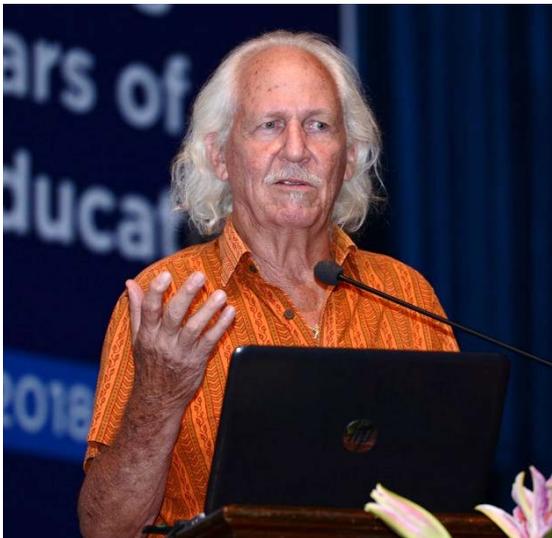




*Padma Shri Mr. Romulus Whitaker (renowned herpetologist and Founder, Madras Crocodile Bank and Madras Snake Park) and Ms. Janaki Lenin (writer and wildlife filmmaker) deliver the second Luminary Lecture, to commemorate the institution's Centenary of Medical Education. The aim of this series of lectures is to listen and imbibe from people, who by their work and life, have empowered and transformed societies, have contributed to our national life or are role models for the youth.*

## **“I'd always looked for a peer group”: Snake Man Romulus Whitaker**

When Whitaker caught his first snake while still a child, and brought it home to show his mother, like any child would, she may never have imagined that her encouragement and shared fascination would spark a lasting passion in him.



Whitaker, a naturalised Indian, who came to India from America at the age of seven, learned the basics of snake handling and venom extraction from the legendary [Bill Haast](#) of the Miami Serpentarium. When he returned to India in 1967, after his stint in Miami, he had a dream of starting a snake farm here, the land of snakes and snake charmers. He looked for a peer group, people who shared his passion for

snakes - and they were not the snake charmers. He found them in the Irulas, the snake hunting tribe of Tamil Nadu, whom he called "[the best in the business](#)".

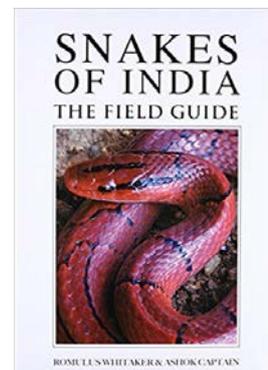
**With his characteristic lack of self-consciousness that belies his prodigious contributions to conservation over many decades, for which he**

was recently awarded the Padma Shri, Whitaker, delivering the second Luminary Lecture, chose to speak about the lowly Irulas from whom he said he had learned so much.

Whitaker, who confessed he had “always been enamoured by tribal folk because they did so many interesting things”, painted a picture of a fascinating tribe. These people, whom he lived with and knew intimately, worked with and admired, could catch snakes that were invisible to all eyes; could dig ditches to precision; could ferret out rats from every nook and corner of a sugarcane field; could make unsuspecting termites come pouring out of their mounds (to be roasted and eaten); and knew every medicinal plant in their forests. On the website of the Madras Crocodile Bank, their prodigious skills are encapsulated in a one-line description: **one of the last forest scientists of the world.**

He unravelled before the audience, with his trademark wit and candour, the stories of Chockalingam, a master snake hunter, whom he calls, “a legend in his lifetime”; the cool Annamalai, who snapped off one of his fingers that was damaged by a snake bite “because it got in his way”; the young Irula boy who became friends with a croc while shooting a film; and of the “Yelikaradi” (Rat Bear), so called because he would disappear down a hole with only his legs sticking out.

When there was a problem with invasive Burmese pythons in Florida, Whitaker convinced friends and government officials there to let the Irulas come and “show the snake-catchers of America how it’s really done.” And they did, catching around eight pythons, in a single day. One time, Whitaker got a government grant to let the Irulas catch rats from the fields over the course of a year, to try out a method that did not involve using toxic chemicals. The Irulas caught 240,000 rats and recovered five tonnes of rice from the burrows but unfortunately, the project did not progress beyond that.



