

A Life Forged in the Wild:

Remembering Dr. Ajith Kumar (1953 – ∞)

An Educator, Mentor, Institution-Builder and Scientist par excellence

-Rohit R.S. Jha

The passing of Dr. Ajith Kumar on March 1, 2025, has created an irreplaceable void in wildlife biology and conservation, deeply affecting the numerous students he mentored throughout his distinguished career, which continued until his passing at 71. He served as faculty at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) from 1988-1992 and later at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History (SACON) until 2003, before joining Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)-India in Bengaluru. His sudden demise occurred in Pachmarhi, Satpura Tiger Reserve, while on a field trip with students. For what it's worth, his passing was in a manner that he would have preferred —amidst his beloved students and in the forest with field boots on.

Affectionately known as 'Ajith Sir', Dr. Kumar was a towering figure in Indian ecology, renowned for his [rigorous science](#), compassionate leadership, and non-judgemental supportive mentorship. For those who learned from him at the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bengaluru (the author included), where he was the [Founding Director](#) of the [M.Sc. Program in Wildlife Biology & Conservation](#) (2003-2020), he was a visionary mentor who profoundly shaped careers, institutions, and the collaborative spirit of conservation in India.

Scientific legacy: Primates, small mammals, rainforests, Eastern Himalaya

Dr. Kumar's journey in wildlife biology began with a Master's in Zoology from the University of Kerala and a doctorate from the University of Cambridge. His [PhD research](#) on the ecology and population dynamics of the endangered [lion-tailed macaque](#) in the Western Ghats highlighted the critical need for large, continuous forest habitats for canopy-dependent species. This early work established his commitment and expertise in primatology and rainforest ecology.

Despite his extensive research across India, particularly in the Western Ghats and Eastern Himalaya, Dr. Ajith Kumar approached conservation with remarkable humility. His tenures at WII, SACON, and NCBS were marked by transformative projects that significantly advanced the field, and improved the knowledge bases in those institutes.



Image courtesy: Dr. T.R. Shankar Raman

At WII, he contributed to ecological studies of species like the Phayre's leaf monkey and civets, actively participated in the Masters and Diploma programmes, and helped develop collaborative projects with the USFWS. His tenure at WII was short but marked by a forward-thinking approach to research and education. Recognising the increasing role of technology in ecological studies, Dr. Kumar was instrumental in introducing computer technology to our Institute and establishing its first computer laboratory. He also contributed to the development of WII's wildlife



Dr. Ajith Kumar was instrumental in setting up the Computer Laboratory at WII in the early 1990s
(Image: Dr. Ravi Chellam)

library, recognising the importance of accessible knowledge resources for aspiring ecologists.

A similar spirit of collaboration was evident during his time at SACON, Coimbatore as well. Although trained as a primatologist, Dr. Kumar's collaborative initiative with Dr. Ravi Chellam and Prof. B.C. Choudhury of WII in the Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve and Anamalai Hills (1995-2002) provided crucial opportunities for PhD students to study the ecology and conservation of a range of non-charismatic smaller animals. Similarly, his collaborative project with Dr. J.P. Tamang of Sikkim University in 2002 on the Teesta River basin's carrying capacity initiated a wave of research in Sikkim's ecosystems, leading to a follow-up project (at NCBS later) where he continued to guide students from 2018 to 2021.

Beyond his direct research, Dr. Kumar was a central figure connecting various wildlife NGOs such as ATREE, CWS, NCF, WWF, Dakshin Foundation and others through his advisory roles. He even served on WII's Training, Research and Academic Council (TRAC). He was a regular at ecology and wildlife science conferences and seminars, and recently served as an evaluator at WII's 35th Annual Research Seminar held in October 2024. Despite his significant achievements, he remained self-effacing, generously offering detailed feed-

back on manuscripts and theses. His involvement with Kerala's environmental clearance board and his remarkable memory for his students underscored his deep commitment to the conservation community. He believed that institutions and research itself thrived on collaboration, not competition, and his office door (in most cases, his home's as well) was always open—to students, junior researchers, colleagues or really anyone seeking advice and opinion.



