

The power of a camera

In India, the world's second most populous country, the fate of forests, wilderness and wild creatures hangs by a thread in the face of human need and exploitation. Independent filmmaker Shekar Dattatri, creator of powerful nature documentaries, is wielding his camera in an inspired personal bid to save India's fast-vanishing nature.

Julian Cribb reports.

An experienced wildlife filmmaker, 41-year-old Dattatri fuses passion with advocacy. For his work, which is changing both public opinion and government policy towards the environment in India, Shekar Dattatri has been chosen as an Associate Laureate in the 2004 Rolex Awards for Enterprise. These prizes provide the financial support and recognition for outstanding pursuits that advance human knowledge and well-being.

In 2001 Dattatri produced 'Mindless Mining', a 12-minute film about the damage inflicted by a huge iron ore mine on the rainforest and rivers of Kudremukh, Southern India. Shown in surrounding villages and to community leaders, the film



Dattatri spends hours in cramped, camouflaged hide-outs to capture wild animals on film. ©Rolex Awards/Xavier Lecoultrre

generated overwhelming public and political opposition to the mine. The film was submitted as evidence in a public interest petition filed with India's Supreme Court and conservationists won a major victory when the court ordered that the mine be closed by 2005.

'Mindless Mining' crowned 15 years of natural history films in which Dattatri produced more than a dozen documentaries, garnering a sheaf of international prizes. It also heralds a new project for the filmmaker – a series of 12 short films, to be

made over the next three years, coupling evocative cinematography with cogent advocacy for the protection of imperilled wildlife. Once all 12 films are made, the footage will be re-edited to produce an all-encompassing documentary to convince India's children – the future guardians of natural assets – that they must cherish their vanishing heritage.

Inspired from childhood by writers like Gerald Durrell and Jim Corbett, the 13-year-old Dattatri enlisted as a volunteer at the Madras Snake Park, run by herpetologist Romulus Whitaker. Accompanied by local tribespeople, the city-born youngster ventured into the jungle on snake-catching expeditions and herpetological surveys,



In 1986, threatened tigers were the subject of Dattatri's TV series called 'Project Tiger'. ©M. Shivakumar

experiencing wilderness for the first time – and being enthralled by it. He then worked as assistant to documentary filmmakers John and Louise Riber, acting as snake-handler for their educational film 'Snakebite'. 'By the end, I realised I'd learned quite a lot about film-making, and this was what I really wanted to do,' he says.

In 1989 Dattatri shot 'Silent Valley – An Indian Rainforest', a 53-minute natural history film on the shola forests of south India. 'My equipment was primitive, an old Bolex powered by four lead-acid



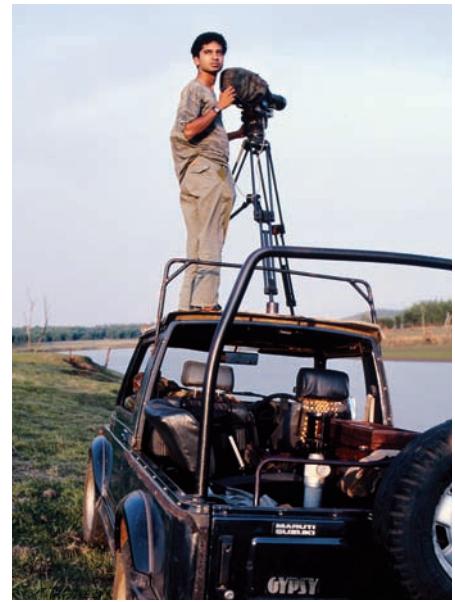
One of Dattatri's first films, 'The Good Snake' (1994) documents a year in the life of a female cobra. ©Rolex Awards/Xavier Lecoultrre

motorcycle batteries that would leak if tilted. I wanted to film the great pied hornbill nesting – something which had never been done before in India.' When word came from tribespeople of a nest, Dattatri shinned 25 metres up a rainforest tree on a flimsy rope ladder and built himself a hide. The footage exceeded his wildest hopes: 'You could hear the male bird coming, the wind in his feathers, bringing food to his mate. He'd swoop down and feed her and then, to my amazement, he'd hop on to the same branch as me – unaware of my presence – to clean his bill! This was the most magical time of my life, sitting for days high up in the treetops, while the forest creatures went about their lives.'

'Mindless Mining' convinced Dattatri that nature films have a role to play in changing public opinion and government



Sambhar deer graze in the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, Rajasthan. ©Anna Lockwood



Dattatri producing 'Nagarahole – Tales from an Indian Jungle', an award-winning natural history film. ©Anna Lockwood



Elephants, venerated for centuries in India, now suffer from habitat destruction and human conflict. ©Shekar Dattatri

policy. So he began making short, hard-hitting films exposing rampant environmental devastation – but also offering solutions. 'I make them short because you cannot keep the attention of busy policymakers if it is 40 minutes long. I often use no music because I do not wish to alter the essential message: this is how it is.'

In 'The Ridley's Last Stand', Dattatri reached back to childhood memories of sea turtles, now in tragic decline. Besides explaining the causes of the turtles' plight, he also showed how fishermen could reduce their turtle bycatch, and how beaches could be restored. 'I don't perceive myself as an activist, but rather as someone who has practical solutions to offer, based on science,' he says.

Dattatri contests the view that all of India's environmental problems stem from poverty. 'Most of us buy into the myth that overpopulation and poverty ... are mainly responsible for the destruction of forests and wildlife. In fact many conservation

problems in India are not caused by poverty, but by the greed of a few. Analyse most conservation problems carefully and you'll discover a small number of people, a cartel or industry plundering common resources for self-enrichment.'

'We still have wonderful remnants of our natural heritage,' he points out. 'India is the last stronghold of the tiger, the Asian elephant, the one-horned rhinoceros and the Asiatic lion. Every time I return from a filming trip to the jungle, I think to myself that all this is so worth fighting for. What depresses me is the level of ignorance,

apathy, greed; the fact that this country had enlightened views on conservation in ancient times, and how we have forgotten these values.'

Shekar Dattatri plans to invest the Rolex Award prize money in equipment for his forthcoming series of nature films. He also intends to train a new generation of Indian wildlife filmmakers to carry forward his sense of hope for the future.

More information:
The Rolex Award for Enterprise:
www.rolexawards.com