

Scene

# Nature Weekend

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BY PRITHA GOPALAN

It's pitch dark and every head in the vicinity is craned skyward. "That's Orion," says a little girl knowledgeably to her friend. The friend seems impressed. An SSTCN member, meanwhile, points out the configuration of the Hunter. "He's not a perfect man," says he, a teacher at KFI, "look how he slopes this way," the torch points. "People in the old days didn't have TVs and things like that, they used to have an early dinner and sit outside their homes watching the faraway stars. In their imaginations, the stars must have taken on patterns. So they gave different groups of stars different names. This one's called the Hunter, look at his sword, can you see it?" the torch points again.

Some of the kids locate the sword, others don't. And helpful friends and neighbours switch on their torches to locate the Hunter for them. "You flashed the torch in my eye," complains somebody and somebody else thinks that's a great idea and a game begins, where the attention turns from the stars to torches. Come on, come on, quiet. Why don't you all lie down and stargaze for a while? If you're very quiet you can hear the sea, and animals and insects," an organiser orders torches off. The chatter recedes, nature takes over.

Banyan roots sway in the light breeze. Fallen leaves rustle. The swish of the nearby sea lulls. The stars twinkle gaily and the half-moon disappears behind a cloud. Sounds of even breathing, insects and the occasional parrot screech. It's the first time the hyper-active kids have taken a break since the Marine Camp began. And its welcome, both to the hap-

pily-tired brood as well as the camp organisers (the Students for Sea Turtle Conservation Network -- SSTCN). Somebody's had enough and signals so with his torch. Bye bye quiet. The group breaks up into the traditional gangs and the camping ground at the Theosophical Society is alive with shouts and torchlight shadows. The deserted tents swarm with kids again, as 60-odd potentially environment-conscious people between the ages of 11 and 13 go about putting themselves to sleep. "Can we have a bonfire, please?" a little one asks,



On the beach

but its late and tomorrow is an early start.

The Marine Camp is a new idea being tried out by the SSTCN, most known for their turtle walks, to teach children the importance of conservation in a way that is meaningful and fun. "To a lot of kids this might just seem like a break from school, homework and parents. But we hope that over these two days (Saturday and Sunday) they've also learnt something about nature and how much it means to us," says a member, who is part of the core group of the SSTCN. "We seem to have reached a point where we no longer think about where our food comes from. We just buy it off the shelves, and that's that."

Dawn. Blankets and dreams are cast aside as many wake up for the first time in an open environment. The early birds are out, winging it over purple-pink skies. The gate is opened and we're on the beach. Crabs scramble for shelter as the kids run to the water. It is like standing between worlds. The orange-gold sea laps at one's feet. The smog-ridden city floats slowly into focus as the sun begins its ascent. The children help a fisherman pull in his net. "This is a great experience for me," says an awed child with a surprisingly adult turn of phrase, "I'm happy I could come. I was always interested in animals and birds, now I know a little more about them." His soft brown eyes are wide with sincerity. His shoelaces are a vibrant fluorescent green. What exactly have the kids done that got them all so happy and interested? The camp uses a mix of teaching techniques-- talks, nature walks, games and worksheet sessions, which are informal enough to hold attention, but participatory enough to retain the message.

Karthik.K

Like when we walked through the forest near the Adyar estuary, a child softly said, "Please, keep quiet, we just saw a monogoose and he might run away." A lot of conversations were about scagull, red crabs and catamarans. Pouted a pretty little girl, "I wish the fisherman would talk in English, I can't understand anything they say."

Its time for the Release Of baby sea turtles. The group divides into two, eagerly watching lines of

well-wishers as the little beings tumble out of their bucket and follow their newly-hatched noses into the sea. Straying babies are put on course by gentle hands. "Look at those bobbing heads, someone points. The amazing babies swim away without a backward look riding the waves with facile ease.

The versatile sky turns grey. It drizzles mildly. Nature's made our day, as in Madras, rain, even a hint of it, is reason to exult. The sea is silver-tinged. Part of the group treks off towards a nearby village to talk to the fishermen. The kids who prefer the forest go animal-watching.