

Celebrating forests, documenting hope

PREMIUM

Forests of Life, the second edition of Azim Premji University's annual climate festival, sought to celebrate forests through an ensemble of art installations and photographs by young interns from across the country

November 14, 2023 09:00 am | Updated 09:00 am IST - Bengaluru



SHILPA ELIZABETH

COMMENTS

SHARE

READ LATER



The festival which began with a tribute to forests of Biligiri Rangana Betta by Soliga tribal elders and presentation by students witnessed around 1,500 students visiting every day.

We encounter fungi in various forms every day, but ever wondered how life on earth would be without fungi?

Shrey Gupta, environmental microbiologist and mushroom connoisseur, notes that life on land may not last very long without fungi.

“They are the decomposers of the planet. If fungi were not there, everything – including humans, plants and animals -would be covered in a pile of dirt,” he says. Gupta was demonstrating his exhibit on the mycelial network displayed as part of the ‘Forests of Life’ festival held at Azim Premji University (APU).

Art works by interns

'Forests of Life', the second edition of the university's annual climate festival, was unveiled in the first week of November. The festival sought to celebrate forests through an ensemble of art installations and photographs by young interns from across the country.

The festival also featured music, movies, artefacts, interactive workshops and performances by various communities.

Documenting forests

“We set up the festival in such a way that it is for the young by the young because children speak to children very well,” said Dr. Harini Nagendra, Director, Research Centre and Centre for Climate Change, Azim Premji University. “We had an open call for internships and 130 interns were selected out of the applications received,” she added.

The student interns travelled through 110 diverse forests across the country documenting their experiences and what they observed in the forests – from indigenous communities who nurture a deep connection with the forest to human-animal conflicts to forest guards who have dedicated their careers protecting the wildlife and more.

The festival which began with a tribute to forests of Biligiri Rangana Betta by Soliga tribal elders and presentation by students witnessed around 1,500 students visiting every day.

Unseen worlds

One of the main attractions of the fest was ‘Living Tapestry’, a terrarium built by 14-year-old Neil Thomas Abraham from Bengaluru.

The vivarium-style container built by Mr. Abraham, who is also the youngest of all the interns, simulated a river and forest ecosystem.

“This is to show how a clean and stable forest ecosystem is. Behind the container, it also depicts the unseen part of the forest ecosystem,” said Neil explaining the installation.

Sacred forests

An exhibit by Lakshmi M., an intern from B.R. hills, gave a preview into the lives, livelihoods, sacred sites and traditional medicines of the Soliga community who live in the high hills in close association with the forests. Ms. Lakshmi who is a member of the Soliga community is a postgraduate and currently works with Punarchit NGO.

Neil Thomas Abraham with his exhibit 'Living Tapestry'

Lakshmi M., an intern from the Soliga community, with other members of the community explains the exhibit 'Biligirangana Betta: Karnataka's ancient sacred forest.'

Explaining the exhibit, Lakshmi also spoke of the many beliefs and customs of the community which form their intricate and spiritual relationship with the forest.

"There are sacred sites within the forest like Veerugallu, Mane Devaru and Kallugudi. We go there, document it and gather information from the village elders," said Lakshmi.

“When there is deficit monsoon, people of the forest offer a special ‘naivedya’ and honey ‘abhisheka’ to a deity called Kadavina Basappa every year and pray for rainfall. The special pooja is followed by good rains. So that has remained a strong belief among the people.”

“The learnings and knowledge will vanish with this generation of elders. So, our aim is to document it and pass it on to the generations to come. We have our own YouTube channel as well, called Soliga Traditional Knowledge. We shoot and upload videos there,” she added,

The mycelial connection

What is the world's largest organism? If your answer is blue whale, you are wrong.

While the blue whale is the largest mammal on earth, the largest organism in the world is a mushroom, explains Shrey Gupta whose team set up the display on the fungi network.

Called honey mushroom, it is estimated to be more than 2,000 years old and covers more than 2,500 acres of the Malheur National Forest in the US.

Gupta noted that the display represented how fungi thrive in the forest and help sustain the ecosystem and other species on the planet. The network of fungi that is present under the soil helps trees connect to each other and exchange resources, he explained.

“An entire forest acts like a single conscious being through this network of fungi.”

“Everything that's dead and decomposing is covered by the network of fungi. They are the garbage cleaners of the natural world, and they help decay and decompose everything,” Gupta said.

A session on identifying the different kinds of mushrooms and traditional recipes of mushrooms from around the world were also part of the exhibit.

Mr. Shrey Gupta noted that the display represented how fungi thrive in the forest and help sustain the ecosystem and other species on the planet.

Birds of Dandeli

Cholanaikkans of Nilambur, an indigenous community living in caves deep inside forests and whose population is as few as 285 approximately, featured in an exhibit by interns Jinu Jishana P., Farsana K.K. and Rana Nasnim.

Extremely reclusive, the community speaks a unique language, refuses to mingle with mainstream society and has been shrinking in numbers as a result of issues due to inbreeding.

Although the Kerala state government in 2013 built houses for them, the community members soon retreated to their caves.

“Their residences are marked as cave 1, cave 2 and so on as there are no houses. These kinds of stories give us an understanding of the complicated interactions people have with forests,” said Dr. Kunal Sharma, faculty at APU.

“Another project by a student from Dharwar-Belgaum area focuses on the birds of Dandeli in Uttara Kannada, a highly biodiverse region. It is the region in Karnataka with the highest forest cover – 76%. But it is also highly impacted by development. There are several dams, one nuclear power plant and several factories,” Dr. Sharma added.

Noting that the urban sprawl is only expanding every year, he emphasized the importance of protecting critical landscapes.

Dr. Kunal Sharma “The time for small scale efforts is over. We need to take it to a bigger scale now. We cannot bring back what is lost. We can only protect what is left. These are forests of hope, and the idea is the students who document these and see these will have hope,” he said.

COMMENTS

SHARE

Related Topics

[forests](#) / [wildlife](#) / [nature](#) / [nature and wildlife](#) / [wildlife](#) / [climate change](#)

