

PM of India Dr.M.Singh inaugurates Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve,PUNE

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Mumbai: The Prime Minister of India, Dr. Manmohan Singh, inaugurated a unique Biodiversity Park & Reserve on the Pune campus of the Mahindra United World College of India (MUWCI) on February 9, 2008. A special project initiated by the faculty and students of MUWCI, the Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve covers approx. 170 acres and aims to enhance the existing species of flora and fauna in this section of the Western Ghats which is considered a global biodiversity hotspot by environmentalists across the world. The inauguration took place on the tenth anniversary of the college and to mark the occasion, Dr. Singh also planted a sapling on campus.

Other dignitaries present included former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, Dr. Shashi Tharoor and Agriculture Minister, Mr. Sharad Pawar. The college wore a festive look as the students – who hail from countries across the globe – dressed in their respective national costumes and carried the national flag of the country they hailed from, creating an image of unity in diversity.

While commending the college for taking such a positive step to help preserve the environment, Dr. Singh laid emphasis on the need for an education system which encouraged creativity and excellence. 'We need a

modern education system...that prepares children for the challenges of the future and not to make them prisoners of the past. We need a system that is both compassionate and demanding. No child should ever feel left out for no fault of his or her. No child should nurse a grievance that his creativity has been suppressed. We need a humane, creative and forward-looking system.'

In his speech, Dr. Singh also praised Indian students from modest social and economic backgrounds who succeed in securing admission in some of the best institutions in the world, despite not having a level playing field. 'No game is played on a truly level playing field. Playing fields differ as every cricketer will tell you. But they don't sit back and demand a field and pitch of their liking. They learn to play on the pitch they are given and try to defeat the opponent,' he said.

He also cited the example of former President K R Narayanan whose poor and underprivileged background never stood in the way of his faring well. "K R Narayanan himself never asked for a level playing field. He, like thousands of Indian students who went to village schools and fought hard to earn scholarships, went and tested his individual worth against those who were born with a silver spoon, nay a golden spoon, in their mouth."

The Prime Minister also praised the students of the college, saying he was sure they would make everyone proud, stating that "in doing so, they hold an example for our business leaders, who must learn to compete on un-level playing fields and prove their mettle like you do.'

He also stated that India was committed to sustainable development and that the government would take up initiatives required to address the challenge of carbon emissions and depleting forest cover.

Mr. Keshub Mahindra, Chairman of the Governing Council, The Mahindra United World College of India, spoke of the importance of initiatives such as Van Vihar for the environment. 'From the smallest of insects to the largest of animals, we are all part of the same web of life, a delicate network of interconnecting strands which depend on each other for survival. Projects such as Van Vihar showcase the interdependence of all life and make us acutely aware of the fact that in the larger scheme of things, man is but a small aspect. The diverse animal and plant life in the Western Ghats is under increasing threat and in dire need of conservation. The Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve is a small but positive step in helping to preserve this endangered area and making us more aware of the miracle of nature.

'We are very honoured to have the Prime Minister with us on such a special occasion. MUWCI was a cherished vision of my father, the late Mr. Harish Mahindra and I am extremely proud to see the accomplishments of the college over the past decade. My congratulations to the students and faculty for having made the Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve a reality. I cannot think of a better way to celebrate the tenth anniversary of MUWCI than by reaffirming our commitment to protect the environment,' said Mr. Anand Mahindra, Governor/Director, The Mahindra United World College of India.

Mr. Mahindra also commended faculty member, Hector Andrade, who initially put forth the idea of Van Vihar and played a major role in its development.

'The unique feature of the United World College movement is the scholarship selection process which not only ensures that meritorious students are admitted, irrespective of their economic background but also results in a diverse student body consisting of a range of nationalities.

At MUWCI, learning continues far beyond the classroom, whether it is helping others or learning more about the world we live in. We strive to sensitize our students to issues such as global warming and its implications and encourage them to develop viable solutions to help combat the same. The students have played a major role in the development of Van Vihar and the I am sure that the experience they have gained in the process of setting up the Park & Reserve will hold them in good stead when they graduate from MUWCI and move out into the world,' said Dr. David Wilkinson, Principal, Mahindra United World College of India.

About the Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve

The Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve received wholehearted support from the Governing Board of MUWCI. The project was launched in June 2006 with the aim of enhancing the rich biodiversity found in the Western Ghats, an area which is in urgent need of conservation.

The project covers approx. 170 acres and is divided into two parts. The first part covers about 75 acres and consists of a Biodiversity Park. It encompasses the built-up area of the college and includes diverse flora and walking trails with informative signage for the benefit of students, visitors, researchers, etc. The second part of the project covers about 95 acres and consists of a Conservation Reserve. This continuous piece of land is intentionally left untouched by human activities and provides the large corridors and private areas required for higher fauna to thrive. The Forest Department has agreed to add an additional 80 acres of forest land to this area to make it a larger reserve.