Dr. Ajith Kumar at a Seminar/Conference in SACON
(Image courtesy: Dr. Arun PR)

Dr. Ravi Chellam, Former Faculty, WII; CEO, Metastring Foundation

"Ajith was incredibly generous. He developed the WII-USFWS project proposal but readily gave it to me as PI when he was moving to SACON. He treated everyone with respect, particularly students, never using them as just data collectors. His mentorship involved gently guiding with ideas, debate, and a focus on data-driven ecology, always with humility and without creating distance."

Prof. B.C. Choudhury, Former (Retd.) Faculty, WII & Dr. Ajith's long-time associate and friend

"At WII, Ajith and I often dined with researchers in their hostel. Evenings would turn into lengthy discussions about their fieldwork, fuelled by what Ajith jokingly called 'sips of ambrosia'. These sessions, sometimes lasting hours, led to a humorous attempt to limit wildlife talk to alternate evenings, with fines for violators. The first 'no wildlife' evening hilariously ended with everyone paying fines to continue their research discussions, leading to the formation of the 'Old Monk Association', where project work was always the real agenda, effectively preparing researchers for seminars."

The Mentor: Nurturing Minds, Celebrating Students' Achievements

In 2003, Dr. Kumar was instrumental in establishing the impactful Master's Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at NCBS, serving as its Founding Director from 2004 to 2020. His vision, alongside those of his colleagues and associates, was to cultivate a new generation of future conservation leaders and practitioners with strong scientific foundations, critical thinking, and a passion for nature. The program emphasised academic rigour alongside natural history knowledge, responsibility towards wildlife, and collaborative skills. Its success is evident in the thriving careers of its numerous alumni across academia and conservation.

To his students, Dr. Kumar was a unique blend of intellectual rigour and deep empathy. He approached mentorship with joy rather than as duty. Known for his extensive knowledge, approachable demeanour, and characteristic wit, Dr. Kumar provided generous, non-hierarchical guidance, fostering a supportive and empowering environment. His non-judgmental approach built confidence and essential skills. In the corridors of NCBS, he could often be found holding impromptu discussions over coffee, dissecting everything from population genetics to the ethics of human-wildlife conflict. While he may have sometimes stumbled through his classroom lectures, he came into his own while in the field with students — igniting curiosity about all kinds of organisms (including his favourite: trees), whether while walking the forests of Periyar Tiger Reserve or when scuba-diving with them in the Andaman Sea. He never missed any opportunity to travel with his students, and spent extended periods of time with many of them in the field.

His genuine care for his students extended beyond their academic pursuits, offering unwavering support and well wishes even after their formal mentorship concluded. The numerous testimonials from those he guided highlight that his impact transcended academic instruction, deeply influencing their personal and professional growth. He celebrated his students' successes as if they were his own, and never forgot to publicly broadcast about grants and awards that they would receive. He firmly believed in the 'People First' philosophy, and lived all his life practicing this tenet.

Dr. Divya Karnad, Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies, Ashoka University (Alumna of the M.Sc. Wildlife Biology & Conservation Programme at NCBS, 2006-08)

"Ajith taught his students about natural history, responsibility, and relationships, through his own astute observations of plants and animals, recognising primates and the reasons for their behaviour, diligent financial support to his Ph.D. field assistant, Thangavelu, from the 1980s, until his death in the mid-2010s, and using any opportunity to connect with people, however far removed they may have seemed, about wildlife conservation. A teacher, he taught us, was not simply one who engaged in a classroom, but more importantly, one who engaged in real life."

Vanjulavalli Sridhar, Indian Forest Service Officer (AGMUT Cadre), 2012 batch (Alumna of the M.Sc. Wildlife Biology & Conservation Programme at NCBS, 2010-12)

"I have just gotten through with the application process for a PhD with Pondicherry University. Even after many years of NCBS and the many people I've worked under who can vouch for me, I automatically filled Ajith sir's name. Now, I don't remember informing him of it at all. That's how much we all knew he was in our corner. He was, in fact, my reference for the IFS application, too, way back in 2011."

