



### CHRONICLES OF SOLITARY CONSERVATORS

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Conservation does make sense when we are able to see its effect on a large scale. The declining population of species demoted to the threatened category require extra protection and continuous surveillance for their survival. But most of the times such actions towards the conservation arises when the species have seen its share of uncalled wrath caused by various anthropological activities. Can't we act beforehand to ensure that the word conservation gets its usage minimised?

There comes the big question of 'How can we aid in the conservation efforts?'. How can we learn about the animals which require conservation? How can we proceed towards ensuring their survival on our planet?

Well, every child is a born naturalist. We all have got our own share of adventures with insects, animals and birds or plants which has made our childhood magical. That base if nurtured further would lead each human being to love and conserve the childhood environment which he/she had relished happily in yesteryears.

I have compiled a set of 5 very short stories which will give an insight that how some have already contributed their small yet significant share in conserving their environment. These stories will make most of us relive our childhood and shine some light on how we all can contribute our share to protect and aid the little dwellers of our nature.

#### Big Eyes

The summer holidays were about to begin. Mother was busy cleaning up the house before the family left for the annual visit to grandparent's in Bengal. All the shelves were thoroughly cleaned and the refrigerator was scrubbed till it shone as new. A week before the trains were scheduled, Jhinuk was busy finishing her holiday homework (so that her vacation went uninterrupted). Suddenly she heard her mother's shrill cry and rushed to the study room, with her little brother tagging along. Mother was sitting on a pile of old newspapers (which have been gathered with the sole aim of being sold off), and near her feet were two shining white marbles. On a closer inspection, Jhinuk found out that they were the eggs of house gecko (which by the way were quite abundant in that room). Mother asked her to throw them away. Jhinuk was quite reluctant to do so, when an idea struck her. She fetched an old medicine box, lined its inner with some paper strips and placed those two eggs upon them. She was hell bent on saving those two lives, yes that required a certain amount of secrecy from her mother and lots of partnership with her brother.

Every day, before leaving for the school, she used to check on the eggs. The same procedure was repeated after coming home too. Soon the date for boarding the train came, but the eggs hadn't hatched yet. So, little Jhinuk decided to take the box along with her. Of course, this was only known to her and her brother. Around a week had passed with her cousins and granny, but the eggs hadn't cracked up yet. She had an uncanny feeling that perhaps the eggs were unfertilized. Yes, reptiles do so to ensure that the unfertilized one gets eaten by the predators and thus, ensuring survival of their progeny. Next morning when Jhinuk checked that the eggs hadn't changed much, she was disappointed. Her brother took one of the eggs and placed it against a light bulb. He noticed something. There was something dark outlined within the egg, which on closer inspection, kind of matched the shape of a baby gecko. Both the siblings were over the clouds on seeing the life beating inside the egg.

Later that evening, both were greeted with two little baby geckos. They were quite tiny (approximately 3 cm in length) and had big eyes. The brother removed the paper strips and eggs shells from the box, meanwhile, Jhinuk held those tiny babies in her palm. It felt magical to her.



The granny's house was huge, with innumerable big geckos, cockroaches, spiders and many more larger sized insects. Most of them could cause harm to these tiny geckos, therefore, the siblings decided to feed them till they grew a bit big enough to evade their predators. The brother began collecting little insects and mosquitoes and used to place them in front of those little geckos. Initially it was difficult for the geckos to take in the food, and they used to either just try to lick them or move away. But after a few attempts, they started eating. Infact, Jhinuk was able to see each tiny mosquito going down in their bellies and creating a bump around there. One fine morning, while the siblings were busy feeding those geckos, Jhinuk felt a tap on her shoulder. On turning around she saw her mother standing along with her aunts. Of course they all were surprised and few even upturned their noses (geckos don't come as a pet for many people in India). But surprisingly mother just laughed and planted a soft kiss on her head before doing the same to her brother. Mother's only word of caution for the siblings was to wash their hands with soap and water every time after they have tended to the geckos. Things got easier now, as even the cousins aided in fetching food for the steadily growing geckos. After a week, when the geckos had grown considerably larger, they required more movement, as the box house was proving to be small for them. So, later that evening, when the number of insects and moths were at the peak, and were hovering around the tube light, Jhinuk with her brother and cousins, had bid a happy farewell to those two little geckos. Initially the geckos were a bit stunned on viewing the large wall with numerous insects of every size possible. Soon they scurried away under a light holder. For a moment Jhinuk hoped that they might be coming out and saying a final goodbye, but she realised that it was not going to happen. The two geckos had already started their life in the wilderness where they will have to defend and honour their territory themselves. The children were happy, and on being called by the mother, all had rushed for the hot piping dinner of steamed rice and chicken curry.

