

It's a Wonderful World

BY BITTU SAHGAL

*I see skies of blue and clouds of white
The bright blessed day, the dark sacred night
And I think to myself what a wonderful world.*

—Louis Armstrong (George Weiss/Bob Thiele)

Imbewu Program

Ishmail, the game ranger, led us through his South African forest as a priest might show us his temple. “Here you can see where a hyena rested a while. Look! In the droppings is a hoof of an impala. Walk silently and the forest will speak to you.”

Just before we reached the river, home of Nile crocodiles and hippos, the ever-smiling Isaac, also a game ranger, a friend and guide, gently pointed to the ground: “Imbewu! The seed. See it sprout from the dung of the hippo? And this is the ‘wait-a-while tree’ that has caught my shirt in its thorns.”

We rose early after sleeping out in the cold of the bush at the Imbewu camp in the Kruger National Park, a facility dedicated to providing previously disadvantaged African children with wildlife experiences. With us on a daybreak trail were four young Kids for Tigers’ ambassadors from India: Prithvi from Delhi, Shruti from Chennai, Varsha from Dehradun, and Nishant from Mumbai. All under 13, they were like fresh blotting papers, sponges soaking up information, experiences, and purpose. Keeping them company were some of the brightest young children on the planet who lived in Soweto and were part of the youth program christened Imbewu, founded by the Wilderness Foundation (South Africa) and run in partnership with South African National Parks (SANPARKS). These children were the future of South Africa. They were the future of the world.

Ever so softly Nishant whispered to me: “When I walk in wild places I feel alive. It’s exactly what I want to do all my life.” All the young naturalists on whom my hopes and those of hundreds of wildlife defenders are being pinned echoed his feelings.

“Want to learn about managing waste in the city? Just look at the dung beetle. It turns shit to life,” said Anish Andheria, naturalist with *Sanctuary*, a photographer, and a passionate believer in kids.

“Close your eyes. Allow the Earth and its spirit to seep into you. You are safe and you belong.” That was Noel de Sa, mentor and guide to us all, besides being the national coordinator for Kids for Tigers, the *Sanctuary* Tiger Programme, which encouraged 1 million Indian children to pause a while and contemplate their place in a world still populated by tigers.

Earlier, at the Botanical Gardens in Pretoria the charismatic Murphy Morobe—ex-chair of SANPARKS’ board, chair of the 7th World Wilderness Congress (2001), and our host—welcomed the Indian kids to Africa, saying: “We are bonded ... *this* is the nation that shaped Mahatma Gandhi. India is very special to us and so are you young tiger ambassadors. If you work together with these bright young children of Africa, you will be able to save the wildlife of both our countries and the human cultures that have evolved from our wildernesses.” He spoke with passion about the Imbewu program and the hopes that the elders, including Nelson Mandela, had for young South Africa.

Imbewu ... the seed. What a perfectly wonderful term to describe everything I have strived to achieve all my life ... to seed future generations with the love and respect for the



Bittu Sahgal speaking at the 8th World Wilderness Congress, Alaska, USA.



The future of the world—young naturalists from both the Kids For Tigers (India) and Imbewu (South Africa) groups. Photo by Anish Andheria.

Earth, vital to their survival and that of millions of species, including the tiger. While an ignorant, arrogant generation of short-sighted adults stampeded over Earth's fragile beauty, we had to somehow protect it *and* change the ambitions of those destined to inherit the planet. And we had to sow seeds of hope, which I did by gently reassuring the children: "You are children of Mother Nature. Like the cut on your elbow or knee, she can magically heal wounds inflicted on the Earth. The turtles and crocodiles will purify your rivers. The elephants, rhinos, and leopards will help your forests to regenerate. Anemones and polyps will restore bleached corals to health. And the birds will cast fruit seeds all around to re-green your lands. But, naturally, if you keep worrying and scraping the wounds, neither your elbow, nor the Earth will be healed."

The Environmental Prophet

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born 138 years ago, on October 2, 1869. Educated in India and London, he pursued a career at the bar, where acute shyness almost ruined his chances of success in the earliest stages. By the time he was 30, he was well established in South Africa, but found it difficult to stomach the way colored people were being treated by the government of the day. In protest, he gave up his law practice around 1900 to fight against the biased legislation. Within five years, he saw that the system could not be fought from within, so he opted out, gave up the Western way of life, and forsook material possessions to lead by example.

He fought valiantly for the well-being of his people in South Africa for years, using the simplest and most

effective means to counter a powerful foe—*satyagraha*, or nonviolent civil disobedience. He calculated, correctly, that the South African government of the day would be unable to respond to the power of peaceful resistance and got them to agree to repeal anti-Hindu discrimination.

