

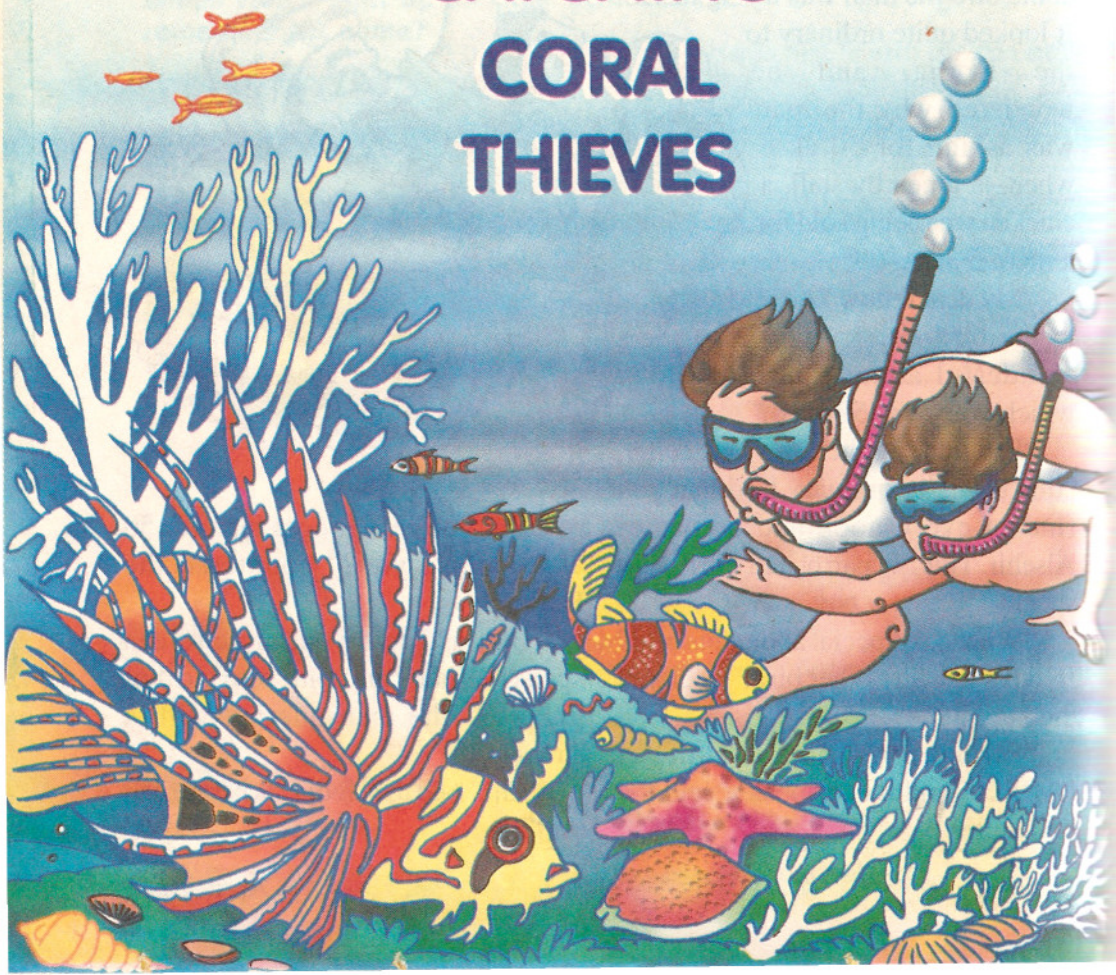
NBSAaaanP's Tales



It was early morning and Ali was getting ready for school, packing his bag, and gulping down breakfast. His school in one of the Andaman islands was almost two kilometres away from home. But it was a distance that he,

all of ten years, covered easily every day. The route that he took passed through his village, and then hugged the shoreline almost up to where his school was. He would often wander up to the waters' edge, especially on

