

Honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

We are delighted and honored to be here as part of 13th Kailash Sankhala Lectures to share our views and observations during our four decades of photographing and filming India's wildlife.

We have been witnessing destruction of our wildlife and natural areas on an ever increasing scale. With the pressures of a rapidly swelling human population and race for economical growth there are tremendous pressures on our lasting natural resources.

Although our civilization has world's oldest tradition of conservation of nature, it seems we are loosing respect for mother earth and bent upon destroying the delicate balance of nature which evolved over millions of years. Today species like the Cheetah and the Pink-headed Duck is already extinct. Magnificent animals like the Tiger, Gharial, Snow Leopard, Great Indian Bustard and the Ganges Dolphin are struggling for survival.

Today environment issues are like global warming, unpredictable weather, floods, drought, forest fires, rising sea levels are major concerns for all living being on our planet. Will we be able to conserve the grandeur of nature's diversity and keep intact intricate web of the earth's ecosystems that required for our own survival? This is an open question that only time will answer.

We strongly feel that documentary films on such important environment issues are most powerful tool to sensitize and spread awareness amongst the masses using electronic media. Film makers travel to remote corners of the planet and spend months and years to record spectacular and rare images of biodiversity and bring them to the comforts of viewer's houses.

Strong powerful issue based films can build public opinion which in turn can influence the Government's decision and policies.

Although India is largest producers of cinema films in world there are only handful producers of serious wildlife and environment films. These films need to be entertaining, educative and not just mere academic lectures. Making natural history films are time consuming, require specialized skill and equipment and hence become expensive to produce.

Bedi Brothers

Let me share with you our personnel story how we got into making wildlife films – was it for money or just passion? We both brothers were born and grew up in a rich environment of Shivalik Foothills. It is here we developed interest in wildlife because of our father Late Dr. Ramesh Bedi renowned author, conservationist. Although he was a qualified doctor by profession but was passionate about wildlife and medicinal plants. He had written thousands of articles, over 100 books and large six volume encyclopedia on plants with medicinal values. We started accompanying him right from our childhood learning about fauna and

flora. We learnt to handle and look after unusual pets like 10 ft long pythons and other snakes, badger, mongoose, jackal which roamed freely in our house.

Our mother never liked all this because of potential danger specially when we young children were around. I remember once my father was called in a neighboring garden as there was panic because of sudden appearance of several snakes. I hopped on to his cycle and reached the spot. There were young natrix hardly a meter long with yellow throat moving around which probably had emerged from the eggs. He caught few and handed over two snakes to me. I held them tight in my wrist so that they don't escape without realizing they need to be handled gently. The result was obvious – both of them bit me on my thumb and I immediately threw them. It started bleeding profusely. The locals got very worried and asked my father to rush me to the hospital. But my father was familiar with these non-poisonous snakes with no potential danger. The wound was cleaned and antiseptic was applied.

At age of ten I started clicking pictures with very basic camera to illustrate my father's article. I remember tracking elephants on foot in Corbett and spending whole day following a herd and recording its activities. I got some remarkable pictures of two tuskers approaching us and calves sleeping under the protection of mothers and aunts. By end of the day we would walk back 10-15 km to our camp Dhikala.

During our initial days we were fortunate to meet legendary wildlife photographer M Krishnanan while working in Corbett with his large format camera without a big telephoto lens. We remember he would spend hours approaching his subject, slowly taking animals in confidence and perhaps getting one or two remarkable pictures in a day. His total dedication and commitment in his work was inspiring. We are fortunate to have met legendary conservationist E.P.Gee and Dr. Salim Ali who were great inspiration.

In sixties, I remember seeing tiger hunting camps across Haridwar in Chilla Range. My first sighting of a big cat was in a sugar cane field just behind our house in Haridwar. It was a tigress with her cubs. Unfortunately it was shot dead for being too close to people.

At that time in Corbett it was a real challenge to even get a glimpse of a fleeing tiger. Forest officials used to tie live baits at Sher Bhogi to lure tiger. But this famous spot got burnt in forest fire and now only tree stumps stand as reminder. We had spent days and nights on machans to sight a tiger but it never obliged. They were extremely shy as they associated humans with bullet and would vanish on slightest suspicion. We often came across sign of tiger presence – a pug mark or a kill.

So much so that in Corbett it was generally said that the forest rangers go out early morning and make tiger pug mark to show it to tourists. But with continued protection things have changed. There are more tigers at Corbett Park and they do oblige the anxious tourists and photographers.

