MOUNTAINS of LIFE Festival

Azim Premji University

INTERNATIONAL MOUNTAIN DAY

December 2024 Edition

MOUNTAINS OF LIFE FESTIVAL

Event Highlights at Azim Premji University, Bengaluru

INTERN STORIES

An Enquiry into the Geological Features and Folklore of Bhoramdeo and Dongargarh

The Satyr Tragopan: An Icon of the Himalayan Bamboo – Oak – Rhododendron Forests

The Difference Lies in the Mind and in Our Response to Crises

Darjeeling's Changing Landscape

INFOGRAPHICS

Champions of the Mountains: Celebrating Young Environmentalists

Mountains of Life Festival: Traveling Schedule

Ode to Mountains

CALL FOR YOUNG INTERNS

Coasts and Oceans of Life Internship Programme 2025

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This month's edition of the *Mountains of Life* newsletter celebrates **International Mountain Day 2024**, (celebrated on December 11) with a focus on the capacity and needs of mountain communities through a triple approach: **Mountain solutions for a sustainable future—innovation, adaptation, and youth**.

In this special edition, we also take readers through the highlights of the **Mountains of Life festival**, held at our Bengaluru campus from **November 13–26, 2024**. The festival featured a range of activities, including photo essay exhibitions, public art installations, engaging workshops, expert discussions, movie screenings, and cultural performances by various communities from all parts of the country all centered on the importance of mountain ecosystems and the critical need for their conservation.

We feature a few inspiring stories documented by our interns during their photo-essay internship. On this day, we acknowledge the efforts of mountain enthusiasts, especially the youth, who are actively contributing to a sustainable future.

We extend our gratitude to the readers for the overwhelming responses to the previous edition. The contributions we received spanning all age groups, were truly inspiring, and a selection of the best has been included at the end of this newsletter. Our newsletters aim to inspire, share knowledge, and encourage readers to appreciate mountain ecosystems through every edition.

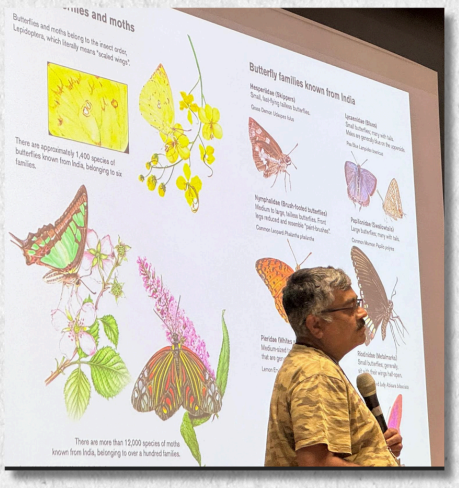
Happy reading, and may you discover the wonders these landscapes offer!

Mountains of Life - Event Highlights

-Rini Singhi

The third in the Climate Festival series, following Rivers (2022) and Forests (2023), Mountains of Life felt like an ascent into untold stories—each layer of the festival revealing not just mountain ranges but also the ecosystems, communities, and traditions shaped by them. At the heart of this festival was collaboration—an effort brought to life by countless individuals working with intention and care. The festival brought together the stories of the mountains in the form of an exhibition through installations, photo-essays, artworks, workshops, and talks.

This collective spirit was evident in the electrifying **Huli Vesha** performers, whose vividly costumed dances embodied the tiger's ferocity and grace. To top it all, children from schools joined the celebration, dancing their hearts out as if embodying the performers. The spirit of the mountains was encapsulated in the lok geet performance of **Muneera Abbas** who sang in Gorji, representing the often-underrepresented Gujjar community of Kashmir. In Spiti Valley, the stark high-altitude desert came alive through skits performed by the people of the valley, capturing the essence of their land and how they lived in and around mountains. The children enriched the experience, sparking engaging conversations with their thoughtful and curious questions, delving into the ecological and cultural significance of this remote region. Another fascinating workshop, was an insect walk with **Yuvan Aves.** Like a true learner of the natural world, he unraveled the intricacies in the hidden world of nature - butterflies perceiving in RGB, bees communicating through waggle dances, and nectar-sipping bats, all vital threads in the web of life that sustain our ecosystems. The Azim Premji University's Theater Group's play **Moonflower** explored the delicate balance of life through the purple Neelakurinji flowers of the Western Ghats.



