

# The butterfly effect

As India continues to lose its rich butterfly diversity at an alarming rate, a handful of individuals work towards creating newer habitats

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If you happen to see a swarm of butterflies flying above the terrace of your office in the crowded Bengaluru city, count yourself lucky. You are witness to the largest annual butterfly migration in southern India. Every year between October and December, swarms of Dark Blue Tiger and Double Branded Brown Crow fly through the Bengaluru-Mysore area to their summer homes in the evergreen forests of Sahyadri in the Western Ghats. There they crowd in dense congregation for weeks, court and breed.

The Western Ghats, along with the Himalayas, the country's north-east region and the Andaman Islands, are home to butterflies unique to India.

*A store in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, selling dead and framed butterflies*



With 1,800 known species and subspecies, the country boasts an impressive 10 per cent of the global biodiversity in butterfly.

Butterflies are crucial pollinators and their contribution to global agriculture is valued only next to honey bees. A fall in their population would also lead to a fall in their predator population like the wasps, spiders and birds.

## A Harvard butterfly specialist

According to Krushnamegh Kunte, India's leading lepidopterist and a post-doctoral fellow at Harvard, habitat destruction and deterioration are the foremost threats to butterfly population. "In India, widespread and excessive use of pesticides and herbicides has exacerbated the problem," he says. Several intended or unintended human interferences, such as agriculture, fires and dams, alter forest structure and plant composition, or completely destroy butterfly habitats. This has had the most serious impacts in the eastern Himalayas and northeastern India, where butterfly habitats are vanishing at an alarming rate.

Add to this the thriving illegal trade in butterflies. High altitude species like Kaiser-I-Hind, Bhutan glory, Pale Zezebel and Ladakh Banded Apollo can fetch up to ₹20,000 in the international market. They are used by collectors to adorn greetings cards, paperweights and jewellery. One can also buy rare species over the Internet. A visit to [www.insectdesigns.com](http://www.insectdesigns.com) can be chilling. Taking advantage of the fact that in most countries other than India, trade

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in butterflies is legal, the site makes available different varieties priced between US \$2 and \$330. In India, several cases were reported in the last decade where researchers and tourists from abroad were caught with huge consignments of dead insects, including butterflies. In 2008, for instance, two Czech nationals were caught with 2,000 specimens of larvae and insects collected from the Singalia National Park in north Bengal. The biodiversity hot spots of eastern Himalayas and the Western Ghats are the prime hunting grounds.

In April 2008, on a field trip to Sikkim, Kunte rediscovered the Scare Jester Butterfly—a species protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act implying it enjoys the same level of protection as the tiger. The species was not sighted in the last 90 years and for him the rediscovery emphasised "the need to conserve hitherto unprotected forest fragments as biodiversity parks". Kunte believes common people can support butterflies. "A native sapling could be planted that

