



Finding OLD TREE TOPS

Forest ecologist Yoav Bar-Ness goes looking for Delhi's oldest trees

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AMERICAN forest ecologist Yoav Bar-Ness arrived in Delhi over a month ago. In his first month in the city, Bar-Ness has been wandering around Delhi's parks and streets, stopping at various trees to say 'hello' and to examine their trunks, roots, flowers and leaves. Bar-Ness, a Fulbright Scholar and tree enthusiast, is preparing for a nine-month project that will broadly explore the spiritual, economic, and social functions of trees all over India with the aim of creating profiles of various trees for an educational resource. The eccentric forest ecologist has a unique approach to trees, perceiving them as individuals. "Trees are individuals with a long history. They are individuals because we give them a name, and once we recognise them as individuals we can tease out their history and even say hello," says Bar-Ness.

Yoav selected India for his project because he claims that it is a country where many communities demonstrate a distinct reverence for nature. "I am working as a forest ecologist trying to become a bit more involved in a human element and India is interesting because it is facing many environmental challenges, but there is also a culture here that has really respected individual trees and sacred groves in a way that we don't in the West," says Yoav. "If we walk up to a tree in India, somebody may be putting flowers on it, kids are playing in it, someone is washing clothes under it, and another person is peeing on it," says Bar-Ness. "But in countries like the US and

Australia we are prone to drawing big circles around areas and saying 'this is a reserve'," he adds.

The variety of tree life in Delhi, he says, is staggering. Within one week he has seen "the beautifully tended gardens at the Rashtrapati Bhawan, countless sacred fig trees in every possible location, the thorny forests of the ridge, the solemn avenue trees of New Delhi, and these Khirnis—survivors from half a millennium ago." His first major mission is to search for Delhi's oldest trees, the 500-600 year old Khirnis. Equipped with Pradip Krishen's *Trees of Delhi*, Bar-Ness heads to Merhauili and Lado Sarai. As we walk through the parkland and scrub around this area, he stops to examine trees, picking sample leaves and pressing them between the pages of the book. At times he climbs the trees, a practice that he is used to from the days when he used to 'map' trees, and measure their branches. When we find the cluster of Khirni trees or *Manilkara hexandra*, Bar-Ness selects one tree, examines the branches, leaves and trunk and then constructs a narrative of the tree's possible history.

Bar-Ness' project will officially begin in a few months. But in the meantime, he can be found wandering around Delhi, searching for trees. Although the project is still in planning stage, Bar-Ness hopes the free educational resource that he creates will have positive environmental implications in India. "You hope that environmental education will make a positive difference. I am aiming to raise awareness and just create enthusiasm about these trees," says the tree lover.