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The intern talks brought to life the stories in the panels. **Sonim Kasar** and **Deki Yangzon** shared powerful narratives from Tangkhul and Merak communities of Manipur and Bhutan respectively. Their stories intertwined tradition, conservation, and a profound sense of interconnectedness with the land. In Kashmir, **Mohammad Fazil's** lens framed a landscape of haunting beauty and quiet resilience through his photos and research which he engaged students in.

In the Western Ghats, **Akshara Kanniganti's** documentation highlighted the region's staggering biodiversity, capturing the fragile yet resilient ecosystems of this UNESCO World Heritage site. **Syed Hazeem**, meanwhile, brought Wayanad's Farmers' Seed Festival to life, celebrating agricultural diversity and cultural heritage with species of bananas, turmeric varieties, tribal artifacts, and sightings of the elusive Malabar giant squirrel. **Ravi Chellam** spoke about the elusive snow leopards and their home in the mountains.

The event saw students from across various schools of Bengaluru come in and engage with the festival. It also saw people from all age groups, citizens of different neighbourhoods of the city come in to look at the vast diversity of mountains across India that they often miss out on by being in the city. Each moment at Mountains of Life was a testament to the power of collective action and shared knowledge. It reminded me that understanding mountains requires more than admiration for their grandeur—it demands a commitment to listening, learning, and acting in ways that sustain the lives and stories rooted within them.

MOUNTAINS of LIFE Festival

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An Enquiry into the Geological Features and Folklore of Bhoramdeo and Dongargarh

Theme: Mountains as Geological Processes
Mountain range: Central Highlands

My visit to Bhoramdeo was filled with great adventure. The Bhoramdeo Temple is a complex of Hindu temples dedicated to Lord Shiva. In ancient times, it was called Dakshin Kosala, a region once ruled by Nagwanshi kings. The Bhoramdeo complex represents a microcosm of the rich cultural heritage and natural beauty of Central India.

I also visited Dongargarh, a hilly terrain in the Rajnandgaon district of Chhattisgarh, which has six major hills. Dongargarh is also a prominent pilgrimage destination. Additionally, the history here is linked to the kingdom of the Gond kings. Maa Bamleshwari Devi Temple, with its popular ropeway, is a landmark for tourists and the religious in the region. The panoramic view from the temple is amazing, and many could be seen taking in the scenery.

My visit to Bhoramdeo and Dongargarh was an incredible journey. From the architectural splendour of ancient temples to the pristine beauty of natural landscapes, each moment spent in these enchanting destinations was a testament to the timeless allure of Central India's cultural and natural heritage.

Harshita Bhagat

Location: Bhoramdeo and Dongargarh, Chhattisgarh

Intern Stories

The Satyr Tragopan: An Icon of the Himalayan Bamboo – Oak – Rhododendron Forests

Theme: Flagship Species and Mountains
Mountain range: Central Himalayas

The Satyr Tragopan, locally known as Laung (लौंग), belongs to the pheasant family, which includes notable birds like the Indian Peafowl and the Red Jungle Fowl. These birds, collectively known as Galliformes, are often favoured targets for hunting.

The distinctive male Satyr Tragopan boasts a blue throat and bluish eye areas, with a black face and nape (back of the neck). It also has a plain red neck. The back and wings are brown with black-ringed white spots, and its chest and belly have black-ringed white spots against an orange-red background. The female is overall brown in colour, lacking the red tones but displaying the same black-ringed white spots. The feet and legs are suited for digging and scratching the forest floor in search of various food sources, including petals, buds, leaves, bamboo shoots, seeds, and insects. They have a black beak that is smaller compared to other pheasants.

Satyr Tragopans are found primarily in the upper reaches of the Central Himalayas, inhabiting altitudes ranging from 2,000 to 4,000 m. They prefer the Kharsu oak–rhododendron–Himalayan bamboo cold temperate forests and the subalpine rhododendrons found in the Munsiyari region. The Satyr Tragopans are commonly found between 2,500 and 3,500 m in the summer, but their presence has been documented as low as 2,200 m during the winter months.

The presence of Satyr Tragopans serves as an indicator of healthy bamboo and oak-rhododendron forests with minimal human disturbance. Conversely, their absence may indicate habitat degradation caused by factors such as climate change, habitat loss due to deforestation and fragmentation, poaching, and other human activities. Climate change poses a significant threat to Satyr Tragopan populations, altering weather patterns and contributing to habitat loss through factors like erratic rainfall, drier winters, landslides, and forest fires. The loss of habitat increases the impact of rapid global heating, further endangering these birds. Large-scale tourism also impacts these habitats, with more tourists, bonfires, and camping fires.

