

INTERVIEWS

Tale from the treetop

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Yoav D Bar-ness, a Fulbright research scholar who is in India studying trees, speaks to Proyashi Barua about how his appreciation for trees as individuals has opened a pathway for exploring multiple facets of the country



Educated in forestry in Seattle, US, and geography in Tasmania, Australia, Yoav D Bar-Ness who has been actively studying jungle and wild land biodiversity for 12 years could easily pass off as another routine highbrow researcher. But his unique approach to trees is what sets him apart.

"I was working as a forest canopy ecologist in Australia and US," recounts Bar-Ness. "During this time I had frequented a lot of tree tops and I discovered that each tree top was a distinct place in its own

right. The shape and size of branches, atmospheric pressure and inhabitants — all contributed in creating this difference," he adds. According to Bar-Ness it was this realisation that spurred his appreciation for trees as individuals.

Bar-Ness is one of the many researchers who focus on studying treetops rather than tree roots. But even here he has a distinctly adventurous approach. "I like to spend days amidst tree tops observing and experiencing life in them unlike most others who study them either from the ground or by merely climbing trees," he shares. According to Bar-Ness it is vital to understand that treetops provide a nexus for studying several allied subjects. "For instance, one can research on termites and insects by examining treetops," he reveals.

He says that trees represent global biodiversity. "Every tree provides a great deal of information about the geological history of the place in which it is growing," he adds. According to him perhaps what is more interesting is that trees also infer the history, culture and at times even the mythology of a place. He goes on to add that a large part of his work revolves around studying these aspects.

Studying Indian trees as ambassadors of cultural identity, landmarks of historical evolution and survivors of ecological evolution is Bar-Ness's current focus. He states that he has studied more than 200 individual trees in India. So why did he decide to come to India? "I have a penchant for deodar trees. I found a map that mentioned the Indian deodar tree. This kindled an interest in India. Moreover, I realised that there are certain historical trees that are not restricted to a particular region. And India is one such place where trees of this kind are found," says Bar-Ness.

"I want to compile a field guide about the different species of trees that have claim to religious, historical and cultural fame in India," he adds. His website <http://www.treeoctopus.net> is an exhaustive source of tree profiles that can be used as environmental education lessons or a travel guidebook. Bar-Ness' long-term plans include creating tangible environmental conservation programmes. "For this to happen I want to spread mass awareness about trees in a fun and engaging way. For instance I want to come up with picture postcards featuring famous and interesting trees," he explains.

According to him, one of the oldest existing trees in India is an 1800-year-old mulberry tree in Joshi Math near Badrinath in Uttarakhand. Talking about some of his favourite Indian trees he says, "The Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya, the Mallanimli tree belonging to the Baobab species in Madhya Pradesh and the gigantic deodars at Jageshwar are some of my favourites."

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