

Our group was filled with anticipation at the start of February as we couldn't wait to leave for our trip to the Andaman Islands. Two connecting flights later we were waiting in the sticky heat of the Vir Savarkar airport in Port Blair. This was the first time our school had sent a group to the Andamans, and more importantly the first time any of us were going Scuba Diving, so our group buzzed with excitement.

We were split into two cars at the airport and promptly sent on our way to ANET. The heat, and the palm trees that interspersed the roadside at regular intervals served as a constant reminder that we were on a tropical island. We arrived at ANET drenched in our own sweat, which did nothing to dampen our spirits. We were taken around the plot and shown our rooms. The amazing thing about the ANET complex is that it is constructed almost entirely out of natural and locally procured materials like leaves, wood and cane. Almost the entire complex is made of completely bio-degradable material barring only a few buildings in which concrete has been used, that too sparingly.

We were then taken out into the neighboring marsh which was recovering from a recent El Nino event which was sadly to become a recurring theme of our visit. The next day was the first day of Scuba Diving practice. This took place in a swimming pool of a hotel a short drive away from the ANET complex. We learnt basic Scuba diving skills like how to set up our equipment and use basic buoyancy control techniques. This was when we first realized breathing through an oxygen tank could be so exhausting. Because of the high nitrogen content in the tank we got so sapped of our energy that there was a special time set apart that afternoon and every single one to follow for all of us to sleep and regain our energy. The second day continued much in the same way the first had and we spent the majority of that day learning more advanced techniques in the pool. Every evening we would have talks or go on walks. We went on a snake walk on the beach on the second night and were able to spot many wild water snakes in their natural habitats. We also had talks on diving theory where we learnt many of the theoretical and scientific aspects of diving. These were especially educative and informative as we had applied the same techniques in a practical manner

during our dive sessions. These theory sessions continued throughout the remainder of our trip.

The third day was the day when things got really exciting because it was time for the open water dive; this would be the first time we were going to dive the sea and our enthusiasm was only matched by our anxiety. This time we practiced basic diving skills 10 meters under the surface of the water and actually cruised around the reefs. This is where we saw how horribly the El Niño phenomenon had affected the ecosystems in the region, all the corals were bleached and the fish life in the corals was significantly low. The remarkable thing about this ecosystem was that it was recovering exceptionally fast and even though majority of the corals were bleached, we could see places where recovery was taking place at a rapid rate, which was an encouraging sign in contrast to the death and devastation that was also visible. We continued our open water diving on the fourth and final day and fulfilled our beginner diving requirement of 21 meters under the CMAS program. On all these days we completed theory classes and had ecological talks regarding the marine life we had seen during our dives. It was more interactive and hands on than learning in class because we had physically seen the things we were discussing.

On the final day of our trip we had no diving session but had our dive theory test. After that we went on a long walk along the coast where we were living. While there we studied the marine ecosystems of the intertidal zones and the mangrove systems which were intricately linked with the coral ecosystems which we had studied over the past few days. We learnt about the animals like the guitarfish and the mudskippers which had special adaptations to help them survive their constantly changing surroundings which alternated between dry and wet systems. We observed that the intertidal zone was linked to the corals because it served as a place where coral species could hatch and raise their young due to the relatively safer nature of the intertidal zone. This zone was thus a breeding ground for juvenile fish while the mangroves served as a source of shelter and nutrition for many plants and amphibious species. Even though the walk was long and tiring it proved to be very informative and enriching and we managed to do something physically challenging as well as intellectually stimulating at the same time. In the evening we did some experiments in the

mangroves nearby (shown below). The next morning we left the Andaman Islands leaving behind only our footprints and carrying back our memories and photographs.

## EXPERIMENT

Aim: To determine the feeding habits of hermit crabs according to location

Theory: It is believed that due to the hot tropical climate the crabs will prefer feeding closer to shaded areas than open areas which are generally hotter

Method : Observation at four locations- Open mudflat, waterside, inside the water, under the rizophora roots

Requirements: Bananas, Leaves, 3 crabs per location

Procedure: 3 crabs were placed at each location respectively and the leaves and bananas were placed near them in an open demarcated space. The crabs were then observed for half an hour at the respective locations.

Observations:

- ♣ In the water all 3 crabs jointly ate 90% of a 2cm piece of a banana
- ♣ Next to the water 1 crab ate 15% of a 1.5cm banana and the others crawled away without eating.
- ♣ Next to the root 1 crab ate 30% of a leaf with the other two sharing at intervals. These two crabs also ate an entire banana piece.
- ♣ In the open mudflat all the crabs eventually crawled away, eating no food

Inference: The crabs ate the most under the root probably because it was shaded and dry, thus proving the theory that crabs prefer feeding in cooler places