Dharini of TREE Foundation in projects to save turtles and dolphin species that breed along the coast of Tamil Nadu. In 2001, he joined Environmentalist Foundation of India full time. His manager at Google declared to him, "Google will function even without you, but the Environment needs you out there." Arun was awarded an amount of ₹ 5 lakhs by Google the day he quit to become a full time Conservationist. To this day his ardent supporters are his colleagues from Google who continue to volunteer in large numbers.

As an environmentalist, Arun has numerous well-wishers and volunteers, but as far as the funds and finances are concerned, it is purely on the goods that he has delivered in previous projects and the network that he has created for himself, that has worked magic. "Strangely, we have never been short of funds or volunteers. Whenever we start a project, both materialize from nowhere." The International recognition and Awards



rolled in giving him the added edge and encouragement. The equipment and technological know-how too came along. But Arun says, the best reward is seeing the uninfested water of the rivers, the fragrance of clean ponds, the yearly return of birds to their nesting sites, the sounds of frogs and insects and most of all the transformation in the attitude of the users of the lakes or ponds. He says with self-assurance, after the completion of a project, the number of abusers definitely comes down.

As a Water warrior, his most prominent projects included the restoration of the Keelakattalai Lake as a biodiversity hotspot and the restoration of the Ramanujar Lake at Kancheepuram as part of a 1000th year celebration of the Saint. After the floods of 2015, he was approached by the government to restore the Mudichur Lake and Perungalthur Lakes that had breached their bunds and wreaked havoc in the city. In this regard he says, "Environment Conservation is no choice, it's not a Compulsion. It is Common Sense." Not that he wishes to call any one out, since he declares at the very outset that we are all in this together. He has words

of encouragement for the Central and State governments that engage with people in "water literacy" programs. But policy implementation apart, the individual's role in conservation of water bodies is significant.

EFI as an organization, is always looking to innovate and expand into newer ways of getting their message across- while they have a very healthy group of volunteers at any given point in time both on field and their office, they have a solid core team comprising of both male and female recruits. Environment conservation is a platform where work is never entirely finished. There is always a new project to survey or an old project to revisit- from lake restoration, to wildlife conservation and on to waste management- the learning and teaching continues, the exploration deepens and the need to expand is constant. As a result, EFI now has projects in 14 states of India including Gujarat, Rajasthan, Jammu and Kashmir, Kerala, Chattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. Their motto is the three Ws- Water Conservation, Wildlife Preservation, and Waste Management.

In the process of the lake restorations and conservation programs, Arun and his

team found that there is a need to cultivate a curiosity and pride about the origins of these ponds and lakes and waterways, some of which were manmade. This resulted in Hydrostan, EFI's Department of Film Making exploring the crafts of Storytelling and Photography- they regularly come out with Short films about Temples and their attached Water bodies, the architecture and Engineering prevalent in the ancient days- stories about fantastic far reaching systems of waterways that were shining examples of sustainable development. Development designed to serve agriculture and economics without disturbing the environment. The wonderful world class short film on Melpadi a town on the banks of the Ponni River is one such example. Fitness enthusiasts themselves, in addition to being a Pollution-crusaders, Arun and Team came up with a Cyclakes program, wherein enthusiasts were given cycling tours of natural habitats. EFI also sought to raise awareness of India's Biodiversity by promoting aesthetic Wall Painting in public spaces giving information about local flora and fauna, endemic herbal and plant species. They also conduct Lake Safaris and Wild Life treks to promote knowledge about waterways. In this regard, EFI is now involved in riverine studies, where all aspects of a river is studied from its point of origin to its tributaries, the lands it passes through, the impact of industries and agricultural lands along its path, the tributaries and distributaries and manmade waterways, mapping the changes in the nature and volume of water along the way. This reiterates the fact that they are not against development but accountability and sensitivity to change is important. It is small changes over years that bring about irreversible transformation like loss of habitat and species extinction.

When asked about the Rolex award, Arun reflects very calmly, that when a sophisticated and eminent Institution like Rolex recognizes you, it only means that one is being watched and the sense

of responsibility increases. One has to work continuously to justify the award. And while the Rolex award is prestigious, equally notable is an award from a city school, because this signifies that the message of conservation is reaching the young citizens of the world- that the world will be handed over to safe hands.

.....yo'pamayatanam veda, aayatanavaan bhavathi....." is a refrain from a vedic chant, the mantrapuspam, which literally means, "...he who knows the source of water, becomes established in himself..." Arun Krishnamurthy and his involvement in restoring water bodies, conserving water, the sustainer of Life itself, is a living example of this. Nadi's are the energy rivers of the body and a good doctor checks the nadi or the pulse to determine the health status; similarly we have a good doctor in Arun Krishnamurthy who has his hand on the riparian pulse keeping our rivers and wetlands healthy. Here's wishing him and EFI all the very best of health and energy to keep up the good work that they are doing.

