

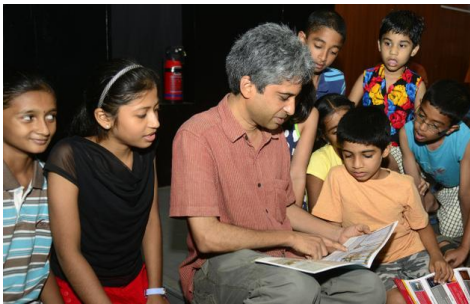
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## The Dattatri who became a Durrell



The Hindu

When his sister thrust a few Gerald Durrell books into his hands, Shekar Dattatri knew it was time to exchange the catapult for the camera. Photo: R. Ravindran



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Shekar Dattatri reads to children from his book 'Ira the Little Dolphin'. Photo: R. Ravindran

**Filmmaker-conservationist Shekar Dattatri, who has been on the wildlife trail for nearly three decades, talks to Deepa Alexander about how it all began, his award-winning work and writing for children**

It is a little hard to believe that Shekar Dattatri has ever hurt a single animal in his life. He is, after all, a man for whom Nature is sacred. Yet, when he was a little boy, back in the day when Madras was a quiet, green city, Shekar roamed the neighbourhood hunting down small birds. Then one day, his sister thrust a few Gerald Durrell books into his hands, and Shekar knew it was time to exchange the catapult for the camera.

“I’m lucky to be doing the one thing I most love,” says Shekar in an interview preceding the launch of *Ira the Little Dolphin*, his book for children, at the Alliance Française de Madras. The book, his third with Tulika, is the story of an Irrawaddy dolphin that ‘does happy backflips in the calm waters of Chilika Lake’ and is based on his film made for the Chilika Development Authority. “My favourite frame from the documentary is of a white-bellied sea-eagle riding the wind across the waters,” says Shekar who has made nearly 30 films since he first assisted John and Louise Riber in *Snakebite* in the ‘80s.

That made him a seeker of all things wildlife and Shekar went on to make some award-winning and influential films such as *The Truth About Tigers*, *Nagarahole — Tales From An Indian Jungle*, and *Mindless Mining — The Tragedy of Kudremukh*, a film that distilled for policy-makers the after-effects of iron ore mining in a national park. “It helped change the tide of opinion,” says Shekar. The film, along with the work of many other conservation groups, played a pivotal role in the courts ordering a closure of the mines.

“Until 2000, I made films for international television without labouring much on the message of conservation,” he says. Then, one day, he turned off the lights on the many wildlife channels and millions of viewers and, instead, trained his lens on the few core groups he thought would help make a difference. “I began to make films that spoke from the heart — for NGOs and policy-makers — in the hope of a tangible change in the way we as a country perceive the future of our wildlife,” says Shekar, who has won a slew of awards, among them the Edberg Foundation Award, the Carl Zeiss Award for Conservation and the Rolex Award for Enterprise.

And so, Shekar travelled the breadth of the country drawing focus on the places and the creatures that mattered. “We have excellent laws, but implementation is often poor. Conservation is low priority and funds are usually not always spent in the best possible manner.”

But Shekar says that despite this, we don’t have to wring our hands in despair. “I refuse to give in to despondency,” he says. “India has about 600-plus wildlife reserves and we are doing reasonably well, much better than many countries in Asia. We are doing a lot for our flagship species — elephants and tigers — but we need to do so much more.”

Which is why he decided to involve children in conservation. Along with friend and naturalist, Ramnath Chandrashekar, he mentors a programme for school children in smaller towns across the State through the Trust for Environmental Education. The module introduces children to films, documentaries and awareness programmes, and encourages them to ask questions and find solutions to matters pertaining to wildlife.

Shekar makes these films over a year, with a variety of equipment, researching and crafting a story to showcase the subject in the best light possible. “It’s hard work,” he says. “Some projects

are funded by broadcasters, some are self-funded. You have to fall in love with a place to get the best out of it, and that is difficult because permission is restricted and Indian jungles are not always ideal to film in. Unlike the savannahs which are open spaces, the challenge here is that foliage is thick, light is often low and the animals are cryptic.”

However exotic a life all this may sound, wildlife tourism seems to be playing spoiler. “Our reserves are small but, with the Indian middle-class on the move, the footfalls are many. Mass journeys into reserves to sight animals are not always a good idea, especially if regulations are not in place. Africa has strict laws that work well for both visitor and wildlife. Sighting wildlife and enjoying it is one aspect, but it shouldn’t come at the cost of yelling, littering tourists. These people are better off seeing animals in a zoo,” says Shekar.

Having got to live his unusual childhood fantasy, Shekar hopes more children will follow suit. “Our hope rests with them,” he says. “Adults are too blasé, too cynical. Children need to be sensitised to the beauty around them, and often they see it much better than we do. They should be taught to preserve the priceless heritage of our natural world.”

### **Meet Ira**

The book launch of *Ira the Little Dolphin* (published by Tulika Books) drew a sizeable crowd of parents and children. Written by Shekar Dattatri with photographs by Dipani Sutaria, Ramnath Chandasekhar, Vasanth Asokan and Yashwanth Ravi, the book is about the shy Irrawaddy dolphins that populate the brackish Chilika Lake in Odisha. The book is based on Shekar’s award-winning film *Chilika, Jewel of Odisha*. The film drew excited and concerned responses from the young audience for whom it was screened.

There is a lyrical feel to the script in the book with a meter that tempts one to read it aloud. The dolphins, swim, swivel and spit their way through the pictures and the narrator is a speck in a rich landscape — a creation that feels true to Shekar’s story.