Purpose and Benefits

Van Vihar will lead to several benefits for the surrounding community. At the local level, the regeneration of a 250 acre forest on a hilltop with concerted

efforts to restore streams and the soil, will lead to increased crop production in the fields located in the valley below. As the popular adage goes, 'the health of the hills is the wealth of the valleys.' The project will also result in employment opportunities for local residents.

From the educational point of view, it is hoped that Van Vihar will function as an invaluable research resource for colleges and research institutes in and around Pune. MUWCI is already in touch with several colleges for this purpose. Moreover, initiatives such as the production of Biogas from food waste, compost from green waste, the use of solar and wind energy and rain water harvesting projects amongst others, have a practical link with the academic programme of the college.

At the global level, besides being a small step towards tackling the adverse effects of global warming and helping to reduce our carbon imprint, Van Vihar serves as a good model for other educational institutes, corporates and NGOs to emulate.

Species Diversity

At present, the Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve has around 800 species of flora, including trees, climbers, grasses and shrubs. The fauna consists of 130 species of birds, 160 species of moths, 60 species of butterflies and 30 species of higher mammals.

Efforts made by the faculty and students of MUWCI since the launch of the project

Today, the Van Vihar Biodiversity Park & Reserve is an eco haven consisting of gardens, trails and walkways, check dams, tanks and reservoirs, amongst other unique features:

Gardens

- Medicinal Garden with over 300 species of medicinal plants
- Ayurvedic Dashmool Garden with 25 plants
- Ashok Van consisting of 25 highly endangered Sita-Ashoka (Saraca Asoca) trees
- Butterfly Garden consisting of around 40 species of food and nectar plants for butterflies and an open-air theatre space created around a pond
- Labyrinth Grove consisting of around 35 species of trees associated with religion and mythology
- Arts Garden which is a green space specially created around the arts centre to display works of art
- Arjun Van consisting of 30 rare Arjuna trees (Terminalia Arjuna)
- Rock Garden consisting of 50 species of cacti and succulents
- Palm Garden consisting of 20 species of Palms
- A Bamboo Grove, a Lily Garden and a Fern Garden are currently being constructed
- A student-run Organic Farm has been developed on 5 acres of land

Trails and Walkways

- Main Biodiversity Trail – 1 km. of this trail has been completed with double Shahabad tiles
- Labyrinth Grove pathways comprising 600 meters of walkways with single Shahabad tiles
- Bird Trail consisting of 330 meters of pathway lined with gravel
- Tree trail consisting of 280 meters of pathway lined with gravel.
- Arts Garden pathways comprising 180 meters of pathway with double and single Shahabad tiles
- New gravel lined road behind the multi-purpose hall covers approx. 150 meters

Check Dams, Tanks and Reservoirs

- A Watering system has been created for the entire Reserve area
- Two Sewage Water Treatment plants (capacity of 75,000 litres each)
- Two water tanks with pump sets (capacity of 1,20,000 + 90,000 litres)
- Rain Water Harvesting reservoir lined with Geo-membrane. (capacity of 22 lakh litres)
- Five concrete check dams (capacity range of 15,000-40,000 litres)
- Three rain water harvesting ponds (capacity range of 30,000 – 90,000 litres)
- Pitched canals (300 metres)
- Two rain water harvesting reservoirs have just been completed. (Total capacity of 50 lakh litres)
- 15 small stone check dams have been built to revive five streams

Additional Unique Features

- Geodesic Dome with 150 species of Cacti and Succulents
- Two open-air performance areas have been created for cultural events
- 300 square meters of new areas have been covered with lawns
- 25,000 trees have been planted on campus
- Cataloguing, photographing and identification of 800 species of trees (climbers, grasses, shrubs included), 130 species of birds, 160 species of Moths, 60 species of butterflies, and several other fauna has been completed

About the Mahindra United World College of India

The Mahindra United World College of India, part of the United World College movement, was founded by the late Mr. Harish Mahindra in 1997. It is the Group's endeavour to promote world-class education with an emphasis on the ideals of peace and understanding, central to the ethos of the United World Colleges. The school is global not only because of the International Baccalaureate degree, but also because of the true international culture in which the students study, live and learn. Each year's

batch of about 100 students accommodates about 65 to 70 from abroad. The faculty includes professors from Argentina, Australia, Austria, Cameroon, Canada, Colombia, Ecuador, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, South Africa, UK and USA. The teacher-student ratio is 1:9. This international mix facilitates global exposure and helps students transcend all artificial barriers based on race, religion, ethnicity, class, gender or nationality. There is a keen focus on all-round development and students are encouraged to think innovatively by involving themselves in socially and environmentally relevant issues. The students also contribute to the local neighbourhood through unique community service programmes.

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