CATCHING CORAL THIEVES



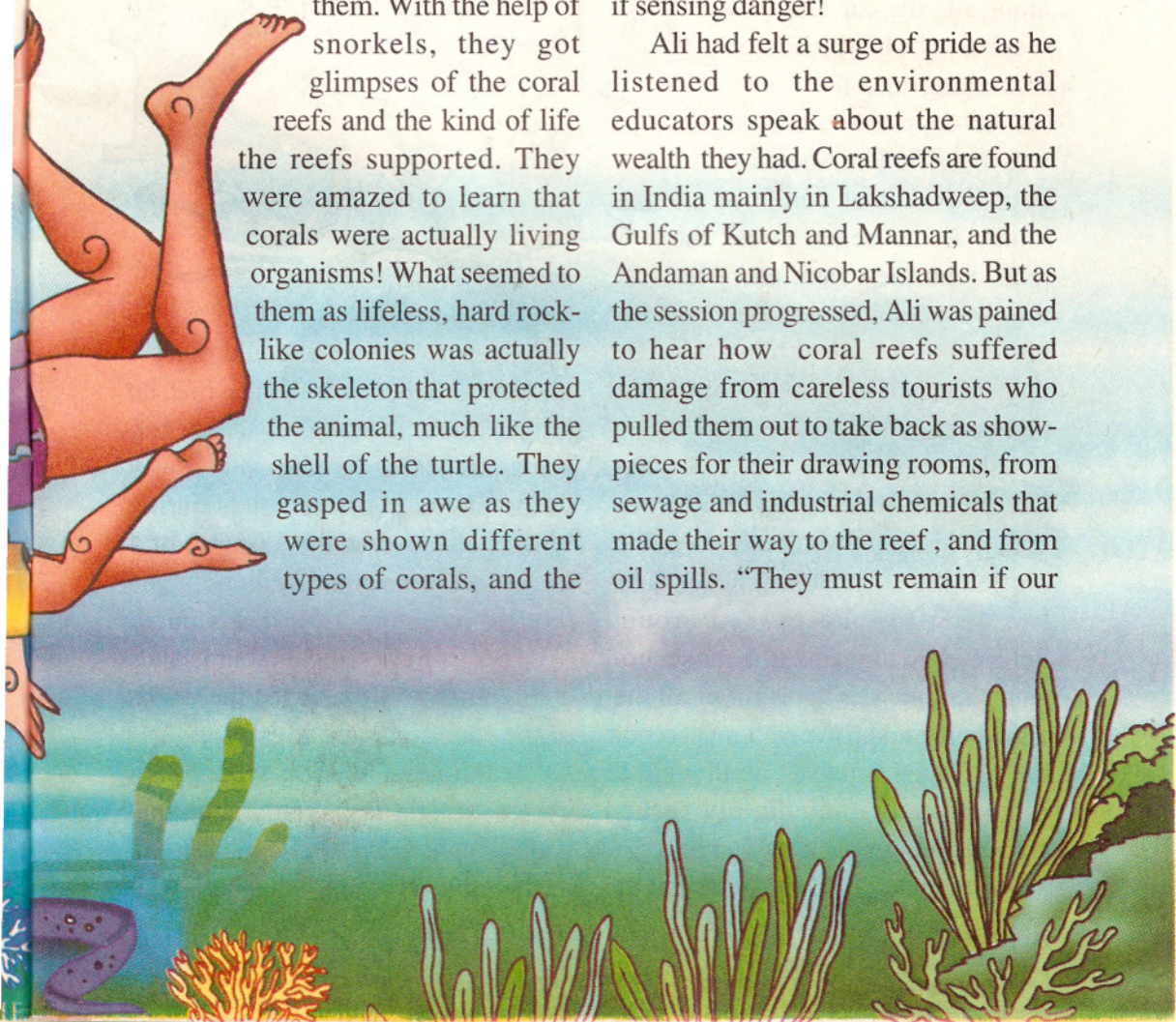
his way back home, to chase hermit crabs back into their burrows, or to look for starfish that might have been washed ashore.

There was very little of the natural world that Ali knew of, until a few weeks ago when some persons from an environmental group took his class on a trip to the beach. There, he and his friends were shown the multitude of sea creatures that lived around

them. With the help of snorkels, they got glimpses of the coral reefs and the kind of life the reefs supported. They were amazed to learn that corals were actually living organisms! What seemed to them as lifeless, hard rock-like colonies was actually the skeleton that protected the animal, much like the shell of the turtle. They gasped in awe as they were shown different types of corals, and the

creatures that lived around the coral colonies, like parrot fishes, sea anemones, star fishes, eels, and so on. What fascinated Ali in particular were the tiny creatures called “christmas trees”, as colourful and varied as the decorated and gift-laden trees he had seen in picture-books. These creatures were attached to corals, and when Ali put his hand out to touch them, they immediately withdrew, as if sensing danger!

