

Indian Wildlife Experts' American Encounters

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

From the forests of Virginia to the waterways of Florida and the mountains of Colorado, 13 wildlife experts from across India bonded with each other and with their new American friends as they toured U.S. wildlife preserves. Two of them, Ashwani Kumar Gulati and Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj, provided these photographs of their adventures.

They watched killer whales perform; observed alligators and panthers; swatted mosquitoes in a swamp and spotted deer on a Rocky Mountain hike. But for 13 Indian wildlife conservation experts who spent three weeks touring U.S. National Parks, their encounters of the human kind formed the most durable impressions.

One found himself pleasantly surprised that many Americans

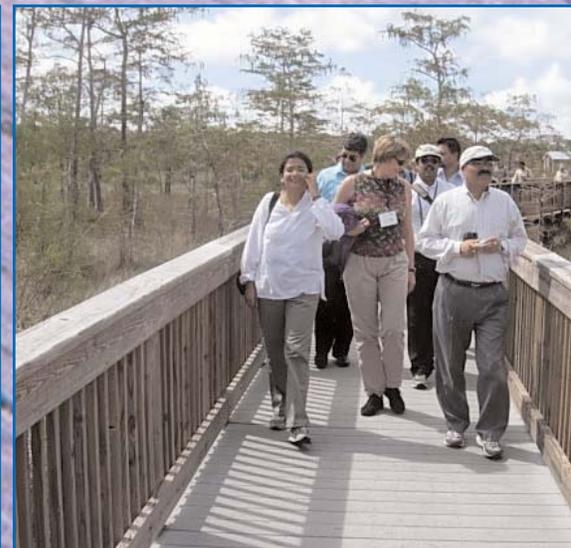
stay married for life and have well-behaved children; one was intrigued by the mysteries of an automatic kitchen garbage disposal that sped the after-dinner cleanup following a home-cooked meal. All felt a connection with their American counterparts in terms of professionalism and zeal to protect wildlife and preserve and enjoy the natural environment.

“Because all the officials and even our hosts for home hospi-

tality evenings were of the kind who loved their work and workplace very much, and since I love my job and place of work, I could appreciate these people very much,” says Sanjeeva Pandey, director of the Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh. Even though he couldn't get enough vegetarian food, Pandey enjoyed the home visits in Jacksonville, Florida, and Denver, Colorado, so much that when he returned

Left: The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Florida.

Right: In the lead on the visitors' walkway through the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge are Alka Bhargava, joint director, wildlife, Ministry of Environment and Forests; local coordinator Janice Brummond and Ashwani Kumar Gulati of the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department.





Clockwise from top left: Denizens of Florida include alligators, a cormorant, a panther, a butterfly and a lizard on a log.





to India he volunteered to host American students “who may like to have Indian hospitality.”

These personal connections, exchanges of ideas and trading of techniques were the purpose of the September 24-October 14, 2005, International Visitor Leadership Program on Park Management and Conservation, sponsored by the State Department. The program was intended to expose high-level Indian officials and non-governmental organization leaders to the variety of U.S. measures to protect wildlife and other natural resources. The visit highlighted the common concerns of collecting biological data for species conservation, developing and enforcing environmental laws and involving the public in nature protection.

“We’re making contacts, forging relationships, things are happening,” says S. Tovan McDaniel, the program officer at the U.S. Embassy in New

U.S. Park Ranger Joseph Darling at Big Cypress National Preserve in Florida displays one of many weapons and high-tech gadgets used to enforce the law and protect the public.

Delhi who facilitated the trip.

Several participants said they might like to try the U.S. practice of involving volunteers and visitors in programs to protect the national parks and form lobbying groups for conservation. “If anything goes wrong in Okefenokee (a swampy National Wildlife Refuge in Florida that the visitors toured by boat) I think there would be thousands of voices by e-mail, etc.,” says Sargam Singh Rasaily, a conservator of forests based in North Kumaon, Nainital, Uttaranchal. He would like to encourage the idea in India that, “If you come to my park, you become part of my park. If anything goes wrong, please

stand up and say what is wrong.” Rasaily also liked what he heard from dozens of briefings by U.S. park officials, researchers and rangers, that “any decision taken in a park was backed with research. For any document, or management plan of any place, there was a public opinion on that.”