I chose to study the Satyr Tragopan because of a broader interest in Himalayan bamboo habitats. These birds, solitary by nature, thrive amidst the dense foliage of moist oak and rhododendron forests, often concealed within bamboo thickets. Their breeding season, which coincides with the flowering of the state flower of Uttarakhand, the Burans (Rhododendron), presents a unique opportunity to observe their behaviour and document the biodiversity of their habitat.

Intern Stories

Continued..

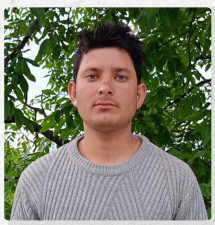
Due to their elusive nature and preference for dense forest cover, observing Satyr Tragopans requires patience and quietness. During the breeding season (April and May), the males' distinctive calls, a far-carrying sound "wuaah ... wuaaaah ... wuaaaah," rising and then suddenly stopping, sound like a wailing woman or child. This offers the best chance to see them. Sometimes, in other seasons, if one is quiet and patient, one may see the birds moving on the forest floor in search of food.

Some birding tourists use unethical means like call playbacks to attract the birds into the open. I am a signatory of the Uttarakhand Ethical Nature Guiding Guidelines and practice observation methods that prioritise the safety of the birds, such as quiet walks through their habitat while avoiding disruptive practices that may distress them. During my survey conducted in February, only one sighting and one call of the Satyr Tragopan were recorded, despite frequent visits to their habitat.

During our visits, we spotted numerous extraordinary birds, including the Himalayan Cutia, Koklass Pheasant, Himalayan Monal, Brown-wood Owl, Spotted Laughingthrush, Rufous-bellied Woodpecker (plus five other woodpecker species), Snowy-browed Flycatcher, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Bearded Vulture, Himalayan Snowcock, and Himalayan Snow Partridge. In total, we observed around 150 bird species, if not more. We also encountered some interesting mammals, like the Himalayan Yellow-throated Marten, which is a predator of many birds, including the Satyr Tragopan.

While the focus of this work is on the Satyr Tragopan, I also wanted to mention a close and rarer relative, the Western Tragopan. This bird is not found in our region. The Western Tragopan is found in the westernmost regions of Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, and parts of Kashmir, with a significantly smaller population compared to the Satyr Tragopan.

Conservation efforts for the Satyr Tragopan and its habitat must address the many threats posed by human activities. Heightened awareness of forest loss and its underlying causes is crucial, along with advocacy for the protection of iconic species like the Satyr Tragopan. On-the-ground initiatives such as forest protection measures and reforestation efforts are essential to safeguarding biodiversity in the region.



Babloo Farswan

Location: Uttarakhand

The Difference Lies in the Mind and in Our Response to Crises

Theme: Fragility of Mountain Landscapes
Mountain range: Western Ghats

Trying to let go of the constant pursuit to freeze time by sharing a little bit with our close cousins, the Lion-tailed Macaques (LTM)—this is what my project is about. In search of LTMs, I reached Valparai in the Anamalai mountain range in Tamil Nadu. Valparai is a truly unique place with large populations of elephants, gaurs, leopards, and endangered species such as the LTM. In fact, as one of the last surviving habitats for the LTM, some sholas, such as Pudutthotam, are home to around 200 LTMs.

LTMs survival faces many challenges as their once undisturbed abode is threatened by the clearing of forests for tea plantations. The young adult macaques require about 300 fruits daily with Ficus and jackfruit being their favourites. However, growing human settlements have led to extreme food scarcity, and many LTMs now resort to living on food discarded by humans. Being arboreal, LTMs move by jumping from one tree to another, but sadly, many trees in the fragmented forests have been cut down to make way for settlements and roads. This forces them to cut across roads on which vehicles ply, leading to their unfortunate deaths. To facilitate their smooth crossing, the Nature Conservation Foundation, a non-governmental organisation involved in wildlife conservation, has built canopy bridges and appointed guards to regulate vehicle movement.

