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The old and the wild

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OLD WORLD CHARM And solid ethics Photo: Murali Kumar K.

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T.N.A Perumal spoke on the ever-changing nature of wildlife photography

When T.N.A Perumal, one of India's doyens in wildlife photography, first began his career in bird photography in the 1960s, he didn't have the luxury of digital cameras and instant flash. Photographers had to walk for miles together, with cumbersome cameras, and wait patiently, sometimes for days, to spot an animal to photograph.

Despite these challenges, Perumal distinguished himself as a wildlife photographer, and went on to win many awards in his career. Last week, Perumal was felicitated by the Kenneth Anderson Nature Society at the British Library. He was then invited to speak on wildlife photography. His lecture was fascinating, being peppered with hilarious anecdotes and jibes at modern photographers.

"Wildlife photography is a noble and princely sport. Princely, because it satisfies a person's creative instinct and noble because it helps to protect animals as it is an effective tool of conservation. We've inherited this wonderful sport from the photographers of the early 1900s," Perumal began his address. He then spoke of the many challenges that earlier wildlife photographers had to face. "We had slow speed cameras, as slow as 40 ASA. Photographers knew their subjects well. They knew that tigers have a regular beat, and would study their pug marks."

Perumal was inspired by three outstanding photographers — Jim Corbett, F.W. Champion and O.C. Edwards, who was a teacher at St. Joseph's and whom he considered his guru. "Mr. Champion photographed tigers at night. He had encountered 200 different tigers."

The photographs Perumal displayed to the audience at the lecture were perfect in every sense, from lighting to framing. Perumal said the key to photographing animals is never to provoke them. "American photography societies have set

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down impossible guidelines for what makes for a good wildlife image. These days, a photograph full of 'action' is considered a good photograph. People manipulate the animal by provoking them. A photographer once took pictures of a pack of lions after they had eaten their kill. But he wasn't satisfied with just that. He asked that the lions be made to charge. I disagree with this approach. Animals look beautiful the way they are.”

This was evident from Perumal's photographs. A tiger sitting serenely by the river side, an elephant ambling through a forest pathway and an eagle in flight are awe-inspiring despite there being no “action”.

Perumal spoke with regret about the species that faces the threat of extinction — the ethical photographer. “These days, photographers are in cages while the animals roam free. Also, we must understand that wildlife isn't only about tigers, lions, leopards and other big animals but also smaller animals such as the hyena and wild flora and fauna.”

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