Chagsaldulam Odonjavkhan, Researcher, Institute of Biology, Mongolian Academy of Sciences (Alumna of the M.Sc. Wildlife Biology & Conservation Programme at NCBS, 2016-18)

"You know, I first met Ajith online when I was enrolling for a master's interview. I can't thank him enough for the chance he gave me—it changed my life! When I first saw him on camera with his glasses and beard, I thought he would be super strict, like those teachers from my school days. But when we finally met in person, he was the complete opposite—so warm, cheerful, and always cracking jokes! During my master's studies, he was such a big support for me. He understood my struggles and really encouraged me, opening doors that I never thought possible."

Dr. Divya Mudappa, Scientist, Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore (Alumna of WII's Masters in Wildlife Science Program & Dr. Kumar's first PhD student at WII)

“He once suggested that we trek to Munnar, one morning, aiming to get there in time to have a good time with his friends in Eravikulam in Kerala. While we took off, we never made it, got lost and had to overnight in the open — completely exposed to hunger, biting cold and rain. Only his humour saw us through, revealing that this was his fourth attempt! Without food, he asked us to forage for berries and tubers, while also remarking, “Once you start foraging for food, you won’t have time to find your way out... We are all going to die here and will be found centuries later by anthropologists who would claim that they discovered a polyandrous society! (I was the only woman with a group of 5 men!)”

Akshay Surendra, PhD Student, Yale University (Alumnus of the Post Graduate Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation, NCBS, 2016-18)

“When I had a health scare, one of the first people I reached out to was Ajith Sir. “Just eat fish”, he said. He proceeded to narrate a story about his relative whose response to a heart condition was to become fitter than he ever had been. “Come home, I will make you fish. Every day!”, he said.

In 10 short minutes, he’d disarmed my fears, brewed hope and extended help unconditionally. My friend, Avishkar Munje calls Ajith Sir, “Dumbledore”. He swears he has heard Ajith say, “help is available at NCBS if someone needs it”. I believe him!”

Dr. Jagdish Krishnaswamy, Former Faculty, WII & ATREE; Dean, School of Environment and Sustainability, Indian Institute for Human Settlements

“Dr. Ajith mentioned to me long ago that academics and scientists can be remembered by either their published work — which sooner or later becomes obsolete, or the students one has nurtured and mentored. He clearly preferred the living legacy of students who went on to shine, each in their own distinct ways and who, in turn, hopefully would do similar things with their own students and colleagues. Dr. Ajith found the goodness and positives in each and every one of us, and although he may have struggled with our deficiencies, he never judged us on those. There are so few like him and we have so much to learn from his outstanding example of inclusive leadership.”



Ajith Sir watching northern pig-tailed macaques with students in 2017 (Image courtesy: Dr. Divya Vasudev)

The Institution-Builder

Dr. Kumar's genius lay not only in science but in his ability to unite people. At NCBS, he was instrumental in fostering the Wildlife Biology & Conservation Program into a crucible of interdisciplinary learning. He possessed a unique ability to bridge divides and bring conservationists with diverse perspectives together towards common goals. Many stalwarts in our field admitted being unable to talk with each other, but they could freely speak with Dr. Kumar.

Recognising the limited research on marine mammals in India, Dr. Kumar proactively gathered institutional and financial backing to help establish a marine mammal consortium in 2023. He was also instrumental in developing practical at-sea training programs for students, even participating in the ship-based training himself. Basically, he never walked alone and always tried building consensus towards common causes, despite and giving space to strong and diverse opinions from all and sundry.

While he longed to establish an Association of all wildlife biologists and scientists in the country (only he could have pulled it off!), he put all his energy in the last few years to establish a platform where advancements in wildlife ecology as a field of science could be discussed more broadly. His dream was realised in 2024 with the successful inaugural organisation of the [Indian Wildlife Ecology Conference \(IWEC\)](#), to which he served as the Convenor with Dr. Jayashree Ratnam. The overwhelming consensus among participants was that this conference should become a recurring event, highlighting its significance in providing a [crucial platform](#) for researchers and practitioners to connect, share findings, and forge collaborations. Dr. Kumar's leadership in establishing this forum underscores his understanding of the importance of a cohesive and communicative wildlife ecology community for effective conservation action.