He returned to India in 1915 and joined the freedom movement. During World War I, Gandhi the tactician supported the British ... in the hope that this might help convince them to free India. But this was not to be. A retinue of broken promises and massacres saw hundreds of innocents butchered, forcing him to launch a series of nonviolent protests against British rule.

A phenomenal motivator, Gandhi was eventually able to weld a disparate country together in joint purpose. He led India to freedom. When he died, the politicians of India's government swore to uphold his ideals.

That promise was soon forgotten. It is still forgotten.

In 1947 Mahatma Gandhi told Jawaharlal Nehru that India should not chase the illusion of Western "development" because such dreams were built on the presumption that cheap resources to fuel material ambitions would come from other countries. He pointed out that if all Indians were to aspire to such a lifestyle, several planets would be needed to feed their demands. His kernel of advice is even more relevant today in a world on a self-destruct mission:

Stay independent. Keep your consumption and demands low. Ask first if your plans will benefit the poorest, weakest Indian before you implement them. Let the villages determine their own destiny for they are the womb of India.

Were Gandhi alive he would surely have pointed out that even more serious than the erosion of our soils is the erosion of our value systems.

Unfortunately Prime Minister Nehru—though he loved Gandhi deeply—felt this was impractical. He, therefore, created a system that encouraged educated or well-connected Indians to step neatly into the British jackboot.

The process of stripping India bare of its natural wealth, which the British had begun centuries ago, continues apace, with rich and powerful urban Indians usurping the resources of the rural poor. Today, for instance, water for 15 million citizens in India's financial capital, Mumbai, comes from distant forests, and the clamor to drown still more forest to feed insatiable demands rises. Our electricity comes from dams built on the properties of villagers who were never compensated for their lands or houses. Mines and timber operation eat into their forests from the Himalaya to the Andaman. Our toxic wastes poison the aquifers that supply their wells.

Because their homes, forests, and fields were systematically stolen or degraded, millions of Indians began to stream into cities. Many still populate slums where they must take difficult, underpaid jobs. The overcrowding of urban India is a direct result of the fracturing of rural India. And the resultant pollution and environmental degradation robs both rich and poor of the quality of life guaranteed by India's Constitution.

An environmental prophet, Gandhi was probably wasted on India's freedom. His teachings and his leadership could have delivered us from the environmental nemesis toward which *Homo sapiens* seems so resolutely headed. Were Gandhi alive he would surely have pointed out that even more serious than the erosion of our soils is the erosion of our value systems.



Dr. Manimohan Singh, Prime Minister of India, with the children from Kids For Tigers, the Sanctuary Tiger Programme. The banner quotes an Indian saying: "The forest is the mother of the river."

Intergenerational Colonization

I am an Indian and proud to be one because I live in a land whose ancestors respected the Earth. The vast majority of Indians still venerate the Earth and its myriad life-forms. But we have been infiltrated. Instead of exporting our Earth-loving attitudes, we continue to import false ambitions broadcast from world bankers. And the agents of the destruction of our subcontinent are the very politicians in whose hands Gandhi trustingly placed the mantle of freedom. British colonial ambitions were immoral. But what the leaders of today are doing is far more immoral than that. They are colonizing the hopes, aspirations, and security of the unborn.

This is what Gandhi wrote soon after India gained her independence, as he watched in horror how a dream had gone sour:

I have a few letters describing some of the dishonest means Congressmen are resorting to in order to further their selfish interest ... I do not want to live to see all

this. But if they go on deceiving us, there will be such a tremendous upheaval that the golden history of our cherished freedom, won without shedding a drop of blood, will be tarnished ...

Had the lines been written yesterday they could not more accurately describe the betrayal of tomorrow at the hands of the likes of present-day leaders who are in denial of climate change and are moving the planet closer to the precipice.

It is all too obvious that the teachings of Gandhi have been forgotten in the land of Gandhi's birth. Decades after his death, the virus of self-interest contrives to destroy India's fabled wealth that conquerors and colonial forces were unable to exhaust.

To put it simply, India has decided to sell its family jewels to some of the most predatory financial forces in the world. Thus Orissa's water-stocked forests and turtle-populated seas are hostage to iron ore companies, Gujarat's pristine coastline is being pillaged by petroleum

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interests, Andhra Pradesh's thick forests are being mined for uranium, Karnataka's Western Ghats are under assault by dam builders, Madhya Pradesh's tigers are being forced to retreat before invading industrialists, and fragile Himalayan glaciers, together with Earth ice everywhere, are in advanced stages of melt.