Advait Premal Sanghavi

Location: Valparai, Anamalai Tamilnadu

If we could simplify human behaviour down to its foundational form, devoid of modern societal or cultural influences, we would find that humans and monkeys share identical behavioural patterns, similar motives, and uncanny resemblances. Human and LTM mothers are inseparable from their children during a significant part of their development. The act of grooming is integral in monkeys and signifies affection, care, aid, companionship, and helps shift hierarchical positions in troops.

LTMs have their own Dunbar's number (measures social relationships), with a group ideally restricted to around 30 individuals, and only one sexually active, or alpha, male. In Valparai, fragmentation, isolation, and limited space are forcing macaques to form larger groups with multiple males, leading to the formation of new cultures and societal structures. The problem is that their brains have probably evolved to handle a set number of relationships, which is now far exceeded, much like the case of humans in the digital era. Our brains and bodies are overloaded with too much information and too many bonds—far more than our brains can handle—causing multiple negative outcomes.

The most profound revelation to me was the ability of LTMs to adapt and the fight to survive. Humans have it too. Over time, the human fight to survive has become more isolated within a societal ecosystem composed exclusively of humans. This has led us to our current state: death, destruction, violence, waste, and a sprinkle of self-destructive tendencies. Is this humanity?

Intern Stories

Darjeeling's Changing Landscape

Theme: Fragility of Mountain Landscapes
Mountain range: Eastern Himalayas

In may travel in Darjeeling I observed and documented the changing landscape of this mountain city as well as the challenges the city faces. Darjeeling is home to a sizable Nepali community, with a significant portion engaged in agriculture as their primary source of livelihood. Asar, a prominent harvest festival of the Nepali community, holds profound significance in their cultural tapestry. This vibrant celebration, observed during the auspicious month of Asar, marks the inception of rice cultivation, symbolises hope and abundance, and celebrates the rhythm of nature's cycles. Lakh Bahadur, a resident of Lamagaon, Darjeeling, reflects on the longstanding agricultural traditions of his family, noting, "Many earlier generations have been dedicated to agriculture". He underscores the crucial role of climate in securing bountiful harvests, emphasising the community's dependence on favourable weather conditions.

With the advent of the British, the hills witnessed a transformation. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway altered the hill's demographic landscape, while its inauguration positioned Darjeeling as a pivotal trade hub. This not only spurred the town's growth but also heralded a new chapter, establishing Darjeeling as a premier hill station destination. The British also introduced tea plantations in the hills, now renowned for producing some of the world's finest tea.

Today, Darjeeling town attracts numerous individuals seeking education or employment opportunities. However, with the burgeoning population, it grapples with the challenge of water scarcity. A tank, constructed during the British era to accommodate a small water supply, now struggles to meet the city’s demand. Moreover, the town's reliance on natural springs is threatened by the adverse effects of climate change and rapid development, leading to their gradual depletion. Inadequate solid waste management is another problem as the waste is either incinerated or left to accumulate in landfills, exacerbating environmental degradation. The surge in tourism has further compounded the issue of waste generation.

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Several inspired and conscientious youth of Darjeeling are actively engaged in cleanup initiatives, striving to transform their environment and hometown into a cleaner, better place. Alongside them, numerous NGOs are trying to address the waste management challenges, collectively working towards sustainable solutions. The communities of Darjeeling are embracing a sustainable lifestyle by pioneering rapid transformation into zero waste villages.

Meanwhile the tea plantations are also facing gradual degradation due to various factors like climate and the use of chemical fertilisers. Tshering Sherpa, a resident of Rangaroon Tea Garden, highlights that low production leads to labour difficulties, such as low wages, resulting in migration.

The delicate terrain of the Darjeeling hills is susceptible to landslides, with numerous occurrences recorded in the past year alone, significantly disrupting the lives of residents. Climate change's impact is unmistakably evident in the Himalayan region, exemplified by the devastating Sikkim Flood of 2023, which ravaged communities and claimed hundreds of lives. Minji Tamang, a Darjeeling resident, poignantly expresses her grief and deep-seated fears of a similar catastrophe befalling her beloved hometown.

My travel in Darjeeling opened the Pandora's Box of climate change and environmental challenges that I have recorded through my stories and photographs.

Avijit Kerketta

Location: Darjeeling (West Bengal)

Intern Stories

Champions of the Mountains: Celebrating Young Environmentalists

-Rahul Patel and Aswathy Arun

In honour of International Mountain Day 2024, we recognise and acknowledge the contributions of young environmentalists dedicated to protecting mountain ecosystems. Through their initiatives, like tree planting, waste management, advocating for indigenous rights and community-led programmes, these environmentalists play a crucial role in conserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable practices in their communities.

