Nature Weekend

The Marine Camp is a new idea being tried out by the SSTCN, most known for their turtle walks, to teach children the importance of conservation in a way that is meaningful and fun.

BY PRITHA GOPALAN

It's pitch dark and every head in the vicinity is craned skyward. "That's Orion," says a little girl knowledgeably to her friend. The friend seems impressed. An SSTCN member, meanwhile, points out the configuration of the Hunter. "He's not a perfect man," says he, a teacher at KFI, "look how he slopes this way," the torch points. "People in the old days didn't have TVs and things like that, they used to have an early dinner and sit outside their homes watching the faraway stars. In their imagination, the stars must have taken on patterns. So they gave different names to the different stars." This one is called the Hunter, look at his sword, can you see it? the torch points again.

Some of the kids locate the sword, others don't. And helpful friends and neighbours switch on their torches to locate the Hunter for them. "You flashed the torch in my eye," complains somebody and somebody else thinks that's a great idea and a game begins, where the attention turns from the stars to torches. "Come on, come on, quiet. Why don't you all lie down and stare at the sky?" If you're very quiet you can hear the sea, and animals and insects," an organiser orders torches off. The chatter recedes, nature takes over.

Banyan roots sway in the light breeze. Fallen leaves rustle. The swish of the nearby sea pulls. The stars twinkle brightly and the half-moon disappears behind a cloud. Sounds of even breathing, insects and the occasional parrot screech. It's the first time the hyper-active kids have taken a break since the Marine Camp began. And its welcome, both to the happy pitty-tired brood as well as the camp organiser (the Students for Sea Turtle Conservation Network — SSTCN). Somebody's had enough and signals to switch off his torch. Bye bye quiet. The group breaks up into the traditional gangs and the camping ground at the Theosophical Society is alive with shouts and torchlight shadows. The deserted tents swarm with kids again, as 60-old potentially environment-conscious people between the ages of 11 and 13 go about putting themselves to sleep. "Can we have a bonfire, please?" a little one asks.

Dawn. Blankets and dreams are cast aside as many wake up for the first time in an open environment. The early birds are out, winging it over purple-pink skies. The gate is opened and we're on the beach. Crabs scramble for shelter as the kids run to the water. It is like standing between worlds. The orange-gold seaplane flies low over the heads. The smog-hidden city floats slowly into focus as the sun begins its ascent. The children help a fisherman pull in his net. "This is a great experience for me," says an awed child with surprisingly adult turn of phrase, "I'm happy I could come. I was always interested in animals and birds, now I know a little more about them." His soft brown eyes are wide with sincerity. His shoelaces are a vibrant fluorescent green. "What exactly have the kids done that got them all so happy and interested too?"

The camp uses a mix of teaching techniques — talks, nature walks, games and worksheet sessions, which are informal enough to hold attention, but participatory enough to retain the message.

Karnak. Like when we walked through the forest near the Adyar casino, a child softly said, "Please, keep quiet, we just saw a red goose and he might run away." A lot of conversations were about sea shells and sand crabs. A woman pointed at a pretty little girl, "I wish the fishermen would talk in English, I can't understand anything they say.

Its time for the release. Of baby sea turtles. The group divides into two eagerly watching lines of well-wishers as the little beings tumble out of their bucket and follow the newly-hatched turtles into the sea. Staying babies are put on course by gentle hands. "Look at those bobbles, head, someone points. The amazing baby swim away without a backward look, riding the waves with facile ease.

The versatile sky turns grey. It drizzles mildly. Nature's made our day, as a Madras, rain, even a hint of it, is reason to exult. The sea is silver-tined. Part of the group heads off towards a nearby village in talk to the fishermen. The kids who prefer the forest go animal-watch ing.