India has some of the finest environmental laws in the world. It is also a democracy. This is why the Supreme Court of India has consistently upheld environmental appeals against the destruction of our forests, often castigating the most powerful leaders in the country for their shortsighted ambition. Such politicians have not seen Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, but they epitomize the despair contained in the quote of Winston Churchill that Gore used to such telling advantage: "The era of procrastination, of half-measures, of soothing, and baffling expedience of delays is coming to a close. In its place, we are coming to a period of consequences." Had Indian politicians seen Gore's film, they might have realized that in an era of advanced climate change it was suicidal to castrate India's Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, and its Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, by passing the new and lethal the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which (ostensibly to benefit forest dwellers) is a thinly disguised ploy of politicians to counter Supreme

Court judgments by dismantling the protective laws that prevent the powerful from trading in wilderness real estate for cash and votes.

If Tomorrow Comes

Today in India (and across the world), forests, estuaries, mangroves, wetlands, grasslands, mountains, and even deserts—ecosystems that should be jealously protected to sequester carbon in the decades ahead—are being set upon by commercial forces that have historically snatched land from the poor and unempowered (in whose name the lands have now been transferred).

Ironically, these were the very assets that Gandhi wished to save from the clutches of the British ... for the security of the children of the Ganges. It saddens me to see how far India has drifted from the teachings of Gandhi, who reminded us that "a worthy heir always adds to the legacy that he receives."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi will have died in vain if we do not wake to the realization that the erosion of our soils is a direct result of the erosion of our value systems. "The demands of equality supersede the letter of the law," he chided the British, when they attempted to take shelter behind one-sided legislation.

Would that he were alive to repeat the advice for the benefit of those who continue to push to build nuclear reactors right next to the Sundarbans Tiger Reserve, the Nagarjunasagar Tiger Reserve, and the Kanha Tiger

Reserve. He would have opposed the World Bank-funded Sardar Sarovar Project, part of the infamous Narmada Project that, like China's Three Gorges Dam, eventually plans to displace 1 million humans.

I am not by any means a "Gandhian," because my lifestyle is not nearly austere enough. But the more I read his works, the more I become convinced that the "Father of the Indian Nation" was not born to deliver India from the yoke of the British, but rather to deliver the Earth itself from foul human ambition.

He would surely have insisted that it should become the purpose of all development to restore health to our ravaged land, restore quality to the water we drink, and productivity to our soils. But this miracle is unlikely to unfold until the consequences that nature delivers force us to act to survive.

With our water and food security on the verge of collapse, we will ultimately be coerced to turn away from present industrial goals of development. We will be forced to improve generation and transmission capacities of existing power infrastructures, rather than build new projects. We will have to resurface roads, repair culverts, and strengthen shoulders rather than build new highways. We will have to reline canals and improve the condition of the catchment forests of existing dams before building new ones. And we will perforce move to alternate energy options from our druglike dependence on carbon fuels.

The truth is such options make good long-term economic sense as well, so the sooner we start the long climb back to environmental sanity the better.

Continued on page 48

starvation, and living off the land; (9) marine medicine regarding safety and survival, submersion incidents, emergency oxygen administration, and diving medicine; (10) travel, environmental hazards, and disaster medical information and risk management; (11) special knowledge on wilderness preparation, equipment, clothing, navigation, and medical supplies; (12) special populations and considerations for children, women, elders, persons with special needs and disabilities, and wilderness medicine

education and ethics; and (13) the wilderness environment and wilderness management and preservation.

The book is for health care professionals, wilderness emergency technicians, wilderness first responders, search-and-rescue workers, wilderness program leaders, field researchers, field scientists, backcountry recreationists, and international travelers using remote areas of the world. This is not a first aid manual for beginners; it is a serious, comprehensive, and well-documented educational

reference book that covers diverse topics, problems, and situations that are about health and medicine. If you only have one reference book on your shelf, in your emergency vehicle, or in your classroom, this is a must own, read, and practice book that will save lives and help you stay healthy while you and others enjoy nature on the wild side.

Reviewed by CHAD P. DAWSON, managing editor of *IJW*; email: cpdawson@esf.edu.

Continued from IT'S A BEAUTIFUL WORLD, page 42

Those of us who value and are prepared to defend wildernesses, anywhere in the world, are confronted by crucial and complicated questions that have not, thus far, been ade-

quately addressed. In which direction does our development destiny lie? How should we balance the needs of people with the imperatives of protecting nature? How can we change

our heroes so that protectors, not marauders, occupy our pedestals?

Trekking through the mountainous Western Ghats forests of Bhimgad in Karnataka, I paused to take in the wilderness vista before me. I was high up and thick forests stretched to the horizon all around me. I had just visited the only recorded site in the world of the endangered Wroughton's freetail bat *Otomops wroughtoni*, and the walk back was hot and strenuous. A rushing crystal pool beckoned, and in no time at all the cool waters had washed away dust, sweat, and tiredness. As I bathed, I drank the sweet water and thought to myself how blessed we were. This was the land that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had fought to free from the clutches of colonial rule. This was the land that had originally attracted conquerors from afar. This was the land I was born to protect. **IJW**

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