Despite all that he has learned from the Irulas, they have benefitted far more from their association with him. Whitaker gave them a new life when he founded the Irula Snake Catchers’ Co-operative in the early 70s, and later the Irula Tribe Women’s Welfare Society, after he and his colleagues got the government to ban the snakeskin trade, which effectively put an end to the livelihood of the Irulas.

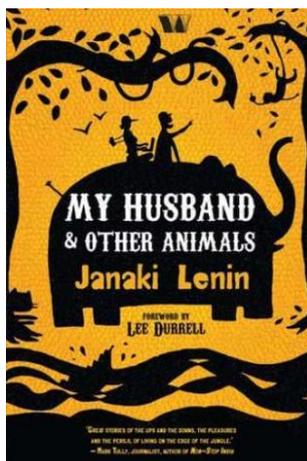
The Co-operative produces anti-venom - which literally costs more than its weight in gold - for the needs of the entire country, thus saving the lives of millions of people.

***“What matters is the amount of space  
you have in your heart for animals”:* Janaki Lenin**

When the diminutive figure walked up on stage after her husband Rom had finished his lively talk about snakes and snake hunters, it was already late in the evening and the audience was beginning to get a little restless. However, as Janaki Lenin began speaking about lost leopards, patient elephants, and young lions co-habiting with fearless villagers, people sat up in their seats.



Janaki, probably best known for her column, ‘My husband and other animals’, that appeared in ‘The Hindu’ (and later published as a book), is a conservationist, writer, publisher and filmmaker. Speaking about human-wildlife conflict, specifically that which affects leopards and elephants, Janaki talked about how often people come up with solutions not knowing the whats and whys of the problem. *“When you have a misconception of what the problem is, your solution is also misplaced,”* she said.



Understanding cat biology, and especially their territorial nature, is crucial to understanding why conflict is born, she pointed out. Without territory, a leopard cannot hunt food or win mates, and is in constant danger of being attacked. A leopard that is taken out of its territory and to a forest will immediately start its journey, however long or arduous, back to its home. This traumatised, starving cat may encounter humans and conflict is “created”.

Moreover, if the leopard doesn’t make it back, in all likelihood, there will be another leopard that will take over its old territory before long, she said.

**But wait! Where was this leopard living before - if not in a forest?**

Contrary to popular belief, leopards and lions can co-exist with humans and have, in many parts of India, been co-habiting peacefully for centuries, said Janaki. She recounted stories of a mother leopard who had her litter in the sugarcane field in front of a school and quietly walked away with her cubs when they were old enough to; of villagers who sleep outside their houses, with their children, while keeping their livestock in tightly guarded enclosures; and of the fascinating Maldhari tribes of Gujarat. *“The Maldhari guys herding their cows in lion territory- all they have is one little stick. If a lion comes too close, they go ‘bonk’ on its head and it goes away.”*

She also talked of another pastoral tribe that every year brings their livestock from the Konkan Coast to the Deccan, after the monsoons, marching over a distance of 300 km. If they did not make this march, she said, the wolves in the Deccan Plateau would have nothing else to eat.

Elephants are another species Janaki has spent many years observing and studying. *“We have two marginalised communities, of elephants and farmers, head-butting each other,”* she said. The rich farmers get the best lands, away from proximity to elephants and those elephants, that are lower in the hierarchy, gets pushed to the edge of the forests. Instead of trying various methods to prevent the starving elephants from feeding on the crops – methods like electrified fences and fences greased with chilly paste – which the patient and clever pachyderms find a way around eventually, we should be thinking of how we can help the elephants find food, thus indirectly helping the farmers as well, she said.

She elaborated on how conflict has a lot to do with perception, using the examples of rats which destroy more crops than elephants, and snakes that kill more people than leopards; neither of these animals feature in conversations of wildlife-human conflict.

She reiterated that the population numbers, loss of habitat and so on have little bearing on having a harmonious relationship with animals. *“What you see in the newspapers of this man-animal conflict is an aberration... Throughout India, every day, people are adjusting their lives, sacrificing a bit of their livelihood, a bit of their income, to live with animals... and they are doing this without any help from conservationists, without any help from biologists or the government. Because of their own sense of sharing the landscape with other creatures.”*

[Read more](#)