

Review Article

Sensitising society about environmental conservation: A study of natural history museums in India

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ABSTRACT

India constitutes a complex and diverse natural and cultural heritage. This diversity is abundantly reflected in cultural practices as well as in flora, fauna and mineral wealth of the country. The statistical records of the biological diversity of India projects that India is home to 96,000 species of animals, 47,000 species of plants and nearly half the world's aquatic plants. The rich biodiversity of the country is also facing threats like in the rest of the world due to climate change, habitat loss and over-exploitation of natural resources. In response to this global concern over nature conservation, various institutions and organisations worldwide are actively working in the field of biodiversity conservation. Natural History Museums as non-formal educational institutions are also playing a leading role in creating environmental awareness. The paper aims at highlighting the role of natural history museums in India in promoting environmental conservation.

KEYWORDS

Natural history museums | Environment conservation | Environment education | Awareness, society

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Introduction

India is one of the world's most biologically and culturally diverse countries and is one of the 17 mega-biodiverse countries in the world. The statistical records of the biological diversity of India projects that India is home to 96,000 species of animals, 47,000 species of plants and nearly half the world's aquatic plants. In India, biodiversity in most regions and communities is imbibed in the socio-cultural practices of people, as visible in their food habits, daily lifestyle, religious beliefs, rituals, sacred groves, etc. The majority of the Indian population is directly dependent on natural resources which are crucial for their livelihoods and sustainable development. The rich biodiversity of the country is also facing threats like in the rest of the world due to climate change, habitat loss and over-exploitation of natural resources. The unprecedented loss of biological diversity is not only affecting the food chain but also the livelihood and culture of millions of people who depend on it for survival.

In response to this global concern over nature conservation, various institutions and organisations worldwide are actively working in the field of biodiversity conservation. Natural History Museums as most valued non-formal institutions are also playing a leading role in creating awareness about nature conservation. In India too, natural history museums are taking initiatives to make people aware of environmental issues, the necessity to maintain the ecological heritage of the country, the environmental impact of climate change and the need for its preservation. The inception of the National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) as a national level institution was a milestone in the field of Indian natural history museums, broadening the scope and relevance of these museums in society. The National Museum of Natural History (NMNH), New Delhi, was the first museum instituted in India in 1972 with the vision to promote environmental education and to create awareness among the masses about biodiversity

conservation. Since establishment, NMNH and its regional branches have been providing out of school education facilities to children about natural science and to create awareness among the masses about environment conservation.

Natural history museums have a substantial role to play in representing and conserving the rich biodiversity of India, which accounts for 7-8% of the world's recorded species while containing only 2.4 percent of the earth's land area. These museums have the unique potential to provide environmental education and promote nature conservation by catering to the heterogeneous Indian society, which is extremely diverse in nature, whether on the basis of language, region, religion, culture, economy, literacy or physical accessibility. These institutions have immense relevance in creating environmental awareness with their varying, tailor-made educational resources; something that no similar institution is doing in a better way. The researcher conducted fieldwork at various natural history museums to understand the role of natural history museums in India in promoting environmental conservation. This paper is based on the findings of the field research carried out by the researcher.

At present, NMNH along with its four regional branches in different parts of India is taking a lead to fulfil the mission of nature conservation. These museums impart non-formal environmental education to the public in general and the student community in particular in order to create awareness about the importance of natural wealth and conservation of natural resources. Apart from their collections and exhibitions, these museums regularly organise educational programmes on various themes, on different occasions and for diverse categories of target audiences. These museums organise awareness programmes on occasions such as Sparrow Day, Earth Day, International Tiger Day, Conservation Day, World Wildlife Day, etc. It has been found that these programmes are effective enough in enhancing the understanding of people about the

necessity of various specimens of biodiversity to maintain ecological balance and the importance of their conservation.

The relevance of natural history museums to contemporary Indian society arises from their ability to become social instruments, communicating awareness about environmental issues and its conservation to every section of society, irrespective of differences in age, educational qualification, occupation, economic status, ethnicity and physical accessibility. In India, a large section of society lives below the poverty line or belongs to the underprivileged classes and cannot afford educational expenses. Though the facility of free education to children aged 6 to 14 is a fundamental right according to the Constitution of India, people who are less privileged, whether from rural areas or from lower income brackets, still do not get enough opportunities and facilities to learn and explore the natural world in the same way as the privileged. These museums, however, help provide non-formal environmental education to such people through a variety of engaging services without charging any entry/admission fees. The preserved and attention-grabbing real specimens of animals, representation of natural phenomena through fascinating thematic displays, participatory exhibits, the tactile models of flora and fauna, discovery room, facilities like ramps for differently-abled visitors, tactile exhibits, touch and feel garden, Braille labels and audio recordings are some of the notable services of natural history museums.

