

Boat library for children in Odisha's Bhitarkanika National Forest

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The boat library will be open on all days during the summer vacation in the schools and will be thrown open to visitors when tourism season resumes on August 1. (File photo/Representational)

The Dangamal nature camp inside Odisha's Bhitarkanika National Forest, the country's second-largest mangrove ecosystem, has added something to its list of attractions – a boat library for children, which is perhaps the first of its kind in India.

The library housed in a stationary boat at Dangamal, the gateway to the forest, threw open its doors on June 5, the World Environment Day, this year.

The boat is stationed at the eco-tourism complex so that children of visitors to Bhitarkanika, which has one of the largest populations of the endangered saltwater crocodiles, as well as students of nearby schools can use the library.

Bhitarkanika Divisional Forest Officer J D Pati, who is among the brains behind the project, said that the boat used to house the library is one of those discarded by the department after being used for years to protect the mangrove forest and its wildlife.

It was retrofitted for the purpose and a room was created in its hull to house the books. Stairs were constructed to reach the room from the ground.

"The aim of the library is to connect children and youth to nature and sensitise them about conservation," Pati said. Inspiration was drawn from commitment and continuous support for mangrove conservation by locals.

"To commemorate their efforts and to build capacity of the next generation, we felt the requirement of a dedicated platform where data, books, documents can be shared with youngsters to motivate them for mangrove and wetland conservation," Pati said. He credits the forest division officers for conceptualising and designing the project, his wife being one of them.

The library houses 1500 books which have been funded by the government-run Bhitarkanika Eco-Tourism and Eco-Development Society (BEEDS).

As it is off-season for tourists now, the boat library is open to local children of the area, which is located in the coastal Kendrapara district of Odisha.

The national park is closed from May 1 to July 31 every year for the mating and nesting of saltwater crocodiles. For now, children of two to three local schools will be allowed to visit the library, Pati said.

Much thought has been given to attract the children to the library. The boat has been painted in bright colours with motifs to attract them. A single room with 32 compartments has been created in the hull of the boat to house the books, which have been placed on shelves in a way that children find easy to use.

The lowest shelves are for children between three and five years of age and have picture books in Odia, Hindi and English, besides card games.

The shelves above it are for children between five and 10 years and are stocked with folk tales, short stories and biographies. Books for those between 10 and 15 years are placed in the higher racks and have encyclopedias, books on nature, conservation, atlas, science projects and biographies.

On the topmost racks are books for those who are above 15 years. There are books on wildlife conservation, mangrove forests and ecology, besides government brochures and publications on wetland conservation.

Students of Naga Narayan Government High School at Rajnagar inside Bhitarkanika in Kendrapara district were among the first-day visitors to the boat library. The students, who are from three gram panchayat areas nearby, were happy.

"We saw so many books on nature and environment. It was fun to be in a library in a boat," said S P Priyadarshi Behera, a student of standard nine of the school.

Omprakash Bari, the school's science teacher, said the effort is novel and hoped that it will create interest among the children in the environment and the wetlands. "The students here liked it all the more because of the innovation.

"We hope there will be more books in this library to create awareness of the ecosystem, nature, ecology and wildlife and also on livelihood, which is an important concern for all," said Bari, who is a 'Wetland Mitra' and is a member of the economic development committee of the village and the forest division.

'Wetland Mitra' or 'Friends of Wetlands' is a person or organisation ready to willingly volunteer to facilitate preservation and protection of wetlands under a central government project.

Bhitarkanika mangrove was designated a Ramsar Wetland of International importance in 2002.

"We will also look for donations for stocking books if there is enough response," Pati said.

The boat library will be open on all days during the summer vacation in the schools and will be thrown open to visitors when tourism season resumes on August 1, he said. Every Sunday, students of two to three schools will be allowed to visit the boat library.

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