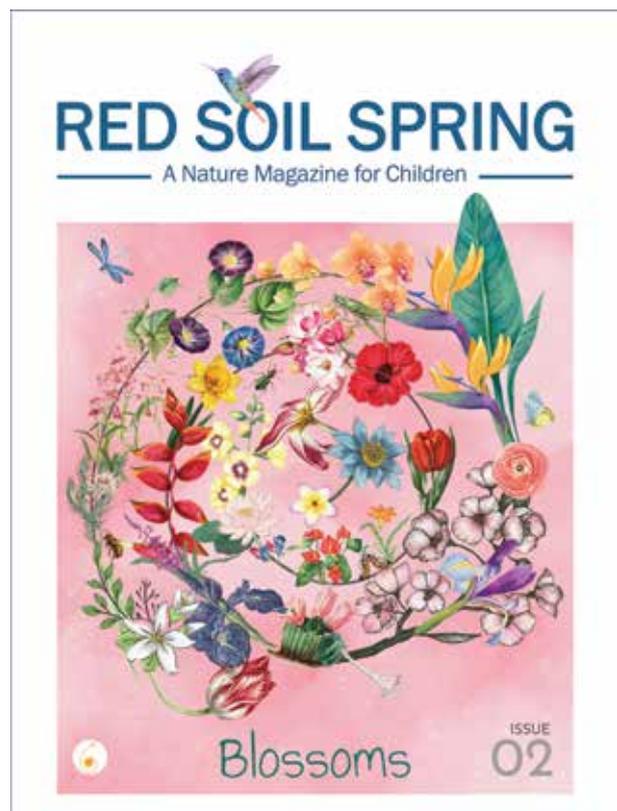


*Red Soil Spring* is a print magazine on nature for children in the age group of 7-12 years. The idea was conceived by Amrutha Preetham (Co-founder and Editor-in-Chief) and Senthil Nathan (Co-founder and Creative Director) with the hope of connecting children with the natural world and illustrating to them how and in what ways humans and nature form the web of life on the planet Earth.

Senthil Nathan (SN) speaks with Shefali Tripathi Mehta (STM).



STM: Red Soil Nature Play came first so let's begin with that. What was your inspiration for this unique play space that you created for children in a burgeoning metro where children rarely get to experience nature?

SN: From the time we became parents, we realised that urban spaces lack natural environments for children's play. Children do not have the opportunities to climb a tree, roll down a grassy slope, dig in the sand or follow ant trails. Children's leisure and entertainment activities are around shopping malls, mobile phones and video games that breed passivity, frustration and aggression. We've deprived them of the joy that comes from spending time in nature. Sadly, this produces people with zero knowledge and awareness of the earth they live on.

As we came to understand the critical need for natural environments in a city, in 2016, we set out to develop a natural habitat for children called *Red Soil Nature Play* located in Bengaluru, where children can immerse themselves in nature to wonder, explore, discover, connect and experience natural surroundings.

Red Soil Nature Play, spread across approximately 2 acres of land, is the first nature play habitat to connect nature and children in the city of Bengaluru. The barren land was restored by planting indigenous trees, and a wide assortment of vegetables, grains, herbs and plants. It is a sustainable environment where the built structures are made of natural building materials, and sustainable practices like rainwater harvesting and composting are practised. It seeks to inspire and ignite young minds to explore and experience nature in a peaceful and unhurried manner. Children can run, climb trees, jump on rocks and boulders, play in the water or with mud, watch butterflies and birds, water plants, and run through tunnels – there are infinite opportunities for nature play depending on what the child wants to do.

STM: The nature magazine, *Red Soil Spring*, is a first of its kind in India. What was the thought behind it?

SN: When the pandemic struck, *Red Soil Nature Play* had to be temporarily closed and while we were thinking of alternate ideas to bring the wonders of nature to children, we struck upon the idea of this magazine.

*Red Soil Spring* magazine is another medium of work where we present children with fascinating knowledge about our planet earth. We intend to reach a wider audience of children through the magazine. Our nature play environment, Red Soil Nature Play has resumed its operations in January 2022 and is open for visits.

STM: While you saw this as a bridge to connect children to nature, to provide them with opportunities to experience and immerse themselves in it, there must have been the larger purpose of nature conservation that now, more than ever, needs the concerted focus of everyone. How easy or difficult is this ‘messaging’ to your young readers – to make the desired impact without creating a ‘doomsday anxiety’ in them?