Natural history museums have started taking initiative in presenting the multiple dimensions of natural heritage in order to create awareness among the masses to value and protect natural heritage. The regional branches of the National Museum of Natural History have developed exhibition displays to represent the socio-cultural practices and beliefs associated with natural heritage. These museums depict biodiversity of India along with various issues that are

threatening their sustenance. For instance, various dimensions of the Khejri tree are displayed reflecting both nature driven information and community driven information and also multiple interdependent contexts associated with it, viz. geographical, ecological, religious, economic, social, cultural and political. Conservation movement associated with the Khejri tree is also depicted to make people aware about traditional environmental conservation practices enshrined in the associated community. This kind of holistic approach helps in dealing with the problems of loss of biodiversity and weakening of cultural diversity. These problems have so far been dealt with separately though they are closely connected and relevant to sustainable development.

One of the outstanding contributions of NMNH to reducing pressure on natural resources and at the same time preserving intangible heritage was the initiative taken in Arunachal Pradesh, a North-eastern state in the country. NMNH joined hands with the Wildlife Trust of India, a non-governmental organisation, and the forest department of Arunachal Pradesh to save the most endangered species of Hornbill birds. Many tribal people of Arunachal Pradesh live in harmony with nature and are directly dependent on natural resources for their sustenance, rituals and entertainment. One of these tribes is the Nyishi, who use animal parts for their traditional dress and headgear. It is mandatory for a Nyishiman to wear the hornbill beak as a part of his traditional headgear, and this is obtained after killing hornbills found in the region. However, as a result of urbanisation, clearing of forest areas and rampant killing of the birds, the population of hornbills decreased drastically. The Forest Department of Arunachal Pradesh convinced the tribal leaders to use artificial beaks instead of real ones and started providing modelled fibreglass beaks. NMNH was approached in this regard to train local artisans in artificial beak making and the museum provided training to artisans, provided training materials and bore the relevant

expenses. NMNH in collaboration with the Wildlife Trust of India imparted training to select artisans from Arunachal Pradesh in making artificial hornbill beaks and plaster of Paris moulds to make the beaks. The trained artisans then imparted training to the interested people of the tribe and the production was monitored by the Nyishi Indigenous Faith and Cultural Society. This effort by NMNH was well appreciated in understanding the inherent values of intangible heritage and in using expertise to preserve the heritage.

Natural history museums are becoming centres for nature conservation programmes. These museums are unique in itself as these institutions create environmental awareness among different sections of Indian society at one time. These institutions help understand natural world in an interesting way and make wide variety of people aware about environmental conservation. Natural history museums are becoming very popular among schools and NGOs who organise regular visits and use the museum exhibitions and other educational resources to sensitise people about the importance of natural resources. At present, natural history museums as social institutions have a significant role to play with dual responsibilities—first, to provide out of school education facilities to children about natural science; and second, to create awareness among the masses about environment conservation. Natural history museums are needed to inform people about the rich biodiversity of India and make them aware of the need for its conservation. Natural history museums are doing a good job in terms of exhibiting nature and environment related themes and in providing environmental education. But the progress of a museum never stops, and these museums can work in a far better way by customising the style of presentation according to visitor usage and response towards their services.

Natural history museums worldwide are among the most cherished museums, but in the Indian context they are struggling to justify their relevance in society. They have strong educational potential and offer a combination of unique facilities and services to impart education about nature and environment in India. Still they are not very popular in Indian society and are facing an identity crisis. The visitor study shows that the Indian public is still not too aware of the essence and relevance of natural history museums. They often don't apprehend what a natural history museum is about and misperceive them to be museums with history or the ancient past. Some perceive them as institutions similar to a zoo or a nature park, and that's why they first prefer to visit a zoo where they find living animals.

When the country is dealing with the problem of illiteracy and poverty, and facing the issue of climate change, natural history museums as non-formal education institutions are very much required in the Indian context, particularly for those who cannot afford formal education. At present, natural history museums in India are very few in number and there is a strong need to establish more natural history museums in different parts of India to cater to the large population of the country.

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