Chandan Nayal

Location: Nainital district, Uttarakhand

Contribution: Nayal has been instrumental in planting over 60,000 trees, building 6,000 micro check dams, and reviving water sources over the past decade. Known for establishing local oak forests, Nayal's initiatives reduced the distance women must travel to collect fodder for livestock.

Awards/Recognitions: Water Hero Award by the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Government of India; Uttarakhand Ratna and the Sunder Lal Bahuguna Smriti Vriksha Mitra by Uttarakhand Government; Recognition by the Prime Minister and Chief Minister's Office.

Archana Soreng

Location: Garjhat Hills, Odisha

Contribution: Archana is a climate activist who believes that empowering indigenous communities is the key to tackling climate change. She argues that their traditional knowledge can significantly protect forests and nature. Archana calls for granting indigenous people formal rights over their lands, discouraging harmful practices like monoculture, and insists on genuine climate action and financial support from rich nations.

Awards/Recognitions: Part of United Nations Youth advisory group on climate change

Pradeep Sangwan

Location: Himachal Pradesh

Contribution: Pradeep is an environmentalist who works to protect local wetlands by managing waste. Through his initiatives, he engages communities in waste segregation and recycling, reducing pollution in wetland areas. His efforts aim to conserve biodiversity and promote sustainable waste practices that protect these sensitive ecosystems and maintain the region's environmental balance.

Awards, Recognitions: Indian Responsible Tourism Award by Outlook Traveller, Recognition from Prime Minister's Office

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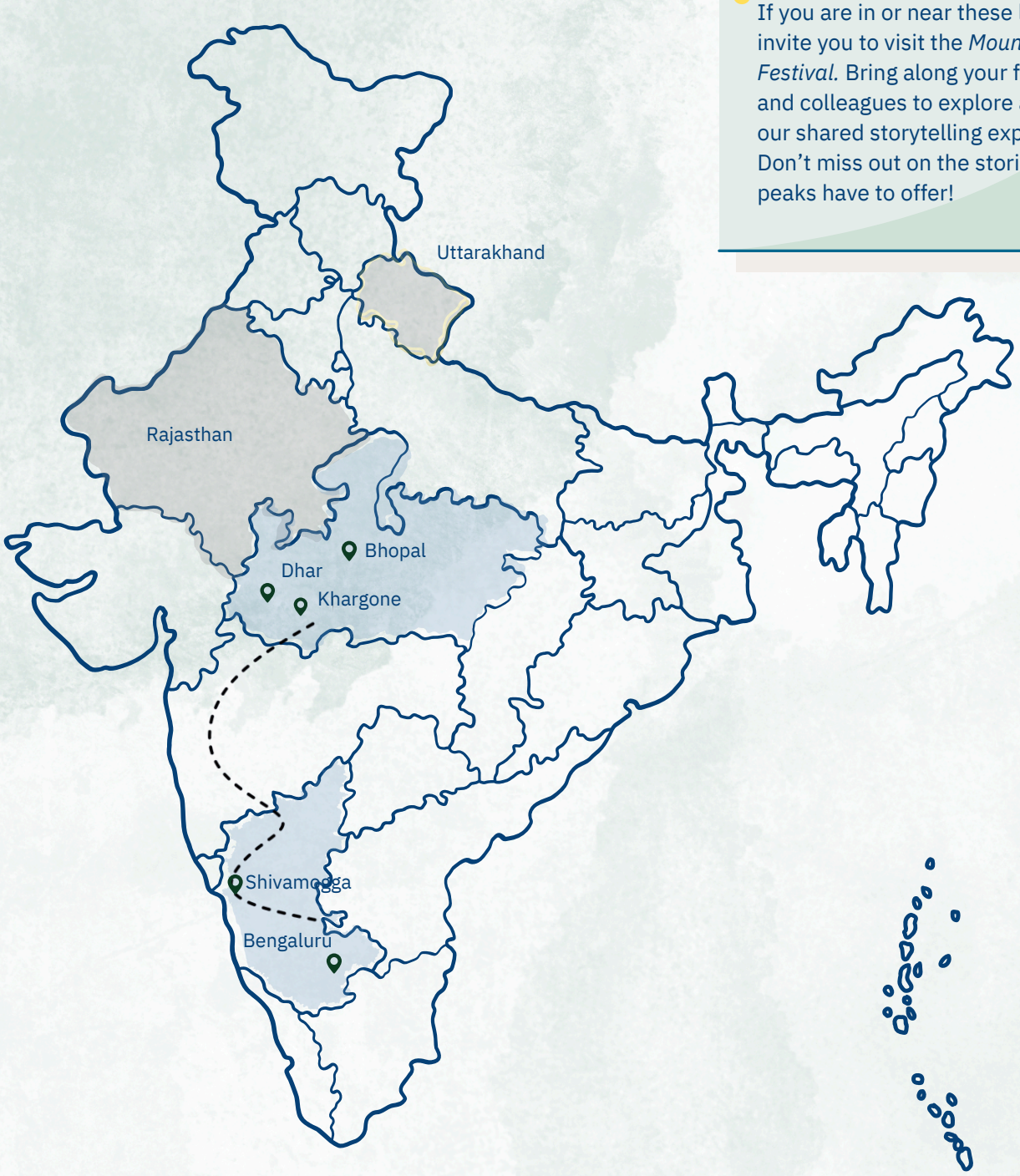
Mountains of Life Festival: Travelling Schedule

