

Life in a forest evokes empathy for all living beings

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Award-winning children's author Vaishali Shroff belongs to a family of wildlife enthusiasts. While her husband and children look for interesting sightings and topographies to photograph, she looks for stories and lessons to be learnt, like for instance, that life in a forest evokes empathy for all living beings.

A walk in the Chitwan National Park (CNP), in the Terai Lowlands of south-central Nepal on the border with India, inspired her to write "Sita's Chitwan" (Penguin). One part is the story of a brave and confident eight-year-old girl who dreams of being a nature guide like her father, and the other details the dedicated efforts to catapult the Park - the size of 178,000 football fields - from the brink of extinction to what it is now, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

"As a family, we are wildlife enthusiasts. While my husband and kids look for interesting sightings and topographies to capture through their lens, I look for stories. For over a decade, we have been frequenting various national parks in India and other countries. With every visit, I fall more and more in love with forests, their rich biodiversity, the various beautiful species that call it their home.

"From bugs and spiders to big cats and elephants, from shrubs to sky-high tall trees, you form an innate bond with them that can't be explained and you know that our planet cannot survive without them. We cannot survive if not for them," Shroff told IANS in an interview.

"A walk in the Chitwan National Park (CNP) in 2018 inspired me to write Sita's story and also to capture the dedicated efforts that the forest department at CNP made to catapult it from the brink of extinction to what it is now. I wanted to show children that you can make a future while saving nature - that exciting professions don't just exist in concrete jungles.

"If you are committed to conserving the environment, you can be so many fascinating things inside a forest and save it for generations to come. Life in a forest teaches one to be patient, passionate, curious, adventurous, and above all, empathetic towards all living beings and 'Sita's Chitwan' is an attempt to talk about that," Shroff explained.

And, with illustrations by Kalp Sanghvi, what a story it is! With a spring in her step and a group of eager tourists, Sita breezes through the forest. But when astray and face to face with a mamma rhino, will she be able to listen to the stillness of the jungle? Join this young Nepali as she unravels the secrets of the forest through a tour of this magnificent Park that is home to 68 species of mammals, 544 species of birds, 56 species of herpetofauna (reptiles and amphibians) and 126 species of fish, CNP is especially renowned for its protection of the One-Horned Rhinoceros, the Royal Bengal Tiger and the Gharial Crocodile.

Intermingled through this is Chitwan's history, its people, culture, biodiversity, conservation practices, and forest-related professions.

How did Shroff choose this particular format for presenting the story?

"I love the format of informational fiction where you use an exciting story to talk about something that's potentially mundane. I first experimented with this format in my award-winning book, "The Adventures of Padma and a Blue Dinosaur", the first book that talks exclusively about Indian dinosaurs and all you want to know about palaeontology in India." "Children love stories and what better way to introduce new concepts, facts, and ideas to them than through endearing characters! The story subtly weaves Chitwan's nuances into its narrative while taking the children on a wild

adventure. The book becomes much more than what it talks about - children can not only connect with the protagonist and her story, but also enjoy learning along the way," Shroff elaborated.

What are the lessons the world at large can learn from the development of the Chitwan National Park?

"We learn that it's never too late to conserve what we have - from being a hunting ground for royals where tigers and rhinos were killed mindlessly and mercilessly to a UNESCO World Heritage Site that has experienced zero poaching for many years, Chitwan's conservation efforts have been exemplary," Shroff said.

"We learn that nothing is impossible if you are determined to save our environment. That you don't have to belong to the forest department to save forests and wildlife - in Chitwan and all of Nepal, even the locals are involved in protecting the forests and their inhabitants alongside the forest department and military. The CBAPUs (Community-Based Anti-Poaching Units) across national parks in Nepal are a testimony to that," she added.

"Sita's Chitwan" is only representative of the kind of conservation work that happens in national parks in Nepal, India and other countries, Shroff said. While poaching incidents are still reported and ambitious infrastructure projects continue to shrink our forests and the natural habitats of millions of species, books like "Sita's Chitwan" salute the untiring and relentless efforts of unsung heroes like Radha Wagle, Joint Secretary in Nepal's Ministry of Forests and Environment; Samantha Helle, a Conservation Scientist at Chitwan; and Doma Paudel, Nepal's first female Nature Guide.

"Children, parents, and educators must read this book - not just to be inspired, not just to know more about CNP, but to feel that intrinsic connection we all have with nature and understand that the smallest of efforts towards saving the world around us can have a huge impact on the unprecedented environment and climate crisis we are going through at the moment. No effort is too small. Everything counts. Everything," Shroff asserted.

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