

# Landscapes & Lifeskills

## From the Western Ghats to the High Himalaya

December 2006 - April 2007

*To be alive is to be part of nature. Yet in a world increasingly dominated by technology and the intellect, a profound alienation from the natural world has taken place. Modern life shuts out the processes that sustain our existence, and this distancing from our bodies, senses, other life forms, and ecological processes disorients and narrows us. Rich or poor, we become estranged from the connectedness of things. Moreover we lose sight of our own humanness, a quality that has evolved with the living earth.*

A central concern of the Landscapes and Lifeskills Course is to re-discover this deeper connection with the living world, wild and human, while acquiring knowledge and skills that can help us understand nature and act sensibly with it. The course is built on a series of interlocking units about the processes, organisms and influences within a landscape, including the relationships between people and their environments. The course is facilitated by the Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary (Wayanad, Kerala), and Malika Viridi (Himal Prakriti- Munsiri, Himalaya). In their different places, climates and cultures, both parties' central concern is the complex web of connections between individuals, their communities and their landscapes.

The course takes an experiential, textbook-free approach to learning. Classes are conducted in the field via a series of questions and exercises that allow students to develop knowledge and skills from experience. Each of us relates to the natural world through our senses and bodies. For this reason it is important to develop one's physical self as a tool for scientific inquiry, along with specific skills in natural history and environmental science. Students will learn to cultivate sense awareness (how to look and listen to the natural world), and improve their strength, flexibility, and agility. The goal is to establish a deeper relationship with the living world and sharpen our aptitude to care for it. We aim to help students become all-round naturalists capable of 'reading' the natural world, understanding what you see, forming questions of interest, and communicating your discoveries.

**The course is intended for young persons who are interested in the natural world. It requires:**

- An open spirit
- A capacity for self-inquiry
- A willingness to be challenged physically, psychologically, and intellectually
- An ability to cooperate with a diverse group of people
- The stamina to live for long periods in simple conditions
- Fluency in English

**Location and dates:** Dec 1 - March 15      Waynad, Kerala  
March 18-21      Excursion to Pachmarhi  
March 23 -April 30      Munsiri, Uttaranchal

**Cost**      Rs. 50,000 for 5 months includes accommodation, food, instruction, and travel.

Scholarships are available. *Please inquire if you are in need of scholarship.*

**Contacts**      Suprabha Seshan- [gbsanctuary@vsnl.net](mailto:gbsanctuary@vsnl.net), Malika Viridi- [malika.virdi@gmail.com](mailto:malika.virdi@gmail.com)

## Part One:

### Tropical Rainforest Landscapes

The Wayanad plateau is a shoulder off the great serrated ranks of the Western Ghats mountains of southern India. With its high rainfall and varied topography (700m to 2100m) the plateau supports different forest types ranging from dry deciduous bamboo brakes to tropical evergreen rainforests and the unique and endangered shola grassland system at higher elevations. The Wayanad is home to diverse peoples, and especially to 17 different tribes that have lived here in these forests for millennia.

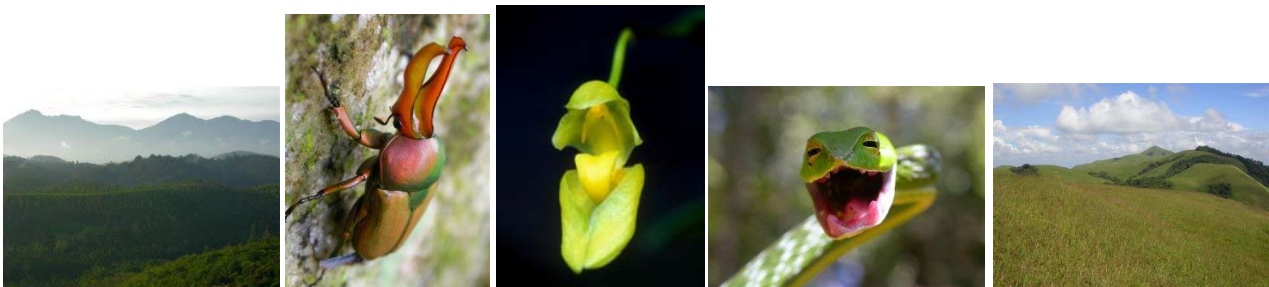
The Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary, a 55-acre forest garden, is located in the wettest corner of the Wayanad district, receiving over 500 cm of rainfall annually. The Sanctuary is a working laboratory in plant conservation and habitat restoration, bordered by a young river and the Periya Reserve Forest. More than 2000 native plant species can be found in and around the Sanctuary lands, along with an extraordinary array of animal forms. A team of gardeners and naturalists live and work here, whose central concern is to bring diversity and health back to the fragile and rapidly eroding tropical mountain environment of the Western Ghats.



The three-month experience at the Sanctuary will introduce participants to a way of life and environmental action that is intimately connected to the plants, animals, people and ecosystems of this region. Student accommodation is on campus in basic conditions, including shared rooms or tents.

#### Curriculum

- **An Open Awareness Approach to Nature**
  - Exploring different ways of engaging with the natural world
- **Introduction to the Natural World**
  - How the earth came to be the way it is.
  - Evolution of life, including the human species seasons.
  - Sky-gazing: understanding the moon, stars,
  - Maps: reading them, making them.
- **Introduction to Plants**
  - Plant Evolution, Taxonomy, Organic Forest Farming
- **Local Wildlife**
  - Birds, Reptiles, Insects, Fish



- **Overview of India's Environmental History**

- Overview of local issues in land use

- **Tribal Cultures of Wayanad**

- **Physical Intelligence**

- Sense-based activities.
- Discovering spontaneity through theatre exercises.
- Developing the eye and the hand: aesthetic explorations.
- Physical fitness through exercise and work.

