

One with the environment

Healing and the harmonious co-existence of man with nature came up for discussion at the Vasundhara International Film Festival

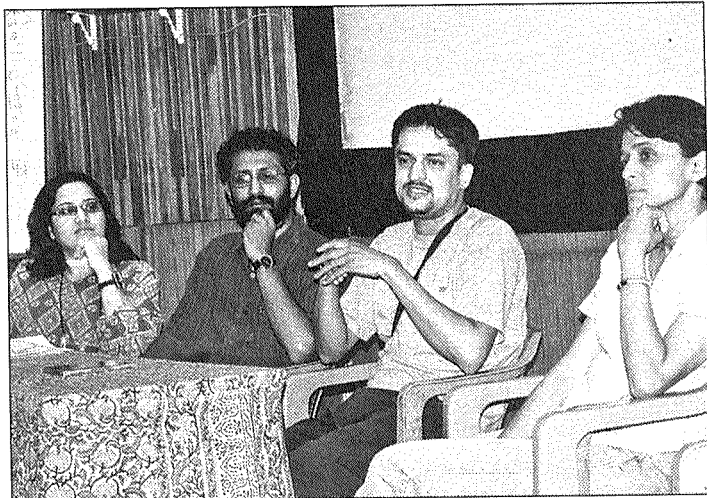
Would the Earth require a plaster, if it ran out of vegetation? This is the question that Suparna Gangal addressed in her documentary, 'Green Plaster', shown on Tuesday at the Vasundhara International Film Festival.

The film shows our planet covered in plaster, in an effort to assuage the environmental destruction it has endured. Gangal was inspired to make this film when she was injured while working as an assistant director for Umesh Kulkarni's hit film, 'Valu'.

"In order to avoid a delay in the shooting schedule, I procrastinated over getting medical help for my fractured hand. This led to a painful recuperation. Looking at my plastered hand, I wondered what would happen to the Earth if it were fractured by the follies of us human beings?" says Gangal.

So, how can we stop the Earth from needing bandages? "We have to save our planet's green belt. Only when we take our genuine development seriously, can we connect with our immediate environment and all those dependent on it, and find solutions to our problems," says Gangal.

A more lyrical interpretation of the same message was lent by Virendra Valsangkar in his film, 'The Unfolding White' which tracks the life and work of Kolhapur-based architect Shirish Beri.



Suparna Gangal, Virendra Valsangkar, Aniruddha Belsare and Vidya Athreya

Learning to live with leopards

Describing leopards as man-eaters may sound colourful, but it is a harmful way of referring to them, says Aniruddha Belsare. The veterinarian along with biologist Vidya Athreya, passionately spoke about the man-animal conflict at the Vasundhara International Film Festival on Wednesday.

The leopard attacks in Junnar and the Borivali National Park a few years ago need to be thought about seriously, they say. "Leopard attacks in Junnar got huge coverage. But wrong intervention led to many misconceptions about the wild cats," says Belsare.

Athreya explains that leopards and other carnivores are extremely territorial. "In order to survive, they mark their territories — both in the wild and other natural spaces — and as the breed grows, they spread out. That's why, besides the protected and unprotected wild areas, they could also be living near and in urban areas," she says.

For ages, these animals have learnt to cohabit with humans peacefully. "There are several instances of leopards living in close proximity with people, without the population knowing about their presence. These animals have learnt to live like this," says Athreya. She is currently studying the leopards in the Sangamner region of Maharashtra. "I'm examining whether these leopards are causing danger to human life in the surrounding areas," she says.

Catching an animal in urban areas doesn't necessarily mean it has 'strayed', she says. "If we think you

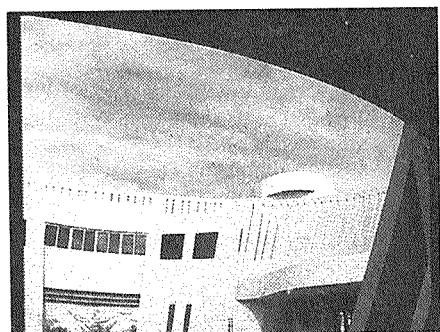
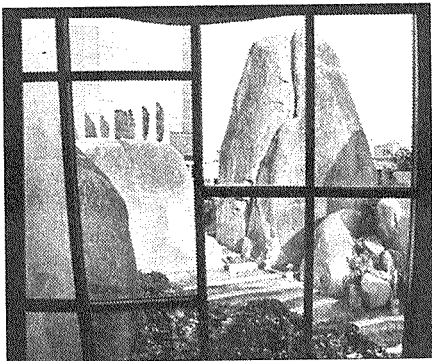
can trap it and leave it in the wild, we are making a mistake. The fact is, if you uproot these animals from their natural habitats and put them in unfamiliar surroundings, they'll come back to their natural regions, that too in greater numbers," says Belsare.

How rural people have adapted with these animals is a sign of their tolerance, says Athreya. "Leopards stray into farms in Sangamner; but they haven't harmed anyone. Farmers have learnt to accept their behaviour and work around the problems they are causing to their lifestyle," she adds.

When leopards are found in urban areas, panic and fear of such animals is normal, but people don't realise these animals are sensitive to people. "They can't handle human intervention very easily. People think they have 'strayed' into the cities. This is when, wrong intervention based on wrong premises, aggravates the problem of handling trapped wild animals," says Belsare.

Belsare and Athreya also spoke about other carnivores like wolves, foxes, lynxes, hyenas and wild dogs. "Rural people and tribals have used traditional wisdom to cohabit with animals in their surroundings. But the urban population doesn't know how to treat wildlife. City-dwellers are ignorant when it comes to handling these animals. That's where the problem lies," says Belsare.

And, what is worsening the man-animal conflict is the lack of scientific data to support our contentions about these carnivores, she adds.



Stills from 'The Unfolding White'

Beri's approach to life and how he has devised an eco-friendly way to live, are interesting. "He has embarked on a spiritual journey through his work, by trying to understand the oneness of life and the environment," says Valsangkar.

The seasoned filmmaker depicts how Beri, also a gifted poet, interprets harmonious co-existence of man and nature, thereby furthering sustainable development.

The film won the international jury award at the Ekotop Film Festival 2007 in Slovakia, and offers solutions to people living a stressful life in the cities. "Beri says that one can connect with nature in spite of living in a concrete jungle. But this entirely depends on how working people use their spaces to create that bond with nature. Given the haphazard expansion of cities like Pune, we have to understand how we can bond with a place in an eco-friendly manner," says Valsangkar.