## One out of Nine

Suchi ached for a pet dog her little brother wanted to tame a cat. But their mother wasn't too easy to convince upon these matters. So, Suchi would just keep on hoping that maybe one day her mother would allow them both to fulfil their desires. During those days, the flat diagonally opposite to theirs, laid abandoned. Most of the children from their block used to play hide-n-seek by jumping over the walls and hiding into the bushes of the flat's untamed garden. Many of the mothers warned their kids about the lurking snakes, which soon brought them back to the parks and streets to play games. Suchi's brother used to spend quite a lot of time roaming near the walls of that abandoned flat. At first he seemed odd to her, and she jumped to the conclusion that he might have had some clash with his friends so was being isolated. But on a casual interrogation session with him, she found about the jackpot her brother had hit upon.

Well, some boys residing in their block weren't too good with animals, and one even had a history of killing little puppies. The brother had diligently made an observation that a cat regularly used to visit the garden of the empty flat. And recently for around three days the cat wasn't seen anymore. The siblings suspected that the cat might have been in any accident or worse have gotten herself killed. But the bigger concern laid over the jackpot. Yes, there were little kittens inside that house, and their mewling could be easily heard by any passer-by. The siblings were concerned that the sounds might attract the rowdy boys, so they decided to act really fast. Suchi came up with an idea of bringing and keeping the kittens in their home, to which her brother laughed hysterically. He was quick to mention the disagreeing face of their mother. But Suchi had rested his fears by presenting before him a brilliant plan. The same night, Suchi handed a medium sized cardboard carton to her brother. Next morning their grandparents were scheduled to come for a visit, so mother and father were in a hurry to go and receive them. As soon as father had started the engine of the car, both the siblings sprang into action. The brother slipped out of the main door, rushed down the stairs, went inside the empty house and brought back the kittens safe and sound within the box. As it was the schooltime, so everybody was inside their houses getting ready, giving the siblings the safe time-frame to go on with their business unnoticed. Once on their roof, the box was opened to reveal, two little furry striped balls. They were too small and kind of hungry, as their thin and shrill mewling indicated. Suchi asked her brother to be on guard as she rushed downstairs and fetched a milk bottle. Then she poured some milk into it and rushed upstairs.

Unfortunately, the nipple of the bottle was too large for the tiny mouths of the kittens. So, Suchi rushed back home again and kept on searching for something to feed them with. Her eyes fell on the pen stand where an ink dropper was kept. Soon she had cleaned the dropper, took some milk in a bowl and rushed upstairs again. It was a success. She managed to feed those hungry souls via the dropper. After they had gobbled up almost half a bowl of milk, they started dodging the dropper. Suchi sensed that their tummies were full. Both the children played with the kitties. One of the kitten was a bit docile and less mischievous, and Suchi swiftly called dibs on it. The other one was quite aggressive and luckily her brother liked it more. A few minutes later they heard the screech of halting tyres. Speculating it was the arrival of their parents and grandparents, they bid adieu their kitties, lightly covered the box, placed it under the shade of the water tanks and rushed downstairs. Meeting the grandparents always brings a calming effect. They were loaded with of homemade pickles, sweets and lots of toys from the local fairs held in the village every year. Soon, it was time for them to leave for school. They loaded their backs with school bags, and informed their mother to not bother watering the plants kept on the roof as they had taken the responsibility of watering the plants. Their helpful gesture made their mother very happy. That day onwards Suchi and her brother used to visit the roof twice, once before going to school and next after coming back home. The children loved those tiny scratching nails on their skin, the little jumps to catch them, their basic instinct of hiding and then chasing them, all made some of the best memorable events of their life. The disappearing milk and the frequent visits to the roof all went unnoticed by the grace of their grandparents. Both the parents were spending ample time with the elderly thus, giving the kids ample opportunity to go and play with the rescued kittens.

But as every happy time does come to an end, theirs too ended, exactly four days after the project's initiation. It was while Suchi was carrying the bowl of milk to the roof to get some air, her mother had followed her to spread wet clothes on the clothes line. She caught the siblings while they were feeding the kittens. They were taken to their father, and soon, with aid of grandparents, it was decided that the kittens will have to go, but to some place safe. Disheartened yet relieved that the kittens will be safe, the kids agreed for the separation.

Next morning, mother spoke to the sweeper and asked him to take the kittens and release them some place safe. The children bid adieu their little fur balls, and wished them a safe and happy future. Yes, they did regularly take updates from the sweeper, who very eagerly had shown the new hideout of the steadily growing kittens. After all, the children felt happy to be a part of one out of their nine lives.

## Mussel Mystery

Rimpa had gone to visit her grandparents during the village's Annual Fair. The weekly market was filled with varieties of vegetables, fruits and animals. She was excited to see the clay sculptures of deities, beautifully designed oil lamps, bamboo baskets woven in all possible sizes, colourful bangles and rows of toy shops lined one after the other. There were many varieties of fishes, eggs of hens and ducks and freshwater snails too which were eagerly brought by the customers. Rimpa sensed that most of the houses that day will be preparing elegant and delicious food items. Her grandfather had also filled their bag with fresh spinach, radish, papaya and pumpkin.