If you are in or near these locations, we invite you to visit the *Mountains of Life Festival.* Bring along your family, friends, and colleagues to explore and be part of our shared storytelling experience. Don't miss out on the stories our majestic peaks have to offer!



13 to 26 November 2024: Azim Premji University, Bengaluru
04 to 09 December 2024: Azim Premji University, Bhopal
06 to 16 December 2024: Indian Institute of World Culture, Bengaluru
16 to 18 December 2024: District Institute - Khargone
20 to 22 December 2024: District Institute - Dhar

Dates yet to confirmed - Shivamogga
Dates yet to confirmed - Rajasthan
Dates yet to confirmed - Uttarakhand

And many more locations..

Echos in the Ghats

-Hussain E

The hollow trunk of a tree standing tall,
The flow of a stream under a narrow bridge,
The swaying of branches, leaves gusting anew,
The winds of rain, the clouds of descent.

All speaking a truth about the hillocks in view,
And yet, the rainbow of a setting sun,
After the drizzles of monsoon at noon,
Absolutely echoes pure vibrancy.

Sounds of the buzzing of bees,
Fragrance of nectar from flowers visited,
Distances covered in flight to and fro,
Time recorded in their hives with the queen.

All captured in bottled honey.
As we open the seal of sweet dew,
Each memory, every momentary life,
Along with the wisdom of the harvester.

The wood he uses to smoke them out,
The breeze he measures, the heights he climbs,
The crumbling of the hexagonal comb,
The wax and butter prepared after.

All resonate with the cliffs and mountains,
All preserved in glistening gold,
Marketed to urban folks,
With the taste of forest wisdom.

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Calling Young Interns for Coasts and Oceans of Life 2025

We invite young aspiring individuals (up to 25 years) to apply to the *Coasts and Oceans of Life Internship Programme*, the fourth in our annual climate festival series.

Click here to know more

Submission requirements:

- A 300-word storyline
- 1-minute video based on a chosen theme
- 5-standout photographs

Themes:

- Art and Folklore of Coastal Communities
- Marine Biodiversity and Flagship Species
- Living Along the Coastlines: Traditions and Livelihoods
- Balancing Coastal Development and Conservation
- Fragility of Marine Ecosystems

Submission requirements:

- A 500-word concept note
- 5 images of previous artworks (portfolio)
- Installation design plan based on a chosen theme

Themes:

- Artistic Narratives of Marine Ecosystems
- Mapping Coastlines and Cultural Histories
- Eco-friendly Creations Representing Oceanic Fragility