SN: The knowledge we bring through *Red Soil Spring* proposes to lay a deep foundation in how children perceive nature and how they respect their environment. *Red Soil Spring* inspires the next generation of children to become social change-makers and caretakers of the Earth. We hope to communicate to children that we are all connected in the web of life, and it is this interconnectedness that makes us sustain our lives.

STM: The first thing one notices on opening the magazine is the striking illustrations as if the magazine is recreating the beauty and wonders of nature.

SN: Yes, it was a conscious decision aimed at making the magazine attractive to children. Children come into the world, full of joy and love. If they are equipped, rather empowered with information and knowledge about nature, they would naturally want to take care of it.

STM: You chose to bring out a magazine knowing that the culture of reading is quite limited– how do you hope this magazine will reach more children? Are you reaching out to school libraries and children’s reading groups?

SN: We think that when the content is visually appealing and the narrative is interesting, children cannot but want to read it. The magazine also encourages early readers who are beginning to navigate the literary world. It allows us to reach children through various interesting narratives, like stories and poems. The art and illustrations appeal visually, and the nature engagement activities can be done whenever they want to. We also have nature journaling pages for them to record what they see, and it is like a personal nature book. Also, children can read a magazine at their own pace, and it doesn’t need to be taught. *Red Soil Spring* is not just a magazine, it is a collectable.

Currently, we are reaching out to a lot of school libraries and reading groups and have a very positive response from them.

STM: Do you think there is a difference between how children in the metros and big cities perceive the natural environment versus how children in smaller towns and villages perceive it? Is the magazine more focused on children living in towns and cities whose experiences and engagement with nature are limited?

SN: Yes, there is a difference in how children perceive nature in cities and in smaller towns. Cities have pollution, traffic jams, more concrete buildings and lesser green spaces. Most schools are constrained by smaller spaces and consequently, little or no outdoor environments.

The magazine is made for children growing up in all kinds of environments, be it urban or rural. Although children in villages may have more green spaces, the impact of issues like climate change affects everyone around the world equally. For example, if the Amazon rainforest is being cut down, it heats up the Earth; if the polar ice melts, it leads to unwarranted floods and drought.

Or, say, when children come to know that the production of palm oil is destroying the only forests where orangutans live, they have a choice of making a conscious decision of not buying the product, when they grow up. As adults, it is our responsibility to let children know about what's going on with the natural world and give them the knowledge that they need to create a better future.

STM: In school, children have a variety of topics on nature and the natural world as part of their curriculum. How does this magazine go beyond that? What are the things that you keep in mind to engage young readers?

SN: There are many things in the magazine that go beyond the school curriculum. For example, each issue has a story narrative about a particular season in a country. Children get to know about the culture, the seasonal changes taking place and the lives of the people living in that country through that season. There is a section about music in nature presented through a beautiful narrative. Beyond factual knowledge, *Red Soil Spring* delivers its content in creative ways.

The selection of content for the magazine is diligently curated for its meaning and purpose. The first section of the magazine explores the Earth, and the second section 'Know your co-habitants', delves into the lives of animals, plants and their habitats.

The next section 'Connect with the Earth' presents DIY nature activities related to sustainable living skills, nature art and nature immersive experiences. For example, our recent issue, *Red Soil Spring - Blossoms* had 'Making flower tea', 'Pressing flowers and leaves' and 'Bird watching' in this section. The last section 'Celebrate nature' discovers the music in nature, has a nature story, nature poetry and a nature word search. It also talks about an exceptional naturalist of the month whose life and work made the world a better place. There is also a section about important nature days to be celebrated every month.

The content is crafted for children's readability. The design is pleasing. The art and illustration are presented to inspire wonder and give wings to the imagination of children.



The content is very informative and made my 8-year-old very curious about a lot of things. Both my kids thoroughly enjoyed flipping through the colourful pages and images. They read and reread! – Deepa Sam, parent



Red Soil Spring is a new children's magazine about nature that will grip the imagination of people of all ages. Beautifully illustrated with drawings, paintings and stunning photos, it will open a large window into wonder and will inspire awe - while remaining fun. The magazine's future will surely be as bright as the contents of its first issues. – Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*, *Our Wild Calling* and other books.

