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FROM WARDS & VADDOS

Ground Reports Telling Stories That Matter



O HERALDO

Meet Paresh Porob, the ranger who rewrote Goa's wildlife story

From documenting Goa's elusive tigers to rescuing wild animals and mentoring the next generation of conservationists, Paresh's legacy continues to grow—etched not just in the forests he has protected, but also in the species named after him, the photographs he has taken, and the minds he continues to inspire

PRAVIN K SARNIS

PANJIM: Growing up in the heritage precinct of Fontainhas in Panjim, Range Forest Officer Paresh Porob, 51, was surrounded by history and community—but his heart was always in the wilderness. "I have been passionate about wildlife since my childhood," he recalls. "I decided early on that I would turn my passion into profession, and dedicate my life to understanding and protecting Goa's wildlife," says Paresh. As a nature-loving schoolboy, he joined the WWF Nature Club Movement. It was here that he first learnt the art of bird-watching and the importance of human-wildlife coexistence through engaging activities that sparked his

lifelong passion for conservation.

He chose to study at the Government College in Sanquelim, nestled near the forested stretches of Sattari. There, he would spend countless hours roaming the forests, observing the wild, learning from it, and connecting deeply with Goa's rich biodiversity.

His academic journey in conservation took him to the Wildlife Institute of India in Dehradun for wildlife management

training, followed by formal study at the Central Academy for State Forest Service in Coimbatore. Armed with this knowledge and field experience, he embarked on a distinguished career in forest and wildlife protection.

Paresh's first posting was as a Range Forest Officer at Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary in South Goa. Over six years, he transformed Cotigao into a thriving eco-tourism destination, showcasing to visitors that Goa's appeal extended far beyond its beaches. His efforts helped cultivate a new narrative about Goa—one where forest trails, tree-top watch towers, and endemic wildlife stood as proudly as its coastlines.

In 2006, Paresh was selected to represent India at the International Rangers' Conference organised by the Thin Green Line Foundation. There, he built friendships and collaborations with rangers from around the globe. These relationships sparked the sharing of techniques, best practices, and innovative ideas that would elevate conservation strategies back home.

After Cotigao, he was posted

to Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary, a biodiverse region requiring close monitoring. Faced with limited resources, Paresh spent his off-duty hours in the forest, painstakingly observing animal behaviour and patterns. In 2011, a ranger friend from Canada gifted him two camera traps—a gesture that proved to be game-changing.

Thanks to his extensive tracking knowledge and intuition, Paresh placed the camera traps in strategic locations. After seven months of fieldwork and nine days of intensive tracking, on April 18, 2013, he captured the first-ever photographic evidence of a Bengal tiger in Goa. It was a breakthrough moment—not only for Paresh but for Goa's wildlife community.

His tiger triumph didn't stop there. Later posted at Bhagwan Mahavir National Park (BMNP), which borders Karnataka's Kali Tiger Reserve, Paresh began a rigorous scientific documentation of the park's biodiversity. On May 14, 2019, after over a year of tracking and documentation, Paresh and his team once again

confirmed the presence of Bengal tigers in Goa, cementing the state's importance as part of the Western Ghats tiger corridor.

Over his two-decade-long career, Paresh has also become an expert in chemical restraint of wild animals and has safely rescued 32 leopards, 7 gaurs, 1 elephant, 11 sambar deer, and many smaller animals. His work has directly contributed to reducing human-wildlife conflict in the state.

In recognition of his commitment, a species of caecilian—legless amphibians—was named after him: *Gegeneophis pareshii*, also known as Paresh's blind caecilian. He also co-authored A Photographic Guide to the Forest Birds of Goa along with fellow naturalists Shasanna Parab and Omkar Dharwadkar.

Paresh is not only a field expert but also an articulate speaker. Through public talks and presentations, he shares his passion, field experiences, and conservation in-

sights with young audiences, encouraging them to understand and appreciate the natural world.

"To young people passionate about wildlife conservation, my advice is simple: approach every task with mindfulness and a sense of responsibility," he says. "It's not just about protecting animals—it's about respecting them. We must understand that most wildlife can survive and heal on their own. Intervention should only happen when there is no other option, and it must always be done ethically and with the animal's welfare at the heart of the decision."



A JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF GOA

In our continuous efforts to put people at the centre of our journalism, we bring to you a weekly collection of stories, specially curated from our ground-level reportage which celebrates the joys, and shares the sorrows of people in their grassroots. These are, at heart, very simple stories, simply told. Interesting initiatives, out-of-the-box thinking, dogged persistence on any issue, and the struggles of people over the years as they try and put their disrupted lives back together are not just news stories.

Each is a document from the wards and vaddos of Goa, a postcard, a letter, a share. This collection is brought to you from O Herald's team of reporters who have been given one simple mandate - go out, travel, and speak to people about their lives.

From Wards and Vaddos is as much your project as O Herald's and we welcome all of you on this journey into the heart of Goa. Please email editor@herald-go.com or reach us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.

THE SOIL REMEMBERS: Octogenarian Ankush Kerkar's lifelong bond with farming

Every field Ankush has tilled holds a memory, and every harvest, a reward. Though the times have changed, his love for the soil remains constant

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ALDONA: Ankush Kerkar, an 84-year-old resident of Aldona, has spent most of his life working the land. For nearly 20 years, he laboured for others, and for just as long, he cultivated his own fields—following in the footsteps of his parents, who were also farmers. Today, even as age restricts his physical activity, his dedication to the land remains unshaken.

"We have grown many different crops over the years," Ankush says. "Chillies, brinjals, okra, and seasonal vegetables—mostly during the monsoon. I've worked in the fields for nearly 60 years."

Though he has not been active in the fields for the past four years due to age, his wife and children have taken over. "My wife has been my greatest support," he says. "She still works tirelessly, just as we did for so many years. It makes me proud to see the family continue our farming tradition."

Ankush studied in Marathi medium upto Class 4, and learned farming from his father. At the age of 20, he began working the fields, employing traditional methods like cattle ploughing. The discipline and rhythm of farm life shaped his days and gave him purpose.

"In the past, farming was manageable. Costs were low, and life was simpler," he reflects. "Hiring labour was affordable, and things like food and tools didn't cost as much. But now, it's difficult to survive as a farmer. Labour costs alone have shot up to around Rs 1,000 per person."

Ankush worries about the future of farming. With land shrinking and agricultural interest declining, he fears that the younger generation may never experience the life he knew. "In the coming years, there may not be many fields left. Farming is slowly disappearing. Future generations might only hear about it—they won't

live it the way we did."

Another change he has observed is in the level of trust within the farming community. "Earlier, there was honesty and mutual respect. Robberies didn't happen. But now, we have had to install surveillance cameras to protect our produce."

Despite the challenges, Ankush remains deeply proud of his identity as a farmer. "I am a true example of what it means to be a farmer," he says. "Through farming, I have raised my family, fed my children, and lived a full life. Even now, though my body is growing weak, my spirit is still rooted in the soil. I know this much—I will die a farmer."

His words carry the quiet dignity of a man whose life has been marked by toil and resilience. In an era of convenience and rapid change, his story stands as a living memory of Goa's agrarian past.

"Farming is no easy task," Ankush says. "It requires dedication and punctuality. If you miss the right time to plant, you miss the harvest."



I have struggled, yes. But I have also lived fully—because I have lived as a farmer —Ankush Kerkar

crop. That's how precise it is."

Over the years, he has faced many hurdles—unpredictable weather, poor market returns, and little institutional support. But he never gave up. "Unlike today, where agencies help farmers and departments provide support, in my time we did everything ourselves. From sowing to harvesting to selling—I carried it all out alone."

He speaks with deep reverence for older generations of farmers. "They worked day and night with nothing but their hands and their will. There were no shortcuts or support systems. Just hard work and faith in the land."

And yet, despite modern advances, he believes the heart of farming has not changed. "It is still a way of life. A connection with the earth that no machine or method can replace."

"I have struggled, yes. But I have also lived fully—because I have lived as a farmer." He recalls with a smile how, in the old days, a bunch of vegetables cost just 25 paise—"enough to fill your stomach." Today, that same bunch might cost Rs 50. Similarly, the cost of labour has risen over the years—from Rs 2 a day, to Rs 5, then Rs 100, and now much more. The increasing costs have made small-scale farming an uphill battle.

Still, Ankush's story is one of deep-rooted pride, unshaken by time or circumstance. In his weathered hands, lies proof of the bond between man and earth. The soil remembers—and so does he.

