

International Biodiversity conference 2012 Fifth Day on 5th October 2012 in Hyderabad International Convention Centre

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A table made out of driftwood for Nagoya, and a fish sculpture built with plastic trash for Hyderabad -- that is the awareness-raising contribution of Silas Birtwistle, a British artist, to two international conferences of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The 3 metre-long, 1.5 metre-tall fish greeting participants at the entrance to the Hyderabad CBD conference venue is a colourful mosaic of plastic waste, sporting remnants of many commercial brands. It is a symbol of the heavy impact of land-based activity on the seas, and highlights the plight of the coastal communities whose youth have collected the trash and sent it on to the artist.

Some waste from city

This piece of garbage art became possible through the involvement of about 35 young people who collected the plastic and posted it in boxes it to Silas, and his brother Adam, also an artist and collaborator. Some of the waste that helped make the fish is from Hyderabad, the venue of the XI Conference of the Parties to the CBD.

“The plastic waste that washed up on shores has come from many places, including the Philippines, Tasmania, Belize, Costa Rica and Canada,” Silas told the media on Friday at a CoP-related event. The youth who sent it to him would get their first real look at the end result only when they arrive at the venue next week.

They will carry messages for the decision-makers gathering here.

Several participants who collected the trash are fishermen. They work with their communities to stop overfishing and to encourage wider global understanding of the problems facing coastlines and seas. Silas was commissioned to produce the 'sculpture' by Go4BioDiv, an international youth forum that has adopted the theme of conservation of coastal and marine biodiversity to sustain lives and livelihoods, during 2012. Among the youth

delegates brought together by the forum are those from marine world heritage sites.

For the previous CoP at Nagoya in Japan, Silas put together a conference table made out of driftwood and 12 chairs and the set was used at the conference. Later, it travelled to other venues and meetings.

The wood was collected from the coasts of East Africa, Borneo, Honduras and Canada. That project is now an exhibit on the web, at <http://atablefromtheseasedge.com/>

“Oceans look the same today, as they did hundreds of years ago, but many people are not able to appreciate the changes such as acidification. Doing things like this is to communicate, use another language to help everyone understand,” says Silas. The fish he has 'sculpted' is quite durable and would work like a weather vane, turning when the wind blows. The final display spot of his unusual art work is as yet unclear. “It may go to the Worldwide Fund for Nature or Wildlife Institute of India,” he says.

Threat to seas ‘unprecedented’

Silas was asked at the World Economic Forum in Davos, whether he felt responsible for the environment as an artist. “No,” he told the surprised audience, “you are responsible.”

The CBD describes the threat to the world's seas from human activity as 'unprecedented'. Fishing, transportation, waste disposal, agricultural nutrient run-off, and introduction of exotic species are visible threats, while higher levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere get absorbed by the oceans, altering their chemistry and affecting marine life.

The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed the decade from 2011 to 2020 the 'Decade on Biodiversity.'

NGOs which put up stalls on the HICC campus to sell handicrafts, organic products and other traditional items, at 'Biodiversity Haat' as part of the COP-11 of Convention on Biodiversity, complained of poor sales.

According to Pradeep Sharma of Delhi-based Kriti, which is selling a wide range of products such as recycled notebooks, bangles, toys, jute bags, mufflers, shawls, hand-made soaps anklets and ear rings, said sales touched just Rs.2,000

since the past five days, while normally it should have been around Rs.10,000. “If the same trend continues, we will end up in losses,” he lamented.

Mr. Sharma said not many delegates are visiting the place because the ‘Haat’ area is tucked away in a corner. This problem was brought to the notice of the organisers, who assured that the sales would improve after October 8, when most of the COP-11 delegates would start trickling in.

Similar views were echoed by Mohan of the Foundation for Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), which is selling ayurvedic health products from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. While the sales should have been in the range of at least Rs.6,000 during the past five days, products worth only Rs.300 were bought.

Lalaram Jogi from Khedanehalpura village, Rajasthan, who is manning the stall put up by Chin India Trust, too expressed the fear that they would end up in losses unless the sales pick up in the coming days. Wearing a colourful turban, he said they had sales of only Rs.1,200 since October 1. At other similar events, products worth Rs.7,000 would have been sold in as many days.

However, it was a different story at the stall of Tiruvalla Social Service Society (Bodhana) from Kerala. Formed as part of the social work department of the Arch Diocese of Tiruvalla, it renders humanitarian and developmental services for the uplift of the poor and other marginal groups, including small farmers and artisans. It markets various honey products produced by farmers.

K. Thomas, programme coordinator for Bee Research and Training at Bodhana, said they stall had sales to the tune of Rs.7,000. Expressing happiness over the sales so far, he said various honey products worth Rs. 5 lakh were expected to be sold by the time COP-11 concludes on October 19.