As she rushed back to hand the vegetables to her granny, she noticed a man was sitting on the porch and weighing the freshly caught fishes. The fish basket was made of bamboo and had the murky smelling pond scum attached to it. There were some prawns as well as a shiny mussel amongst them. Rimpa was fascinated by the mussel and wanted to buy it. The fisherman gave it to her for free, as it had no use for him. He was anyway going to throw it away. Rimpa was delighted.

The shell of the mussel had beautiful white rings upon a brown background. At first her grandparents were amused at her childish antics, but soon they aided her out. Grandfather gave her an empty coconut shell with some pond scum in it. Rimpa filled it with water and kept the mussel inside it undisturbed. After around seven minutes, she saw the shy mussel was opening its shell, and a white slithery foot emerged which explored its new home. She then gave powdered puffed rice to it, which was very deftly swept away with the siphon present on its side. She used to spend hours watching the opening and closing of the shell and enjoyed its antics. The mussel was a slow mover but on the contrast it was too fast in siphoning off the food from scum.

After a couple of days later, Rimpa had to return back to her hostel. Rimpa was then pursuing her bachelors and was living in a hostel. Pets weren't allowed there, but she couldn't just leave her mussel. So she decided to carry it, hidden in her luggage bag. Back at hostel, some of her friends were really excited to see the new roommate. One of them even had lent her an old bucket to use it as the new home of the mussel. Rimpa filled the bucket with water and lined it with sand at the bottom.

The days passed productively as the girls began studying the mussel's movement, its playful hide-n-seek under sand and siphoning off the food from the surface. The algal deposition on the sand surface gave it an added source of nutrition. Few months later, Rimpa went back her home during the Puja vacation. Her parents already knew about the mussel and gave Rimpa an information that it normally doesn't survive more than a month, but Rimpa has done wonders. Rimpa placed the mussel in the balcony where it received rain, heat, wind, hail storms and all other natural phenomena. The mussel grew in size and started getting better in camouflaging. Sometimes it became really difficult to spot in under water. Only an occasional siphoning action would make the sand particles move and give away its perfectly hidden shell.

The mussel had a pleasant stay of around a year with Rimpa and her family. After a year, Rimpa asked her father to release it in the river Ganges (which was near his workstation). She was happy for her mussel. She wanted to let it live free and enjoy the vast stretches of water and abundant nutrients with the other mussel folk.

## Rosie

After completing her Bachelor's degree, Roohi was returning back home with her luggage, aided by her mother and elder brother. It was a sweet-bitter farewell and she had already started missing her friends and teachers. The train was halting at the designated stations with passengers pouring in and out. At one such halt, she noticed a man selling caged parakeets, budgerigars and munias. She had longed for a pet bird right from her school days, and that day in particular she was feeling more lonely than ever. As train chugged out of the station, she kept looking outside the window for catching a last glimpse of the birds. Her brother nudged her softly and handed her a big box with a jute bag thrown over it. Roohi was surprised and peeked under the bag. There awaited a huge surprise for her. It was a beautiful baby parakeet gifted by her brother. Roohi was over the clouds and couldn't be more happier.

On reaching home, she along with her brother rushed to put some water and water-soaked Bengal gram into the tiny bowls inside the cage. It was a juvenile of the Rose-ringed Parakeet which remained quiet for the initial few hours. Perhaps it was getting accustomed to the new surroundings. When mother asked Roohi to open the cage, she feared it getting hurt by flying and hitting the fan. But mother showed her carefully that the wings of the bird were clipped. That revelation did cause pain to Roohi. She wondered how could anyone hurt such a little bird. As she let the cage open, the bird came out and started exploring the house. There started a beautiful journey of Roohi with Rosie (as Roohi had named her bird).

Rosie's antics were hilarious. She used to scurry past every member of the family and climb upon her favourite spot, the shoe-rack. She used to share meals with them too. Sometimes a few strands of chillies, guava and water-soaked grams would do the magic. Other times she had to be treated with milk and rice. Whenever any song was played, she used to croon to the music and dance by lifting her legs (like she was performing march past). She also used to lend her shrill cacophonies to all the jingles and TV commercials which the mother used to watch. In the evenings, Roohi and her brother used to take her to their roof, where she would climb all the potted plants and try perching on the highest branch. Roohi loved to carry Rosie clinged to her fingers.

