

ENVIRONMENT

Meet the snake expert



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Defanged, a documentary on snakes, debunks myths and misconceptions around these reptiles and raises awareness on rescuing and protecting them

Herpetologist P Gowri Shankar survived the bite of a king cobra. That is a feat as there is no anti-venom for it. He speaks of the terrifying incident with unusual composure. "I was in the hospital for three days. I almost died. The factors that saved my life were: I kept calm when I was bitten. I was given polyvalent, which is produced for all four venomous snakes, but it does not always work for king cobras. Since very little venom entered my body, it was only a small scratch. I survived." Gowri cautions against the word 'attack': "That is not the word you should use. Snakes don't disturb you unless you do. They always act in self defense."

Gowri has been featured in a recent documentary titled *Defanged* by Bengaluru-based film-makers Trishala Ashok and Abhilash Krishna. In 2015, Gowri received the Herpetologist of the Year Award by the Swedish Herpetological Society. He is based in Agumbe and is the founder-director of Kalinga Centre for Rainforest Ecology, and was in Bengaluru at St Joseph's college for the screening of the film. "I was 13 when I first encountered a snake. It was a non-venomous buff-striped keelback. I handled it like a venomous snake; I pinned it and picked it up gently," recalls Gowri, who is a wildlife biologist studying king cobras for close to two decades.

He is enrolled as a PhD candidate at North Orissa University, Odisha, and is a former exchange student at

Uppsala University, Sweden. His interest lay in Evolutionary Biology and he is studying the phylogeography of king cobras across South East Asia. He has also authored and co-authored 11 scientific papers on king cobras (six were a part of a special issue) for the *Hamadryad*, a leading herpetological journal. He previously worked at premier organisations such as the Centre for Herpetology, Madras Crocodile Bank Trust (MCBT) and also helped set up the Agumbe Rainforest Research Station, Agumbe, Karnataka. As part of his study, he has rescued and relocated over 300 king cobras from distress situations and monitored over 30 king cobra nests. He was instrumental in initiating the pioneering radio telemetry study on king cobras and was able to discover the secret life of king cobras.

Gowri explains that the Kalinga Centre for Rainforest Ecology (KCRE) was set up so that people could get an opportunity to learn about wildlife in the most responsible way. He is also the co-founder of Kalinga Foundation, an NGO focusing on ecological research and conservation to impact a positive change for the environment.

Gowri has fond memories of his times spent at MCBT. "I worked there for three to four years and consider my time there as graduation. In the morning I would read about monitor lizards, in the afternoon about crocodiles and evenings about snakes."

He also spent several hours at Bannerghatta zoo in Bengaluru. "I would spend the entire day observing king cobras."

There are snake rescuers, though not too many, who have

no formal education on snakes but have the ability to rescue snakes. What difference, then, does theory make? "I am one of the few who balances theory and practice. Most of the time, knowledge is not shared with the public. There is, however, quite a bit of data collection happening, which should be known. When I first started working in Agumbe, people were wary of me. They are conservative. In Agumbe, king cobras are considered sacred, you cannot kill them. Since I rescue snakes and release them into the wild, I became popular," he says.

Speaking about the importance of conserving snakes, Gowri says: "Snakes are an important and integral part of the food chain. They help control the rodent population because they eat rats. Rodents eat up to 40% of food grains. Also snake's venom has medicinal properties, it is used to make anti-venom."

Only about four snakes are venomous, says Gowri. These are the cobra, krait, Russell's viper and saw-scale viper. Snakes, he adds, recognise their surroundings. "They depend on chemical sensors to distinguish humidity, prey, and their mates."