Scan QR Code to know more

Write to us at coastsandoceansoflife@apu.edu.in for queries

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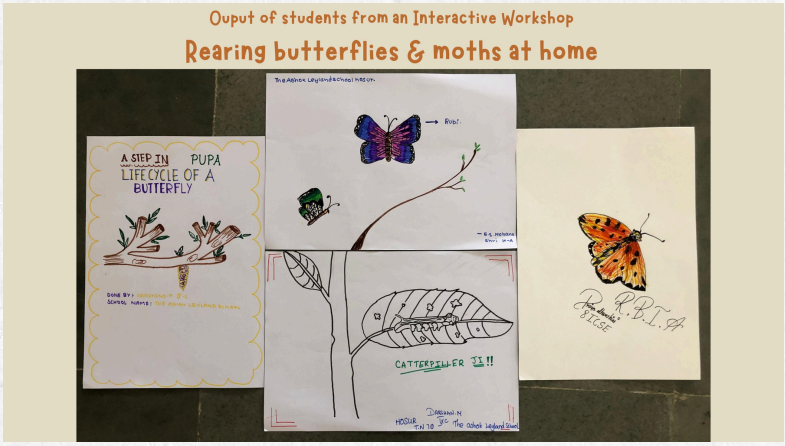
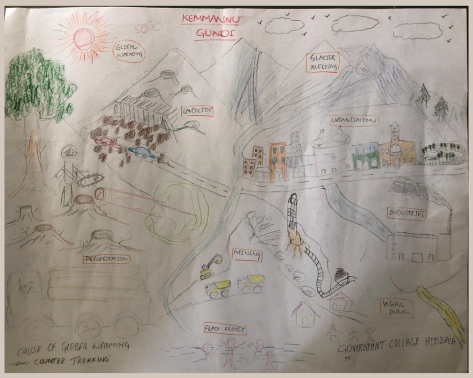
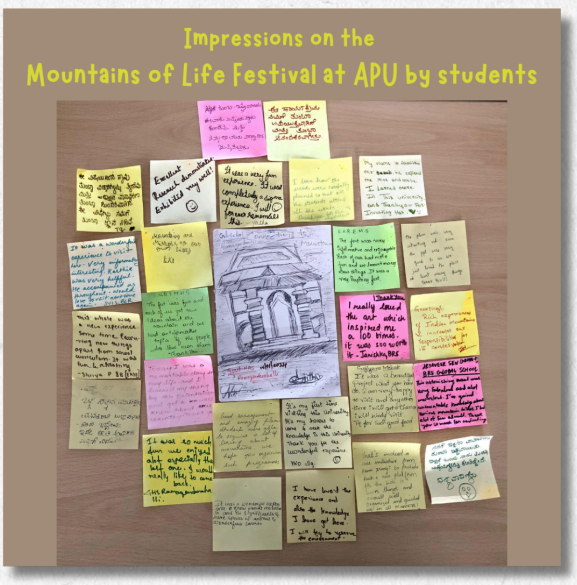
Few Creative Expressions by Students at the Mountains of Life Festival, Bengaluru

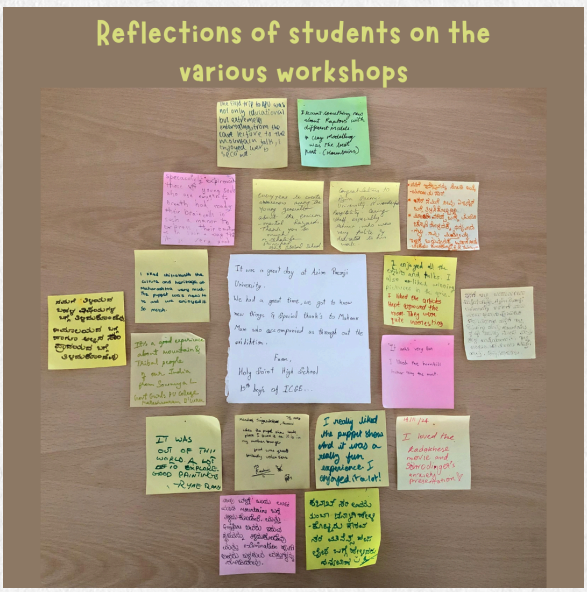


Artwork created by students as part of the session on

Mountains odysseys in era of climate change







Thank You!
We express our heartfelt gratitude to each and everyone for their invaluable contributions in making this event a resounding success. Thank you for being an integral part of this journey!

Credits & Acknowledgements

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Curated by: Aswathy Arun
Edited by: Seema Mundoli
Special credits: Harini Nagendra

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Intern stories

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- The Satyr Tragopan: An Icon of the Himalayan Bamboo – Oak – Rhododendron Forests by Babloo Farswan
- The Difference Lies in the Mind and in Our Response to Crises by Advait Premal Sanghavi
- Darjeeling's Changing Landscape by Avijit Kerketta

Champions of the Mountains: Celebrating Young Environmentalists

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