



Empire and the Environmental Heritage of India

A collaborative exhibition between the National Museum of Natural History, India, the University of Sussex, United Kingdom, and the British Library, United Kingdom

Image: View in bed of Gooree river looking downstream [River Gori, Almora District].
Watercolour (detail) by S James Manson, 1826.
British Library: WD 543/10

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This exhibition is an attempt to illustrate some of the seminal features of India's environmental heritage and significant historical developments regarding the natural environment of India. The first segment of this exhibition comprises of 9 panels that have been curated at British Library. These are a combination of visual, textual and cartographical literature sourced from the departmental records of British administration. The introductory panel presents us with the historical context that brought about processes in motion leading to significant changes and reconfiguration of the natural environment of India.



An important component of environmental heritage is the emergence of knowledge systems based on field investigations in the subcontinent. Three panels on Botany, Forestry and Geology outline the important trajectories of these disciplines, growth of institutions dedicated to research in these disciplines and their role in colonial commerce and changing the natural environment of India. Another three panels on Health and Disease, Irrigation and Communication outline the context in which research and investigation began in these fields and their broad outcomes. In order to provide a sharper outline to the above, there is a panel that draws up a timeline of significant moments in the history of science and environment in India. The concluding panel brings together some important illustrations of the natural world of India and the following stanza from the poem 'Tintern Abbey' by romantic poet, William Wordsworth.



“Nature never did betray
The heart that loved
her; 'tis her privilege
Through all the years
of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy”

The second segment depicts the contemporary research taking place at the French Institute at Pondicherry. There are three panels which are infographs about their permanent sampling plot in Uppangala from which current research on forestry is carried out, herbarium for plant specimens and their palyno project and collections. The regional museum of natural history has curated ten specimens of flora and fauna and geology in India for display, in order to compliment this exhibition.

The subsequent segment moves in the direction of the discipline of meteorology and climate history of India. In this segment, there is an extensive infograph on the meteorological history of India authored by Professor Richard Grove. This depicts the various stages of scientific investigations in India and around the world that led to concrete understanding of climate events in long term perspective and their possible impact on human conditions, viz. monsoons, seasons, El Nino Southern Oscillations.

The third segment of the exhibition depicts an intangible environmental and cultural heritage of India that runs parallel to British period and far back in time. These images show the diverse ways in which sacred groves are worshipped in India and thereby preserved. These images have been curated by Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal. Sacred Groves, found in many parts of India, in recent research have emerged as zones of biodiversity and many endangered species of flora have been found in them.

This exhibition and the conference is a collaborative effort of British Library, Centre for World Environmental History, UK and National Museum of Natural History, India. The exhibition has been hosted by Regional Museum of Natural History, Mysuru, India.