In this section of Resonance, we invite readers to pose questions likely to be raised in a classroom situation. We may suggest strategies for dealing with them, or invite responses, or both. "Classroom" is equally a forum for raising broader issues and sharing personal experiences and viewpoints on matters related to teaching and learning science.

School in the Forest

A joint experiment between Centre for Learning and Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary

What do a school in Bangalore and a forest garden in the Western Ghats have to do with each other? This article is about a rather unusual relationship between the students and teachers from Centre for Learning, Bangalore and the members of Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Wayanad, Kerala. Since 1992 the two places have given a great deal of energy to explore jointly the role of nature in education.

The interaction between CFL and GBS started with a visit by CFL’s 16 year old students and their biology teacher to GBS for a week. This was just an introductory visit and it was the first time the students had ever experienced the rainforest environment; and for GBS too, it was the first experience of a group of youngsters! The visit inspired CFL teachers to make an annual visit to GBS a compulsory part of the curriculum for their middle group of students (ages 13–16), as they felt that a regular exposure to such an environment would be very valuable for young people. The same group visited GBS for three consecutive years from 93 to 96 for three weeks each time. In
addition there were a few other organized visits too – the senior art students for a 10 day nature drawing session, the nine year olds for some fun filled days that included treasure hunts, walks and swimming, and a mixed age group that was keen on learning horticultural skills. Each visit had its own character. Essentially, teachers and students engaged in their own study programme and the sanctuary provided a beautiful natural environment to learn in, with opportunities to go on long walks, swim in the river, do some practical work in the garden and live a simple, non technological life.

In 1996 we became interested in doing something more intense, to enhance their capacities for understanding and appreciating the natural world. We wondered what features of the sanctuary could be shared with them and in what way. Two stood out:

- The sanctuary is a place where it is possible to experience a way of life closely connected to a much larger community of interdependent living beings - wild and domestic, resident and visitor, plant, animal and human. Living with a direct awareness of other life forms, the forest, weather, and natural resources, creates an understanding of one’s own impact on the environment, something that is not so easy to observe in a city.

- Working and functioning in nature demand an alertness of the senses and the ability to look consistently and afresh at what is going on around one. Nature moves in unpredictable ways, never static, always new, presenting infinite variety in form and function, revealing deeper patterns and principles. To engage fully with this invites looking and listening, an agile body and a quiet, alert and non judgemental mind. The sanctuary’s work with plant conservation, reforestation and organic farming were seen to be conducive to an educational approach where a primary mode of learning through direct observation (of living things and processes) could be combined with more abstract modes such as communication, the connecting and seeing of patterns and correct intellectual enquiry. This unification of the primary