SPREADING education and awareness about the environment through the non-formal sector and motivating people, especially the youth, to adopt more environment friendly and sustainable lifestyles is an integral part of the mandate of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

National Nature Camping Programme is an initiative of this Ministry aimed at creating greater awareness, understanding and empathy of children with and for the environment. A first-hand experience of Nature has an educational impact that is strong, irreplaceable, and lifelong. Being outdoors in Nature is not just a fun-filled activity but is also a strong conservation tool that builds broad-based public support for long-term protection of wildlife and wilderness areas in particular and environmental protection in general.

The effort is based on the premise that the Ministry should strive to provide an opportunity of nature camp to students during their schooling. Such exposure goes a long way in sensitizing children to nature and environmental issues, and helps shape their attitudes and actions towards nature conservation and environmental protection.

It is a well established and recognised fact that children can be catalysts in promoting a mass movement about the ensemble of environmental issues. Being future citizens, inculcation of environment friendly attitudes and behavioural patterns amongst them can make a significant difference to the long-term efforts for protection of the environment. Children are triggers for a chain reaction, making a difference at the local and community level which in due course leads to awareness at village, city, state, country and global level.

Children today often spend more and more of their free time with electronic gadgets, on social media, and watching television. They are much less connected to the natural world than at any other time in history. The natural connection has been replaced in various ways – greater interaction with the digital (‘plugged-in’) world, less unstructured outdoor play, and via growing urbanisation.

This decreased exposure to nature has consequences that we are just beginning to understand. The growing disconnect is already showing several impacts – poor health, attention disorders, depression, and inability to interact in group situations.

It is widely established that direct exposure to Nature through outdoor experiences, such as camping, has a strong impact in motivating people to lead more eco-friendly lifestyles and contribute towards conservation of Nature and environment. The impact can be lasting, indeed lifelong in the case of young children and the youth. It also helps build their confidence, teamwork abilities, problem-solving skills, besides of course supplementing their curricular studies in a practical and adventure-filled manner.
The nature camping movement has a fairly long history in India, having started in the early 1970s in its current organised form. In fact the earliest nature camps were started by some NGOs, most notably WWF-India, CEE, GEER Foundation, Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), and some others.

Under the National Nature Camping Programme of the Ministry, the average camp duration is 2 nights–3 days. These are organised in permitted zones of Protected Areas (National Parks, Sanctuaries, other categories of protected areas), in wilderness areas and natural habitats such as coasts, deserts, mountains, islands, grasslands, other field locations such as natural landscapes owned/managed by organisations/institutions/trusts, etc. The size of the camp is not more than 50 (fifty) students.

Students get to know about biodiversity values, forest types, and wilderness of the campsite selected. There is information on relation between biotic and abiotic factors that helps children to relate with the elements of nature. There is an experiential learning about plant diversity, animal diversity, and bird diversity. This experience motivates them to bring about an attitudinal change and behavioural change and even pursue and develop interest in nature conservation.

The camps are organised through approved Government Agencies, Centres of Excellence of MoEFCC and autonomous bodies of centre and state governments keeping in view their track record and institutional credentials. These agencies have either their own camping sites with adequate facilities for batches of 50-60 campers, or a tie up with other organisations (e.g. Forest Department or another host agency).

Some such agencies include the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), WWF-India, Gujarat Ecological Education Group discussion in Aravalli Biodiversity Park, New Delhi

Some Campsites

- Aravalli Biodiversity Park, Delhi
- Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala
- Suhelwa and Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, UP
- Sanjay Gandhi National Park, Borivali,
- Pench Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra
- Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu

The nature camping movement is an integral part of the mandate of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

Values picked up in early school years through camping and similar experiences become a positive influence in shaping the attitudes and practices with regard to nature, use of natural resources, and the response as a whole to issues of environment and development.
The camp life is devised such that conservation is reflected through routine activities and practices, and not just taught or imparted through instructional methods. As far as possible, activities and practices at nature camps are in conformity with these objectives, clearly demonstrating the reduction of consumption, minimization of impact on the environment, and sustainability of all actions, especially the actions of the organisers and other elders (the “whole camping approach”). Nature Camp activities in general try to minimize the classroom & lecture approach, and use strategies of field experience, self discovery, and learning by search.

Various factors such as camp calendar, resource material, clothing requirements, camp discipline, camp safety, hygiene, food, water, sanitation, transport, first-aid kit, etc. are taken care of before a nature camp is scheduled for students.

Nature camping activities are remarkable educational tools. The activities can be intended both for fun-filled learning as well as imbibing conservation ethics and values. This will become one of the strong memories in the child’s schooling experience. One of the main aims of these activities is to develop an interest and appreciation of our unique natural biodiversity, varied ecosystems, flora and fauna, to understand the impact on environment and climate. It is basically hands-on learning in the natural environment which also improves observational skills of students.

Values picked up in early school years through camping and similar experiences become a positive influence in shaping the attitudes and practices with regard to nature, use of natural resources, and the response as a whole to issues of environment and development. Youngsters also learn values of team working, confidence building, facing challenging goals in unfamiliar surroundings, and so on.

Students get to know about biodiversity values, forest types, and wilderness of the campsite selected. There is information on relation between biotic and abiotic factors that helps children to relate with the elements of nature.

The camps are organised through approved Government Agencies, Centres of Excellence of MoEFCC and autonomous bodies of centre and state governments keeping in view their track record and institutional credentials.

Nature walk at Mudumalai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu

Activities conducted in nature camps

- Nature Trail/Nature Walk
- Nature Connect Pledge
- Quiz on environment/wildlife
- Journal writing
- Eco songs
- Preparation of Biodiversity Register
- Flora fauna identification
- Viewing the night sky
- Bird watching
- Poster competition
- Interactive session/Group discussion

Mr Lalit Kapur is Adviser and Ms Kanchan Puri is Programme Coordinator in the Environment Education Division, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Indira Paryavaran Bhawan, Jor Bagh, New Delhi-110003