Tiasa Adhya, Co-founder and Director, Conservation and Ecology Program, Human & Environment Alliance League (Alumna of the Post Graduate Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation, NCBS, 2012-14)

"We put together a six-month-long Wetland Ecology Biodiversity and Conservation course (in collaboration with IUCN) without much dedicated funding. Ajith sir agreed to be in the advisory committee and selection panel for the course, without any honorarium. Not only did he help select candidates, he also joined our field course for two days, during which he charmed the course participants so much that many of them continued to remain in touch with him."

Prof. (Dr.) K. Vijayraghavan, Former NCBS Director & Former Principal Scientific Advisor to the Government of India

"When Dr. Ullas Karanth and Dr. Anindya Sinha proposed the idea of starting a master's course in wildlife biology and conservation at NCBS in 2003, there was widespread opposition from the then NCBS community — you know, things like 'it won't work', 'we are a laboratory-focused institution', 'what kind of a course runs in alternate years' etc. However, we gave it a try, and the program became immensely successful and has added vibrancy, drive and enthusiasm to the NCBS campus! The ecology space at NCBS grew beautifully and Ajith's role in it was phenomenal. In hindsight, if we run the 'deletion test' as we do in molecular genetics, the program simply wouldn't have worked without Ajith's inclusive leadership."

Prof. (Dr.) Kartik Shanker, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science

"There were so many things that Ajith did that were not advertised. He and I ran the Indo-US Knowledge Initiative Project together for many years in collaboration with Dr. Barry Noon. Mostly about workshops, training and exchanges, the project had little for us personally in terms of research or collaboration. But Ajith and Barry both believed that this was worth more than many of the other things we did as scientists. Great role models."





Dr. Kumar remained a curious researcher till the end and trained himself de novo about marine mammals in 2013 before helping shape the vision of 'Marine Mammal Consortium of India' that culminated in 2023, never taking any direct credit for any of this effort

A Legacy Beyond Loss

Dr. Ajith Kumar's departure is felt deeply, but his legacy is indelible. He taught us that conservation is not a battle waged in isolation but requires people and institutions to come together. His students now lead projects across the globe, while his ethos of inclusivity continues to shape institutions. He leaves behind a remarkable legacy as a pioneering researcher, a dedicated and inspiring educator, and an influential figure who shaped the field of wildlife biology and conservation in India towards developing it as a profession — without ever speaking about his own accomplishments.

His memory and his profound contributions will undoubtedly continue to guide and motivate future generations of conservationists. As we grieve, we also celebrate a life that was lived fully and well, and which burned brightly for wildlife and for people. In his memory, let us reaffirm our commitment to the values he championed: curiosity, compassion, and the courage to bridge divides. He will live on through the work of his students until [infinity](#).



Dr. Ajith Kumar at Pushpagiri Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka in 2021 (Image courtesy: Dr. Swapna Nelaballi)

Author

Rohit R.S. Jha is a Senior Researcher at the Wildlife Institute of India's Conservation Advisory & Policy Cell, where he is currently working as Principal Project Associate. He is an Alumnus of the Post-graduate Program in Wildlife Biology and Conservation at NCBS (2012-14), and a beneficiary of the Late Dr. Ajith Kumar's leadership and mentorship. He acknowledges the kind support of Prof. B.C. Choudhury, Mr. Gyanesh Chhibber (WII), Dr. S. Muralidharan, Mr. Manoharan (SACON) and Ms. Shruti Ghosh (Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru) for sharing information and other details about Dr. Kumar's work and times with these institutions. Note that information pertaining to Dr. Ajith's tenure at WII and SACON may not be precise, due to lack of older records, and the fact that he neither left his CV with anyone nor is it publicly available.