The siblings had to be on a constant guard during the roof visits. Twice they had saved Rosie from the crows and once from a swooping black kite. Their neighbours occasionally visited them to enjoy Rosie's company. She was intelligent, sharp and always amusing everyone with her antics. Roohi's family never kept Rosie in the cage. She was free to move wherever she liked. Every morning, Roohi's first job was to search for Rosie's new hideout. Sometimes she was found under the bed, and sometimes under the sofa. She often dangled from the curtains and other times she rested atop the shoe rack. Yes, she used to litter the house a lot with her shed feathers and half eaten food items. Cleaning the mess was an additional job for Roohi and her brother.

Soon Roohi's family had completed two months with Rosie. One afternoon on the roof, Rosie was as usual climbing atop the hibiscus plant. Within a wink of an eye, she flew away to a gathering of tall trees lining the supermarket. Roohi and her brother had rushed downstairs and asked their father to help them retrieve her back. The three of them had then ran towards those tall trees and tried spotting Rosie amidst the dense canopy. Upon calling her name, she did answer back. An electrician was working on the nearby pole with a tall crane. Roohi requested him to aid them get their bird back. At first the man seemed amused on being made such a request, but soon he took his crane and tried reaching Rosie. As he was few feet away from her, she flew away again to another gathering of trees nearby. After a fruitless trying for around 45 mins, Roohi decided to let her go.

At that moment she had realised, Rosie was never hers to keep. She stayed with them for a while, made all bask in her companionship. But, she was always meant to be free, and no one should ever take that from her, or any other bird ever.

## Unique Hummingbird

Putul's father got superannuated, and they had to move to their new and permanent house in Bengal. The flat where Putul had spent her entire childhood and teenage years was bid adieu. It seemed quite strange in the beginning, when she had to designate a new unknown place as her home. Initially, Putul started making acquaintances with the nature surrounding her new house. There were lot of rain trees surrounding the big lake just behind the house.

One evening it was drizzling amidst the last rays of the setting sun. There was a Crepe Jasmine plant in the backyard of the house and Putul was admiring its white flowers, when something fluttered by and got hidden behind the plant. It was hard to notice anything from behind the window amid the rain. So, she took her SLR camera and tried capturing the object. It seemed to be a bird but was too small for a bird. It was capable of hovering at a place for quite a long time while drinking the nectar of flowers, but that was supposed to be known as a quality of the Hummingbirds. Putul knew that Hummingbirds weren't found in India, which made her more inquisitive regarding the flying object. Unfortunately, she was unable to click any pictures of it.

The next evening, at the same time, she saw the object hovering above flowers again. Putul was forced to watch it from behind the window because, as soon as she did step in the garden, it used to fly away. The weather was also the same, light drizzle with the last rays of the setting sun. Luckily this time she managed to take a picture of it, although not very clear but enough for its identification. On further research via books and internet, she was surprised to find out that she had been right about it all the time. It was indeed a hummingbird, but a moth. Yes, its full name was Hummingbird hawk-moth. It was almost the size of a hummingbird, and many people do mistake it for the bird. But it had always belonged to the Lepidoptera order.

A few days later, there were miniature grenades scattered around the crepe jasmine plant. Putul got curious, and inferred those shapes to be some new digging pattern of earthworms. Next day the grenades grew in their size. And within a couple of days the size of the grenades had reached that of a pea. She then noticed that some of the leaves were eaten, and that's when the marvellous surprise in the form of tiny caterpillars emerged before her eyes. The caterpillars of the Hummingbird hawk-moths could grow as large as 12 cm and they had this yellow coloured horn at the end of their tail. Putul took three caterpillars and kept them in an empty bucket lined with the leaves.

Caterpillars are voracious eaters. A single caterpillar could easily eat 10-12 leaves in a day. Putul got engaged in a constant cycle of feeding the caterpillars and then cleaning their grenade shaped excreta. The caterpillars were pastel light green in colour and as they neared their pupating time, their colour changed into dark green (in the upper portion) and orange (in the lower portion). At first Putul got tensed to see them jerking their bodies at regular intervals, which gradually intensified. But later she saw them encapsulating themselves in a brown coloured cover. She then knew that those jerks aided them to pupate.

It was a mystery for her as she had seen many adult caterpillars on the plant, but not a single pupa upon any of the branches. At first she thought that they were all being preyed upon by the crows and mynahs. But then one day she saw a moth resting on the ground. It was a newly hatched Hawkmoth and it was still pumping the fluid into its wings. She finally solved the mystery by inferring these caterpillars, fall on the ground, dig under, pupate and then emerge out as moths. So, Putul had lined her bucket with the garden soil.

After the pupation period was over, She was treated to the emergence of three beautiful and absolutely magnificent Hummingbird hawk-moths. She watched them slowly climb the bucket, rest on the rim for around 4-5 hours, and then fluttering away into the unknown.

This small yet important event in her life had made her fall in love with her new home. Thereafter, each season she awaited the arrival of her own little unique hummingbirds.