In late sixties, I went to famous Film and Television Institute at Pune to learn film making. After three years of training I topped the batch in 1969 winning both Gold and Silver medals of the year. Declining the Bollywood offer to shoot a feature

film I decided to make documentary films on Indian Wildlife. It was challenging and no one was doing so in India. It was an ambitious thinking without any financial backing or having any specialized equipment. But the decision was made.

With no other option, I started freelancing making small wildlife based features for Doordarshan, the only Tv Channel at that time. We had covered number of interesting stories from Delhi Zoo which was then headed by Mr.Kailash Sankhala. He was bold and strict administrator and the Delhi zoo saw several reforms under his tenure as director. Mr. Sankhala was among few dynamic IFS officers who were really dedicated and committed to his work. His contributions towards understanding of tigers and its conservation are immense.

Mr. Sankhala

I would like to share an interesting incident with you. One day early morning we were stopped at Zoo Gate as per the instructions from the Director. The reason seemed quite obvious as Mr. Sankhala was conducting some experiments in tiger enclosure as part of his studies and was avoiding any media exposure.

We were upset and angry and later went to see Mr. Sankhala in his office. Unfortunately our meeting turned into heated arguments. As the temper ran high he got up from his seat and said you young boys don't be angry. Lets shake hands ...we both have common interest and have to work in same field let's be friend and not enemies. It was great for him to respect our enthusiasm for wildlife. After that incident we had much more friendly interaction with him even when he became Founder Director of Project Tiger in 1973.

I want to briefly talk about some of earlier films with short clips to give you behind the scene story and the important role played in sensitizing people and in conservation.

Ghariahs

My younger brother Rajesh after completing an assignment on crocodilians for National Geographic came up with idea of making a film about the fish eating Ghariahs – a peculiar animal only found in India. At that time only 300 were left and were on the verge of extinction. They were extremely shy and were hardly studied in the wild.

It was gigantic project with enormous problems. We started with borrowed money using a hand cranked camera. After initial filming we approached the leading broadcaster but no one was prepared to put money as they thought it is extremely difficult to make a film. During five years of filming we worked at Chambal in the domain of dreaded decoit Pholan Devi and at Corbett we survived a tusker in musth.

As we progressed we got more confident. We were certain it is going to be first film on the life cycle of elusive Ghariahs and India's first wildlife documentary. Our dreams came true when I was awarded the prestigious Panda Award or Green Oscar 1984 for best cinematography. It was a great honor not for us but

for India to have won the award for best natural history film which competed with multi million dollar budget films from all over the world.

Our film in fact was first to record and reveal many aspects of its behavior earlier unknown to biologists. It was widely shown on prime time television worldwide spreading awareness about this endangered reptile and stressing urgent need for its conservation.

Lets see the clip of the film 3 .30 minutes

Dholes

We choose our film subjects which were exciting and challenging. We made a first film on Dholes – the Indian wild dogs titled “Whistling Hunters”. It covered their breeding habits and was narrated by Sir Richard Attenborough, shown on BBC and National Geographic.

Ladakh

In mid eighties we decided to film wildlife of Ladakh region. A special permission from Ministry of Defense was taken as we had planned to work in inner-line areas close to Chinese border.

It is one of the most difficult terrains – barren wind swept high altitude desert. The winter temperature drops to minus 25-30 degrees. Thin air with low oxygen made us out of breath even walking few steps. But on average we worked around 16000 ft with heavy equipment.

We were fortunate to have got valuable advice from Lt. Gen. R.K. Gaur who had done some remarkable work in the area. With all hazards and difficulties of logistic we spent three years and were able to record for the first time in the world the whole breeding biology of Bar-head Goose in Tso Morari Lake. It was a year later BBC filmed them in Siberia.

We had to spend winters month to film snow leopard when it comes down to lower heights following its prey. For two years we could not find any snow leopard. It was only in third year we could film the elusive leopard. Our two films were first of its kind from the region and successfully recorded the presence of Tibetan Wild Dogs and Lynx. They are so rare and shy that so far no body has been able to get much footage on these animals. The biologists keep referring to our old footage. Such wildlife films have great archival value. I would like to share with you two small clips from the films.

