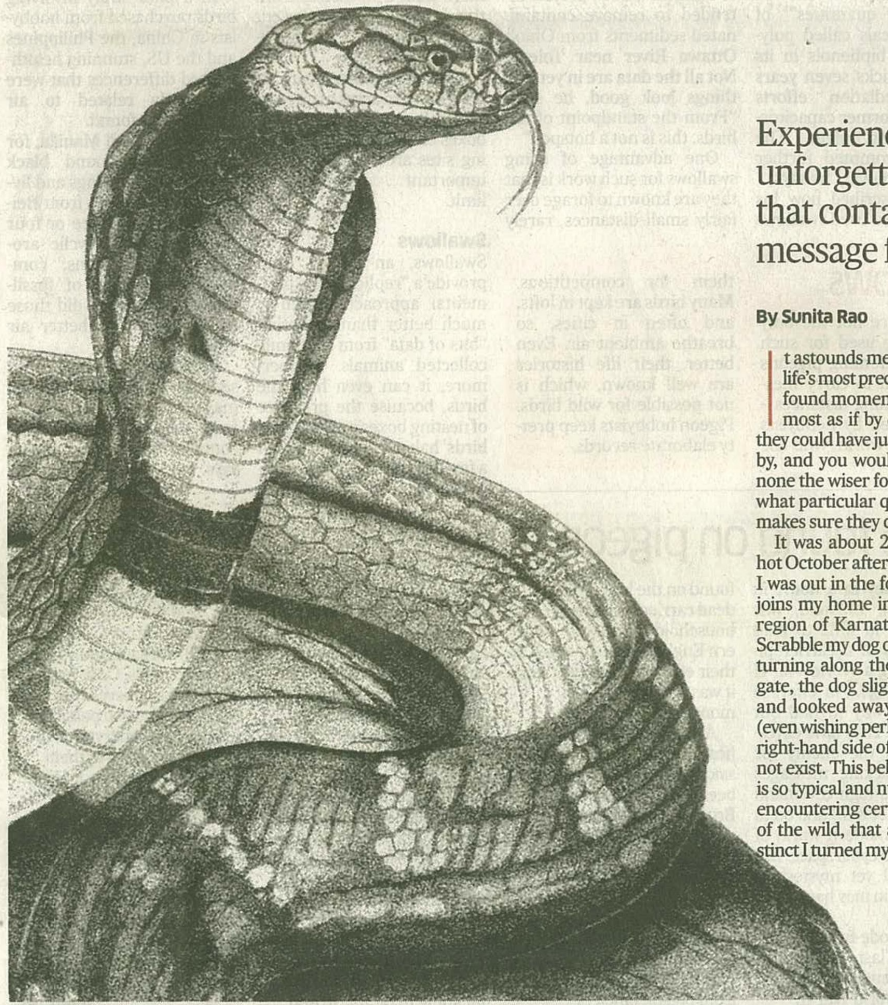


LONG LIVE THE KING!



'King Cobra' BY SALEEM HAMEED.

Experiences in the wild are always unforgettable. Read about one that contains a very special message from a cobra

By Sunita Rao

It astounds me that some of life's most precious and profound moments happen almost as if by chance. As if they could have just slipped you by, and you would have been none the wiser for it. I wonder what particular quirk it is that makes sure they don't.

It was about 2.30 pm on a hot October afternoon in 2011. I was out in the forest that adjoins my home in the Malnad region of Karnataka, walking Scrabble my dog on a leash. Returning along the path to the gate, the dog slightly stiffened and looked away pretending (even wishing perhaps) that the right-hand side of our path did not exist. This behaviour of his is so typical and nuanced when encountering certain denizens of the wild, that almost by instinct I turned my head to look

Alert eyes

There off the path, facing the forest was a very long snake with its head and body reared up a full two-and-a-half to three-feet. Its hood was somewhat expanded. Its body was blackish with pale yellow cross-band markings. The head and body were very still, and eyes extremely alert and watchful. The way it "stood up" tall was distinct. We looked at each other for a few, slow, long, still moments (perhaps a minute or a little more), each taking in the other with some healthy scepticism and mutual respect. With no aggression emerging, there was only a primordial need to keep our distance from each other as part of a natural order of things. The staring became almost meditative and mesmerising. Then, suddenly, almost on cue, the snake lowered itself and quietly slithered away into the forest.

And I made my way back home immersed in the encounter.

Acceptance

In a very physical, inexpressible way I felt that this really was



what coexistence was about. Textbook definitions and academic studies fell away, and I felt I had gained a new level of comprehension and acceptance. I walked quietly, glad that this had happened. And gladder still that the snake was able to glide away undisturbed by any intrusion. And could keep to its own rhythm, given that indeed I was an intruder in its rightful territory.

The snake I had seen was a King Cobra. Its scientific name is *Ophiophagus hannah*. The name *Ophiophagus* (meaning snake-eating) indicates that this snake chiefly predated on

WHAT IS COEXISTENCE ALL ABOUT? WASN'T I AN INTRUDER IN ITS RIGHTFUL TERRITORY...

other snakes. It is classified as the longest of the venomous snakes in the world. It has enough venom (mostly a neurotoxin) that can kill 20 people or even a good-sized elephant. It is the only species of snake in the world where females build nests and guard them. These nests are ingeniously made using mounds, and covered with leaf litter so they don't get soaked by the heavy monsoon rains, and the eggs stay dry. Even as these factoids began dancing before me, a nameless fear made its sneaky entry. There was a King Cobra somewhere around where I lived. What would I do if I saw it again? How would we best keep out of its way?

Some doubts

Some weeks later, I spoke to Siddharth Rao who is with the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station deep in the Western Ghats, and encounters these snakes very often. They have even been seen engaging in courtship rituals in villagers' courtyards (where courtyards meant for courting King Cobras?!). He said the sort of moist and dry deciduous forests that I live in are good habitat for the King Cobra, though they are largely found in evergreen forests that are very quickly disappearing. Keep on going, I was told, in response to my questions.

It is likely the snake will be

as eager to stay away from you, as you are to stay away from it. The station has been involved in much needed research on the King Cobra, and works with the local community in trying to protect this endangered animal, and mitigate situations of human-animal conflict.

Andamans incident

I remembered an incident when I was in the Andamans about 18 years ago. Manish Chandi, currently a researcher in the Nicobars, was then a volunteer there. He and some others went out one afternoon to a villager's home in Wandoor, to try and identify a big snake they had been alerted about. With a field guide in hand, these young stalwarts were inches away from this snake, busy counting its scales, and repeatedly consulting the book to identify it. They fell back and scrambled away when they realised it was a King Cobra!

What continues though, to linger in my mind, is that brief, precious slice of time in the forest, when two fellow creatures of the earth gently appraised each other sans anything else ... the King and I!

This series has been coordinated by Kalpavriksh.

The writer is a founder trustee of Vanastree - the Malnad Forest Garden and Seed Keepers' Collective and an Adjunct Fellow at ATREE.