- **Living Together**

- Work responsibilities such as coffee picking, vegetarian cooking, wood chopping
- Inquiry and dialogue: What is one's relationship with the world?
- Engagement, co-operation, self-motivation, communication

### **Project Work**

Each student will select an area of particular interest in one of several fields (Zoology, Botany, Ecology and Horticulture) and design a 2-month independent project to explore it. The project will represent the range of modes of inquiry studied during the term: formulating a question, gathering information by observation, a variety of forms of documentation, verbal presentation to hone public speaking skills. Examples of Projects:

- The river ecosystem
- Trees of Wayanad, Rates of forest re-growth
- Natural systems farming
- Tribal knowledge of the forest
- Animal studies: Birds/Snakes/ Ants of the Sanctuary



### **Excursions**

Travel to local sites according to student interests: shola grasslands, habitat restoration projects, interactions with tribal communities, etc.

The team who will work closely with the participants will comprise of Suprabha Seshan, T. Sandilya, Stefi Barna, Lorenzo Castellari, L. Shyamal, Diba Sidiqqi, Shirly Joseph and Roshan Sahi.

### **Excursion to Pachmarhi**

Enroute to the Himalayas, there will be a 5 day visit to explore the Pachmarhi area. Pachmarhi town lies at 3,500 feet elevation on a picturesque plateau in the centre of the Satpura Range in M.P. On all sides the plateau drops away to magnificent broad-leaved forest which is protected by a network of Sanctuaries and a National Park. Pachmarhi was appreciated by the British for its park-like scenery, surrounding sandstone gorges, waterfalls and streams, and became a hill station for Nagpur residents, laid out with care to highlight these attributes.

This segment will be coordinated by Pradip Krishen, naturalist, photographer and tree specialist.

## Part Two: High Himalayan Landscapes

*In Munsiri students will be housed with local families in a village in the Greater Himalaya, located in the Gori River Basin, across the snow capped Panchachuli range, as part of their study of the issues related to mountain ecology and rural livelihood.*

Munsiari is a high mountain locale, at the junction of the Western Himalaya with the Nepal (Central) Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau. The Gori river basin, where Munsiari is located, offers altitude gradients from 560 meters above the sea to over 7,400 meters, 32 glaciers, forests and grasslands that range from Sub-tropical to Alpine, and an astounding diversity of plants and animals. Human habitations spread across this landscape- shared as it is with other life forms- and the land-use of the local communities form interesting mosaics that constantly set the 'timer' back on succession of species, revealing interesting inter-linkages.

The segment of the landscape course at Munsiari is an opportunity to see and experience some of these elements of Nature and their dynamics at a landscape scale. The course also offers the opportunity to learn something about mountain and wilderness skills, and other cultural skills such as weaving, and local percussion.



- **Landscapes and Life forms- An introduction to Alpine, Temperate Forest and Riverine Ecosystems:**

Visits will be made to different elevation landscapes to understand the changes in habitat conditions, flora, fauna, their linkages and the history of succession and climax of each place. Sites include

- Alpine meadows of Khalia Danda (3,747m asl),
- Temperate forests of Munsiari (2,280 m) and
- River landscape of Gori River and hot water spring (1000 m asl).

Introduction to the wildlife- trees, shrubs, herbs, animals, birds, reptiles and fish of these Landscape.



- **Land Use- its sustainable use in mountain landscapes:**

Focus will be on understanding the centrality of forests in the lives of the mountain communities for survival and subsistence.

- An introduction to issues of ownership and governance of these forests as in state owned (Reserved Forests and Sanctuaries) and community owned (Van Panchayat) forests will be initiated.

- Understanding the pressures on this landscape, on the present land use and on the various life forms, as a result of a rapidly changing global market economy.



- **Lifeskills**

- Living with local families in a structured Home-Stay arrangement will facilitate an orientation to mountain cultures (tribal and non-tribal) and livelihoods like working on the fields in preparing the land and seasonal agricultural activity of potato and vegetable sowing, farm animal care, weaving, collecting produce (fuel wood, fodder, medicinal plants) from the forests.
- Camping in the alpine and temperate areas and learning to live off the land, and developing wilderness safety and survival skills will be introduced.

Participants will be encouraged to learn any one hands on skill- weaving, wool dyeing, weaving with a local bamboo to produce artifacts of daily use, drumming, wood cutting, preparing and ploughing the fields, dairying, house building.

- **Project Work**

Projects can be selected according to each participants aptitude and interest as well as local needs. Participants will be encouraged to give back to nature- work with the local Forest Council or Van Panchayat through physical work like plantation of seed and trees, revitalizing of water bodies and water ways. Some examples:

- Resource and Land use mapping using GPS, Contour maps and Cadastral village maps- of forests and of watercourses, of agriculture, hunting and other extractive uses.
- Fodder Grass study, Leaf Litter study, Farm Yard Manure study.
- Bird surveys in ongoing action-research studies, particularly of the Pheasant species (Galliformes)
- Mountain agriculture- for subsistence use and for the market.
- Craft economies- Learning to weave with locally produced wool and artifacts of daily use.
- Studies of regional flora or fauna- snakes, birds.
- Nature and Adventure Tourism in the Landscape

This segment of the course is set within the mountain community and will initiate participants to the diverse, complex mountain habitats and help develop the life skills to meet its challenge. Those of us who will be running this course are members of this mountain community with skills and interests varying from mountaineering, ecology, art, Information Technology, and farming.

The team will consist of Malika Viridi, K. Ramnarayan, Emmanuel Theophilus, Bhavna Kandari and Abhijit Menon Sen.