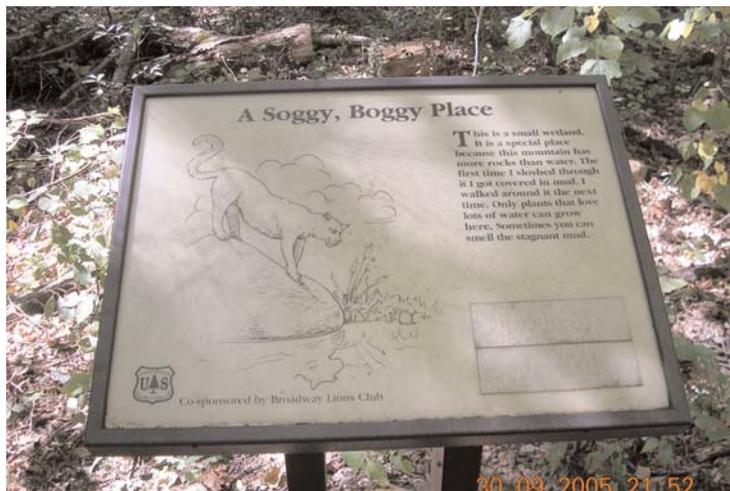
After returning from the trip, Pandey feels, “The problems I have vis-a-vis wildlife conservation are not a little bit, but quite different than America has. They have more forest than India, but one-third the population. In India, the forest means livelihood for people; in America, people go there to relax and have a nice weekend.”

Ashwani Kumar Gulati saw more similarities. “We were wanting to know what is going on in American forestry, and we were relating with other forestry people, relating to how they manage their problems,” says the additional principal chief conservator of forests for wildlife in the Himachal Pradesh Forest

The Indian experts (right) tour George Washington National Forest in Virginia, where a volunteer group has provided educational signs on the hiking trails (left).

Department. “To the same kind of questions, we would be giving similar replies.” One difference, he says, is that the American officials were more concerned about how to get people to help them preserve the forest and wildlife, whereas Indian forest officials are more often concerned with protecting people from wildlife and protecting the forest from too many encroachers. “At the butterfly gardens at Florida’s Natural History Museum, I think every 10 steps there was a volunteer wanting to give us a sheet of information,” he recalls, echoing a memory most of the visitors had: the extensive number of brochures, films, exhibits and other sources of information in visitor-friendly centers at each site, aimed at informing and educating the public.

The Indian participants were also “intrigued by the many seemingly contradictory policies in U.S. natural resource management, for example allowing grazing, logging and mining in public forests,” says Janice Brummond, who accompanied the guests to 15 parks and preservation sites in Colorado, Florida, Virginia and Washington, D.C.





Americans enjoy commercialized "wildlife parks," such as the Miami Parrot Jungle Island and the Seaquarium, where killer whales are among the performers.

The dichotomy of Americans' concern for nature and their often wasteful use of resources struck several of the Indian guests. "Most of the time there was only our bus that was carrying 15 people on the road," recalls Pandey. "Otherwise, everybody was in his or her car alone. We came to know that the government does encourage sharing of the cars, but the people do not think in these terms. I don't know how sustainable is this lifestyle given the situation that fossil fuels are not going to last forever... The wealthy people in India also behave in the same manner."

Rasaily, from Uttaranchal, felt slightly differently. "I had the feeling the American people are not only concerned for their country but for the entire world, for example their support of rhino conservation when the U.S. has no rhinos," he says. Rasaily said he was

struck by the cleanliness he observed, "not only in the parks but in the country itself." He noted the amount of resources being used; every time he had a cup of tea there was another throwaway plastic cup and the tea came in a plastic bag. "But those resources are not lying on the streets," he says. "We may use fewer resources but they are going onto the streets, dirtying the land."

Rasaily was a bit stunned, however, by the fate of food scraps left on the plates when the group had dinner with a family in Denver, Colorado. "I volunteered to help Mrs. Biddinger, our hostess, with her dishes and was taken aback when she washed perfectly good food down the sink!" he recalls. "And with a switch of a button, the sink chewed away the food and sucked it down. To where? Even Mrs. Biddinger didn't know or seem to care," Rasaily says in a humorous and accurate description of the automatic garbage disposal machine that is commonly found in the drains of American kitchen sinks.

For Gobind Sagar Bhardwaj,

deputy conservator of forests and deputy field director at Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, a highlight was learning how his American counterparts monitor their big cats. "When the population of the puma, the Florida panther, diminished to just 20 to 40 individuals, they brought in

The project helped foster a sense of common purpose, highlighting the similar challenges of nature conservation in India and the United States.

breeding females from Texas, tagged them, and in just 10 years the population was around 80 to 100," he recalls from a presentation at the University of Florida. "This was scientifically done, an excellent example for dealing with the diminishing population of any cat. It could be used in our country," says

Bhardwaj. "We don't know what is happening to our tigers, our cubs." He suggests Rajasthan's tigers may have the same problem as Florida's panthers, "frustrated dispersal." That is, when young males cannot find mates, they leave the protection of parks to look for new territories and female companions. "If we do radio tagging and scientific monitoring, we can come to know what is happening to our animals." He and the others enjoyed demonstrations on the use of trained dogs and satellites to track roaming cats, monitoring their movements to find ways to protect them.

Rajiv Bhartari, director of the Corbett Tiger Reserve in Uttaranchal, said it seemed that in the American conservation system, about the same amount of personnel are devoted to veterinary care as to protecting land areas and that U.S. officials had many more weapons and techniques to control animals.

"Park managers have their own language," he says. "Talking to one of them was like talking to ourselves." □