

Roy teaching students about nature in a butterfly garden



The Butterfly Brigade of Kolkata

A wildlife enthusiast and his nature conservation group are on a mission to turn the City of Joy into the City of Butterflies *By* VENKATA SUSMITA BISWAS

Arjan Basu Roy has a dream—to turn the City of Joy into the City of Butterflies. Luckily for Kolkata, it hosts at least a hundred butterfly species. Roy and his band of nature lovers are on a mission to transform, restore and conserve the disappearing urban wildlife in the city. As secretary of Nature Mates, one of Kolkata's foremost nature conservation groups, Roy has overseen multiple conservation projects, the most prominent of them being Banobitan, India's first open air butterfly garden.

Nature Mates was formally launched in 2006, but it started much earlier in 1993 when wildlife enthusiast Roy and his schoolmates set up a WWF Nature Club in their school to pursue their interest in wildlife. As part of the school's nature club activities, Roy and his friends participated in

find it here, in my city, around me. It was then that I started following urban wildlife," he says.

The club works in tandem with the West Bengal Forest Department in conservation activities. "A healthy butterfly population is an indicator of biodiversity. They are the best pollinators; birds, lizards and frogs feed on them, so conserving butterflies will give opportunity for an entire spectrum of other species to thrive," says Roy. "This biodiversity can be initiated by everyone. Any area can be transformed into a butterfly habitat—a sprawling garden, a front yard, a terrace or even a balcony. Planting butterflies

Roy believes that affirmative action to preserve nature makes a bigger difference than protesting or criticising wrongdoings. According to him, token gestures of planting saplings when a tree is uprooted to make way

for construction amount to very little in the big scheme of nature. "We offer assistance to build-

ers in relocating trees that would otherwise have been uprooted and replaced by five saplings elsewhere," he explains. Nature Mates addresses a wide spectrum of conservation activities, including animal rescue, restoring endangered animal species, cleaning wetlands around Kolkata, working with the forest department to set up butterfly gardens, wildlife surveys, installing bird nests, etc.

One of the key contributions of Nature Mates is the research the group undertakes on biodiversity, wildlife conservation. "We present the data in the form of usable information to guide people. This information is made available in English and Bengali to ensure even rural communities can make use of it," he says.

Over the years, Roy has noticed a change in people's attitudes that is positively impacting



wildlife rescue missions and wildlife monitoring. Growing up with financial constraints meant that Roy could not visit wildlife reserves, nature parks or forests as a child. "That was when I realised that I did not have to go to a forest to see wildlife. I could

placing butterfly-friendly plants in a home or garden will augur these colourful biodiversity agents."

Arjan Basu Roy



is positively impacting urban wildlife, "but it is very slow, much slower than needed". To augment this progress, Roy and his team are continuing their mission to improve biodiversity in Kolkata, one butterfly garden at a time.