

## EDITORIAL

South Asia (the former British India together with Sri Lanka and the Maldivian Islands), was one of the first tropical regions to be subjected to methodical floral and faunal exploration by the early European naturalists. By the time of Linnaeus, the flora was considered to be well known. By 1900, the same was said to be true of the fauna. The exploration of South Asia continued at an ever-increasing speed until the 1950s, when British influence in the region began to decline. Unfortunately, together with this, interest in natural history too, declined.

The reason for this has not been the lack of new material or the potential for new discoveries. It has been largely apathy on the parts of governments and their associated institutions. Natural history exploration in South Asia, always partly the province of the amateur, is now even more so.

It is fashionable for governments to promote "conservation" these days. Aid agencies are conscious of the impact of development projects on the environment. Environmental Impact Assessments have become a lucrative business. Yet, do we really know what it is that we are conserving? Faunal and floral lists are produced *ad lib*. Many of these are the result of exploration of the (usually outdated) literature and not exploration of the biotas themselves. Organisations associated with conservation programmes seldom stop to think about how much is actually known about the composition of the actual faunas and floras they seek to protect. As often as not, they do not know. And even then, many of the programmes are orientated towards protecting the larger, "cuddlier," mammals and birds.

The infrastructure for natural history exploration and research too, is rapidly disappearing. Shortage of funds, a result of the slumbering economies of the countries in the region, limits peer interaction between workers in the region and their foreign counterparts. Laboratory and library facilities are minimal. Most of the relevant research establishments and museums have been shrouded in a mist of lethargy.

Is there hope?

We like to think there is. We have commenced publishing the *Journal of South Asian natural History* largely in order to afford workers on the natural history of this region to publish their results in a journal with reasonably high standards of production and review. Unusually for journals in this region, we encourage authors to publish colour photographs of the taxa they are dealing with. We do not levy page charges. Because we are not doing this for profit (production is in fact heavily subsidized), we are able to market the journal at a very low price, which we hope will encourage circulation.

Although the journal is published in Sri Lanka, its geographic scope extends to the entirety of South Asia and the Asian countries bordering the western Indian Ocean. Biogeographically, South Asia is often considered to form a single precinct within the Oriental region. Each of its constituent nations shares much of its history, fauna and flora with its neighbours. Natural history results from one country are often of importance also to the others.

We would like to give space in equal parts to botany, zoology and ecology. This first issue deals mostly with Sri Lanka and aquatic biology largely because of our personal interests. This issue is meant to be a "sampler," indicating the kinds of articles we would like to receive. The choice of desired disciplines is wide (see *Guide to the preparation of manuscripts* in the last four pages of this issue).

The South Asian region is faced with alarming rates of population growth and habitat loss. Much of our floral heritage has already been lost. The fauna is, even in the most optimistic estimates, on the brink. We would like to think that in some small way we can help improve the awareness of the scientific community of the riches that surround us.

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