

We need to get 'Green Lit' books into children's hands

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[Home](#) > [opinion](#) >

We need to get 'Green Lit' books into children's hands The Green Lit Fest, set up in Bengaluru a few years back, selects three books each in the categories of fiction and non-fiction, children's writing, and business literature.



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Harini Nagendra the Azim Premji University Prof prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong

Yesterday, during an animated discussion with friends who have worked on issues of conservation and sustainability for several decades, we compared our personal histories. When and how did each of us get interested in these issues? What was the moment we decided to dedicate a substantial fraction of our life to working on sustainability challenges?

The responses matched what we have also found while interviewing dozens of sustainability warriors and champions, working on lake cleanup, waste management and tree-planting in cities across the country. Several cite formative childhood influences, of growing up in a rural or forested environment, embedded in nature -- and a parent or mentor who took them birdwatching, trekking, etc. But this is not the only path to nature awareness and action.

Many others -- including some of my friends in yesterday's conversation -- said that books played an influential role in shaping their environmental consciousness as children. I immediately thought of Gerald Durrell and James Herriott, whose books I devoured as a teenager. They had a knack of making the animals in their shared worlds come alive to the reader -- as individuals, with personalities and quirks of character -- dissolving the barrier between 'them' and 'us'.

But they were not Indian, these worlds. A village in Herriot's Yorkshire was so different from an Indian village! For me, it was books like Shivaram Karanth's *Mookajjiya Kanasugalu*, brilliantly translated into English, which I purchased for the princely sum of two-rupees from a roadside vendor in Jayanagar 4th block. I had sat under many an Ashwath Katte before reading this book, but never really appreciated them until then -- after the book, I never fail to pass by a peepal or banyan tree without a silent, reverential namaskara.

There are many such books in local languages, of course -- Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Marathi, Kannada. But their availability is restricted to regional contexts, despite the fact that they have so much more to offer to the rest of the country. It is with great delight that I now see the resurgence of environmental literature for the young. Children have fewer opportunities to go deep into the forest or spend a morning spotting birds. Books can be their surrogate entry into this world, a way to draw them into a deeper engagement with real life issues of climate, biodiversity and pollution that affect their future.

Good books have a way of connecting to hearts, souls, and imaginations where moralising lectures fail. Bijal Vaccharajani's book *Savi and the Memory Keeper* is a poignant story of environmental grief and loss, which ends with a positive message. Madhav Gadgil's recent memoir, *A Walk Up The Hill*, describes his life-long "love affair" with the Western Ghats. *Women in the Wild* charts the lives of some of India's best women ecologists, an inspiration for other young women who want to enter the field.

Many of these books have received critical acclaim, been felicitated at literature festivals and through book awards these days. Several have also become bestsellers. But publishers, who have been slower to react, still do not provide this genre with the marketing focus they would for self-help or diet books. Slowly, this disinterest is changing though. One approach which has been very helpful in raising overall consciousness of this genre is the existence of a new literature festival and award series, focused on Green Literature. The Green Lit Fest, set up in Bengaluru a few years back, selects three books each in the categories of fiction and non-fiction, children's writing, and business literature. This year, the festival was held yesterday (November 25), in the heart of Cubbon Park.

It is initiatives like this that we need, along with courses on environmental writing, fellowships and prizes, marketing and publicity drives, translation initiatives and other approaches -- to get a book on the environment into every child's hand. Only then can we have hope for a

better future, one where our children take up the task of environmental action in large numbers.