

A unique safari experience that proved life-altering for the children as well as the organisers. Photograph: Sanjay Shukla

Birdsong, alarm calls and a life-altering
experience with 23 visually-impaired
children in the forests of Kanha
National Park
— by *Bhavna Menon*

A Sensory Experience

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It's exhilarating to be able to connect children to a forestscape, to watch them form a purely appreciative, non-transactional bond with nature. I have been blessed to be part of an initiative that gives me an opportunity to do just that.

The Wilderness Foundation (LWF) has been involved in the Village Kids' Awareness programme since the summer of 2012. The programme involves working with students living in the buffer zones of tiger reserves like [Bandhavgarh](https://www.natureinfocus.in/guide/bandhavgarh/) (<https://www.natureinfocus.in/guide/bandhavgarh/>), Kanha and Panna to help them understand the correlation between denizens of the forest and the need to protect them. It

lps also, to understand the behaviour of a tiger as that of a wild animal rather than only a
urce of economic loss for the villagers in form of livestock lifting (which happens more often
an not).

owever, despite working in this landscape for the past five years, our most surreal
perience came this year, in the form of 23 visually-impaired students from the Ananya
anav Sai Samiti, Jabalpur. The enthusiasm shown by these students – complemented by the
tiative taken by the Kanha Forest Department and LWF – made it possible for us to take
em on a forest safari through Kanha National Park in January for the very first time.

ver the next day and a half, the children drank it
ll in: the early morning air heavy with birdsong,
re calls and grunts of the grazing herbivores and
re touch of an ageing sal tree.



A student touching the bark of an ageing tree. Photograph: Sanjay Shukla



Teachers and students together, ready for a day in Kanha National Park. Photograph: Sanjay Shukla

ey listened to the descriptions of the golden grasslands and the narrated 'sight' of a camp
phant throwing mud playfully on its back as it examined the meadows. The highlight for
em, however, came in the form of a noisy Gaur as they heard it breaking off branches and
ewing the leaves of a bamboo bush.

hat was remarkable was the heightening of our own senses. We stopped at every rustle, at
e energetic crashing of langurs through the canopies and waited to examine the strong
ahul' creeper, tracing the patterns on the leaves with our fingers, its softness delighting the
idents, making them shudder with excitement.

iving in the forest, the students noticed how some parts were relatively cooler. On being d that it was a mix of meadows and dense forest, the students put out their hands to amine the drop in the temperature and exclaimed excitedly that they could hear the eams in the parts of the forest that were coolest.

Does Kanha have a lot of hills? Has the vegetation hanged? Do tigers live in such hilly regions?” asked the students as we drove on an incline. We ruggled to keep pace with their intelligence and perior vision.

the Kanha Interpretation Centre, everyone's excitement was almost palpable as we roduced them to the different skeleton structures of animals. They carefully examined the erse shapes with their hands, Blackbuck antlers emerging as the clear favourite. “*Kitna idar hai!* (It's so beautiful!)” they exclaimed; gingerly wrapping their fingers around the ges in the antlers. Loud gasps of admiration echoed through the museum as they came in ntact with the teeth of the wild boar. “*Baap re! bahut pene hain!* (How sharp these are!)” As ey tried to squeeze their hands into the embossed structure of a tiger's pugmark, to erstand the difference between male and female, all they could murmur in excitement was w beautiful the animal must be.

the students' happiness knew no bounds when they had an opportunity to meet the camp phant, thanks to the Forest Department. They enjoyed the slight breeze caused by the pping of its large ears and clung to us, shivering every time it moved. They touched the chyderm's wrinkled skin reverently, saying it was the best thing they had ever encountered.



the students examined the exhibits at the interpretation centre, delighting in the experience of being able to touch the bone structure of a wild beast. Photograph: Bhavna Menon

the equaliser came, in my opinion, when we took the children to the dark room at the useum, for the sound and light show. This exhibits the nightlife of a forest with a recreation a dimly-lit landscape inside a glass case with the sounds of different animals, climaxing with iger hunting a spotted deer.

I struggled to adjust to the pitch dark, the students spoke admiringly of the atmosphere of e room, the number of steps they had climbed to get here and patiently waited for the show begin. As the night life of the forest came to life with different calls, no one spoke, they

are breathing it all in, shuffling slightly to the sound of rustling depicting animal movement. When it ended, they stood listing down all the things they had heard, clutching my hand in a fever of excitement, their reactions uncomplicated. I thought of the majority of tourists who visit the reserve every day, expecting the forest to deliver their money's worth and yet are never truly satisfied with the experience. These students took the experience holistically, step-by-step, marvelling with equal enthusiasm whether it was the call of a Golden Oriole or the rough touch of a sal tree. I was overwhelmed in that room – albeit with my limited understanding of the lives of the children – and realised that sometimes happiness can be sought from the most uncomplicated of things, only if we allow it to be.

Watch the children enjoy their day out in the jungle

Beyond sightings - A vision of Kanha Tiger Reserve



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