Damodar Madgaonkar: 30 years at sea and still going strong

Even as the monsoon churns the sea and halts industrial trawlers, traditional fishermen like Damodar Madgaonkar remain steady—preserving a way of life rooted in sustainability, ancestral knowledge, community ties, and the quiet, everyday dignity of feeding Goa with fresh, local, and responsibly caught fish

ERWIN FONSECA

SIOLIM: With the onset of the monsoon, it is commonly assumed that all fishing activities pause—especially for mechanised trawlers that depend heavily on non-Goan workers. As rough seas and a government-imposed fishing ban come into effect, these vessels are anchored offshore, and their crews return to their native states. But for traditional fishermen, the sea has no off-season. Come sun, rain, or wind, they remain committed to casting their nets and keeping Goan kitchens supplied with fresh fish.

Goenchi xit kodi, nistem—Goan fish curry rice—is not merely a meal. It's a cultural identity, rooted in the state's geography. Fertile rice fields, an expansive coastline, and coconut groves have long shaped this distinctive cuisine. Yet today, the forces of urbanisation, degradation of paddy fields, and coastal pollution threaten the very resources that sustain it.

In the face of these challenges, individuals like Damodar Madgaonkar from Nerul stand firm, determined to preserve a way of life that is as

During the monsoon, the sea reveals its suffering. It throws up all the garbage we've dumped into it. That's its way of cleansing itself—and a reminder to us of what we've done. Whatever garbage we put in, the fish consume it. And then we consume the fish —Damodar Madgaonkar

much about community as it is about sustenance.

Now in his late forties, Damodar says he has spent the last 30 years of his life "at sea." He began fishing at 19, soon after completing his graduation, joining his father in the family's traditional fishing trade. "My forefathers were all fishermen. My mother used to sell the fish my father brought in, and now that she's old, I've taken over," he says. "I deliver fresh, local fish—caught by hand, not machines—to homes in Taleigao, Panaji, Arpora, Anjuna, Candolim, Mapusa, Calangute, Assagao, and sometimes Siolim."

What's extraordinary is that Damodar does all this while holding down a regular nine-to-five

job. "This is not just about income," he insists. "It's about keeping a legacy alive. Fishing is in my blood."

He credits his village's location for enabling the continuity of traditional fishing. "In Nerul, we're lucky. We have inland and brackish water systems, so we don't need to go into deep waters. The fish we get from the sluice gates, or 'manos', is especially delicious—and people can tell the difference," he says. "Our fish is 100% local and gets sold within hours. The taste can't be matched by deep-sea varieties."

Damodar stresses that traditional fishing is inherently more sustainable. "We don't use aggressive techniques. We let the ecosystem breathe. Still, I believe in the idea of a fishing ban—but it should be longer," he adds. "In my opinion, it should last for at least four months, or a minimum of 100 days. That's the time fish need to breed properly. If we let them multiply, we'll have more supply and prices will come down. Right now, prices are high because there's less fish, not because people aren't buying."

He also has strong views on the harmful effects of deep-sea fishing. "The sea is sick," he

says bluntly. "It's full of oil, plastic, and all sorts of waste. That pollution affects the quality of fish. And then there's formalin—that's what they use to preserve fish and make it look fresh. But it's poison for us."

Damodar insists his motivation has never been profit. "For me, it's about making sure Goans can still eat well. Fresh, healthy, local fish. That's what matters. There's a big market for it, and that demand is only growing."

He believes more young Goans should consider taking up traditional fishing. "Our youth are talented, but many are looking for shortcuts. They want success without effort," he says, visibly pained. "This is hard work, yes. But it's also honest, sustainable, and deeply rewarding. We're not just preserving tradition—we're delivering quality. Our customers get value for their money, and they know it."

Damodar sees traditional fishing as a viable option for Goan youth, especially those struggling to find employment. "There's dignity in this work. It's not about wearing a suit and tie—it's about feeding your community and staying rooted in your land. That should matter."

As he prepares for another late-night outing, Damodar reflects on what keeps him going. "It's not easy, but every time I cast my net, I feel connected—to my ancestors, to the sea, to Goa. That's what drives me."



As polluted tides rise and traditions fade, Damodar Madgaonkar stands firm. With every cast, he honours his ancestors, feeds his community, and defends the sea that sustains them. In an age of shortcuts, his work is a quiet rebellion—for dignity, for legacy, and for a coastline struggling to breathe