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Cover: Whale Shark *Rhincodon typus* and Reef - made with poster colours. © P. Kritika.



## Book Review - Under the Feet of Living Things

### Editors — Aparajita Datta, Rohan Arthur & T.R. Shankar Raman

Review by [Melito Prinson Pinto](#)

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Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) is an NGO that most of us are familiar with. A Mysore-based NGO, founded by a bunch of youngsters 25 years ago is now currently working in the different landscapes of India. The work they do in conservation is well known through different means, such as publications. But not everyone knows about the actual story, the thought process, the efforts, and the turn of events that led to a particular conservation work's success or failure. This is where 'At the Feet of Living Things', a collection of essays from the scientists and researchers at NCF gives us a narrative. As the book says, it's a commemoration of twenty-five years of wildlife research and conservation in India. The front page is designed with a beautiful illustration that contains landscapes from the Himalaya to the oceans, from the high-altitude flying cranes to the forest-dwelling Binturong, Lion-tailed Macaques and others, to the sea-dwelling Dugong, and Sea Turtle. And all of these are observed through the eyes of a naturalist.

Like Mahesh Rangarajan, in his foreword mentions, the uniqueness of this book is that there is not a single chapter that mentions or speaks about Tigers. Rather, there are chapters on other charismatic animals like Snow Leopard. Although there are four essays on Snow Leopards, they are written about their conservation in different aspects. Reading through the 16 different essays, an immersive reader experiences a wide range of emotions. There are moments where you feel sad looking at the situation of the landscape from the author's perspective, feel joy when a conservation program finally takes off, anguish when things go awry, and moments of shock when one didn't expect a particular thing to happen, and much more. But there is one common emotion among all this - hope.

This is how I journeyed through the book, First, I learnt what it means to think like a starfish, then joined Rucha Karkarey and Mayuresh Goyal at the

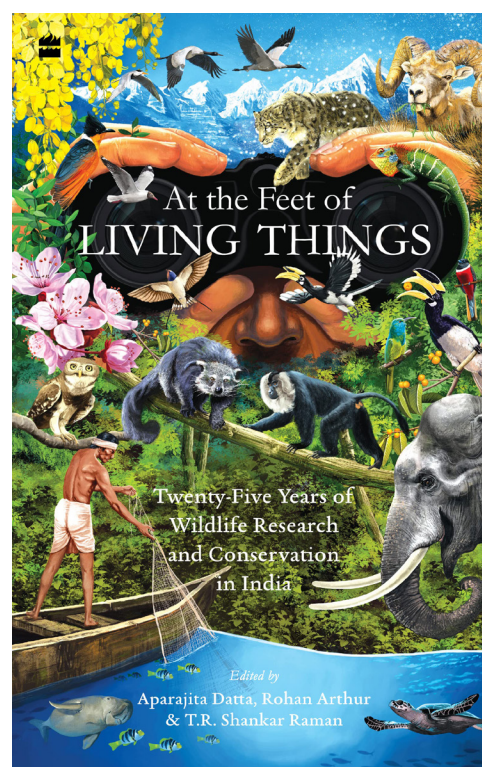
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Lakshadweep islands and saw how a survey for fishes led to identifying a beautiful grouper, which led up to the events of setting up an FSA (Fish Spawn aggregation). And just when I had thought “you guys are lucky, things went really smooth for you”, came a dark twist that I was not expecting. A similar thing was experienced in the next chapter by Aparajitha Dutta. I saw the beautiful landscapes around Namdapah, got to know about the Lisu tribes, and felt deep sympathy for them. Here too, I could see things taking a turn for the worst. I felt the fear and helplessness that the authors went through. Both the chapters had me saying one thing at the end “It’s alright. You guys gave your best”.

Reading through Charudutt Mishra’s chapter, I found myself in the Spiti Valley, feeling that chill and thrill of wanting to conserve the Snow Leopards. The anger, and frustration the villagers felt towards the Snow Leopard became apparent to Mr. Mishra only when the two lives that meant a lot to him got preyed upon by the predator. This was one of the speechless moments. A moment where emotions would have all the capacity to destroy your work. But then how Mr. Mishra navigated through these emotions which eventually led to things slowly falling back into place was a relief. The chapter ends on a wholesome note.

In the chapter by Erika D’souza, I could see her journey, an exploration in search of dugongs. The chapter answered the question of why it’s called a ‘Sea Cow’ and not a ‘Sea Pig’. Of the two marine species discussed in the book, I could see the Dugong functioning as a farmer, while the other species that would be mentioned later, a sheep. I was enjoying this journey until Erika at a point mentioned ‘a Grimm picture’. I immediately felt the fear that the Dugong population is doomed. But later, when the hunters turned to become protectors, the light of hope shined bright.