Clip 3 minutes - Bar-head breeding and snow leopard

Red Panda

In 2006 we completed a film on cute looking Red Panda in temperate forest of Eastern Himalayas. Not many people are aware about the existence of red pandas in India, though they have herd and seen pictures of black and white Giant Panda of China – the Symbol of Conservation. Solitary in nature it is one of the most difficult animals to sight and film in their natural forbidding mountain

habitat. This is the reason that hardly any film exists on wild pandas. With less than 2500 in the world they are fighting a lonely battle for their survival.

To film such an elusive and arboreal animal was a tough task. After spending two years our team could record some rare behavioral sequences for the first time – mating, nesting and giving birth, etc.

Red Pandas mate during winter months almost in subzero temperatures – making it extremely difficult for the crew to track them in snow bound hazardous terrain. Timing was very crucial as females are only receptive for a single day in whole year. If our team is not there at right time and right place we would miss it for a year. But our Bedi Luck worked. We made over twenty trips spending nearly 180 days on location and had to put up a brave face with blood sucking leeches in 100 % humidity and in situation when the camera failed at nick of time.

The film titled “Cherub of the Mist” has been shown world over and has won over a dozen most prestigious awards in US, Canada, France, including Green Oscar or Panda Award at UK. It was our team passion and commitment to achieve something which has not been filmed before that would help in better understanding of pandas and its conservation.

Like our other films this film is educational, entertaining, follows a good story and has strong conservation message. We funded and supported the project as we felt that there is urgent need to conserve the species and its fast disappearing habitat before it is too late.

Clip 3 minutes - opening montage – habitat loss

Tigers

The tigers fascinated us right from our childhood. We have closely followed where development for the conservation of tiger – under the Project Tiger. We remember filming the visit of The Flying Prince, HRH Prince Bernhard of Netherland, Founder President of WWF for BBC. He came in his private jet and landed on a specially made airstrip at Bamani Dadar inside Kanha Tiger Reserve. It was a flying visit and Shri HS Panwar then Director Kanha National Park and other officials had to work really hard to show a tiger to the visiting dignitary.

We were fortunate to have known Late Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi and her passion for wildlife and environment. It is because of her interest and commitment of her Government that tigers are saved today. I remember in 19.... when Mrs. Gandhi had released Rajesh's large format coffee table book – Indias Wild Wonders and had spent lot of time going through pictures.

But it was early eighties when got the first opportunity to make a film on Project Tiger. During the making of this film we used to fly to Jabalpur quite frequently by the Indian Airlines Avero flight which was often piloted by Shri Rajiv Gandhi. He was also keen about wildlife and had taken up photography. It was pleasure to share with him the progress of our tiger filming. We requested him to visit Kanha and also requested him to ask Mrs. Gandhi to visit Kanha as it was best place to

see tiger at that time. It did materialize and we were fortunate to have film Mrs. Gandhi's only visit to any National Park.

We made two film on Tigers called " Saving The Tiger " and Man Eating Tigers. Both the films were big success and were shown on Prime time television by leading broadcasters. With high TRP they were nominated in 1987 for highest and prestigious British Academy of Fine Arts and Television Awards – BAFTA.

Our interest in tigers still continues and we made several other TV programs. I am not going into details of systemic failure of Project Tiger which was doing well till late eighties. We don't wish to go into details of issues like – poaching, lack of trained and committed forest guard, problem of tourism, notifying buffer areas, relocation of villages and compensation and man animal conflicts which have been raised and discussed many times on both print and electronic media..

At the moment we are working on a long film about the tigers which covers many challenges involved in saving the magnificent cat. However due to lack time I have compiled a shorter version of the same for today's screening.

Shot over several years across the country, it has for the first time aerial shots of tiger habitats; exceptional tiger behavior and frank interviews with tiger biologists & conservationists.

In short we would like to point out a single major problem in saving Tiger or other wildlife and habitats is our growing population. Surprisingly no body seems to be seriously dealing with the issue. With such growing population and race for economical growth there are tremendous pressures on our lasting natural resources.

There is no doubt that we all love tigers and would like to see them flourish. But the conservation of tigers should go beyond the trendy talks of elite, bureaucrats, policy makers and most importantly it needs the political will beyond the party politics.

Unless we all believe that the beautiful creation of nature belongs to all off us and it's our duty to protect it and its habitat the future of tiger is bleak. Time is running out. I think far more urgent and effective measures are required to save the magnificent cat.

We would be happy any question you may have after film screening.

With this I thank you all for listening to me so patiently.