Ali had felt a surge of pride as he listened to the environmental educators speak about the natural wealth they had. Coral reefs are found in India mainly in Lakshadweep, the Gulfs of Kutch and Mannar, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. But as the session progressed, Ali was pained to hear how coral reefs suffered damage from careless tourists who pulled them out to take back as show-pieces for their drawing rooms, from sewage and industrial chemicals that made their way to the reef, and from oil spills. “They must remain if our

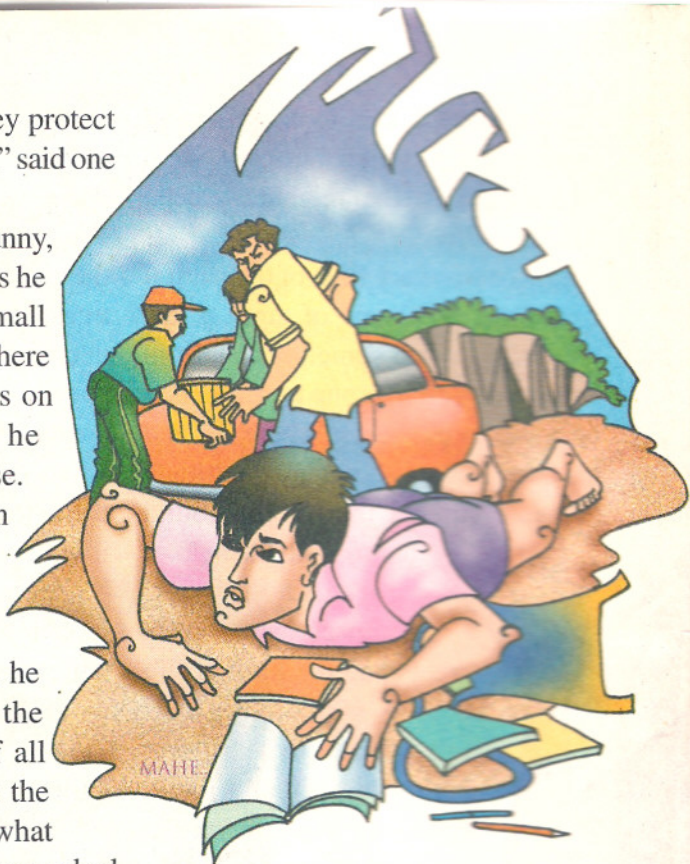


islands are to remain, as they protect our islands from sea erosion," said one of the educators.

The day was warm and sunny, and Ali set off for school. As he walked along, he saw a small white car in the distance. There were not too many vehicles on his island, and this one he definitely did not recognise. There were three men alongside the car and they seemed to be busy loading something into the boot. As Ali approached the car, he was horrified to see that the boot was full of corals of all kinds. As he began to ask the men who they were and what they were doing, one of them punched him and then pushed him aside. The three then quickly jumped into the car and drove off.

Ali got up to his feet to catch a last glimpse of the car speeding away. It took him a few minutes to gather himself together. He had never in his life been hit and pushed around before, but that did not make him angry as much as the sight of all that coral being taken away. 'I must report them, I must, I must!' he thought to himself, and immediately turned around and ran back to his village.

At the grocery shop, he asked the



shopkeeper whether he could borrow his bicycle and, on receiving a nod, he jumped on to it, slung his school bag across the handle bar, and cycled away in the direction of the neighbouring village. He covered the distance of 4 km as fast as he could, with only one thought repeating itself in his mind: 'The corals must remain if our islands are to remain.' He recalled the words of the educator some days ago.

At the neighbouring village, Ali cycled straight to the only shop that had a telephone booth. He made a call to the environmental educators who

had visited his school (luckily he had their numbers in his school bag!), and told them of the white car full of corals in the boot. Having done what he could, Ali cycled back to his village to return the cycle to the shopkeeper.

The next day, as school was in progress, Ali's class had a stream of visitors. The school headmaster brought in a local government official, besides the team of environmental educators, and two journalists from the local newspaper! One of the educators, who had received Ali's call, described the events of the previous day to the class. The description of the car was given to the

police, who immediately flashed it across to all their checkposts. The men were apprehended with all the coral, and it transpired that they were planning to ship it to Kolkata, where it would find a buyer's market.

The entire class broke into a spontaneous applause as they listened to Ali's adventure, and the applause grew louder as the journalists interviewed and photographed him. 'It's a big day for me, but a bigger one for the coral reefs,' thought Ali.

- Sujatha Padmanabhan
(Based on a true incident)

Courtesy: The National Biodiversity
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Kalpavriksh