Moving on, with Aparajitha Dutta again, this time I saw her explore the hornbills in the Pakke Wildlife Sanctuary along with her Nyishi acquaintances. A journey of ups and downs that ended with a big message to be resilient like the hornbills. The next chapter by Anindya Sinha was something different. Who would’ve expected that Bonnet Macaques were so cool? Conveying the narrative from the perspective of a protagonist bonnet macaque named ‘small’ made things enjoyable. Throughout this chapter, I was left saying “Oh Bonnet Macaques do that? How come I never thought of these”?

The next bunch of chapters was on ‘living with the wildlife’, where the essays contained conservation efforts made for coexistence between humans and wildlife. In ‘conservation is an elephantine journey’, I could see

the situation in the landscape, the tension between the people and the departments, and the loss of crops and lives due to negative interaction with elephants. Ananda Kumar, Ganesh, Vinod, and Sreedhar Vijayakrishnan’s essays give us the narrative of the critical situation in these landscapes. A particular mention where a farmer who had not just lost his crops to elephants, but also his hopes to repay his bank loan invites Vinod and his team for a lunch at his home. This was heart-wrenching and had me dumbfounded. Such things make anyone think about who’s the actual sufferer.

The next two chapters on snow leopards by Kulbhushan Singh and Ajay Biroor, and Yash Veer Bhatnagar gave me an experience of efforts put into conserving snow leopards with the help of communities in the Himalayan landscapes. When Mr. Bhatnagar said ‘landscape - level participatory conservation is here to stay’, I felt the confidence that this conservation program is achieving what it was meant for. In the essay by Teresa Alcoverro and Rohan Arthur, what started as the banter between Teresa and Rohan continues to be a restoration of seagrasses for the green turtles. And yes, these are the sheep I referred to earlier, the same green turtles. Personalities like Al Badush really inspired me here with his enthusiasm. Here again, after multiple successes and failures, in the end, the ray of hope shines again. Every time Rohan Arthur writes something, there’s always ‘tea makes everything better’. Dear Rohan Arthur, I am really looking forward to the day we could have a great conversation on conservation over a cup of tea.

The next section of ‘the fall and revival of nature’ showed me a road filled with ups and downs. It began with hope, then came moments where the authors would question if it would work, the fear of failure and the efforts going to waste, and at the end of the road, meeting hope again. Shankar Raman and Divya Muddappa’s essay on rainforest restoration takes place in a plantation landscape which I could connect myself more with. It’s just crazy how a seed of hope of restoring the rainforest was found in the scat of a Palm Civet, categorized as a carnivore. Through all the ups and downs, visualizing the restored rainforest felt great. The essay ending where the civet scat is found again containing another seed is symbolic.

Rohan Arthur’s search for resilience in a dying reef gave me a glimpse of the grim reality of coral bleaching. I could feel his worry, the fear of losing his favorite ‘potato patch’. I too felt like saying to the reef patch “hang in there my friend, you’re going to make it”. And there is shown resilience of the reef and Rohan’s skill of including subtle humor, which would make one smile

and relax after having a horrific experience. And.....tea makes everything better.

Part 5 is a bit different from the others. Although this too is about a journey, it's not directly about the conservation action for a species or in a particular landscape. Rather this is with bringing the citizens together for citizen science. Dr. Suhel Quader's 'birders in arms' gives us an account of how the e-bird came into play for the citizen science initiative and led to a bloom in birders in India. I wonder If I could find a similar sunflower field and reminisce about something sweet. The mentions of birding notes LBT - little brown thing and GOK - God only knows made me take a look back at my birding notes. Why hadn't I ever thought of these acronyms?

Pranav Trivedi's chapter on his nature education program was a delightful read. Getting students and teachers alike interested in nature, and getting feedback from someone like George Schaller is really a cool thing. Swathi Sidhu and Geetha Ramaswani's 'Citizens see the season's signs' gave me a glimpse of the beginning

and the progress of seasonwatch. Ammu's Konna tree story was really lovely. It is absolutely true that it takes watching a tree to learn how to be patient, as the author mentioned. P. Jegannathan's confessions of crazy birder are indeed confessions that are crazy. If I was a person who was crazy about birding and had set multiple goals, then this would be something I would have really enjoyed. But this also gave me a glimpse into the level of craze one must possess for the passion he has.

With all these things being said, I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone interested in not just conservation, but wildlife in general. Every essay is worth the reading effort. The authors have tried to hold nothing back. Success is mentioned as success and failures as failures. Also, they have gone on to explain the reason for the failure and something that we can learn from. For anyone that is yet to begin reading the book, I have a fun activity: you see that the cover page illustration contains different animals. As you go on reading, try finding where these animals are mentioned. Don't cheat though.







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