

Scientist teaches students about life underwater

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Chennai: Riding his bike for more than 1,200-km along the coast of Tamil Nadu to talk about marine species among fisherfolk, followed by a 600-km kayaking expedition from Rameswaram to Chennai to now engaging with students about marine ecology — Vedharajan Balaji has dedicated himself to studies on marine creatures and creating awareness about them.

His Organisation for Marine Conservation, Awareness and Research (OMCAR), Palk Bay Centre, is teaching school students about the value of a marine ecosystem. At least 10,000 students from schools in rural Thanjavur and Pudukottai have benefited from field trips conducted by this marine scientist since 2014. The trip is free of cost, and at times lunch is also provided.

“Students, mostly from high schools, come to our centre every month. They come in separate batches with prior information. We take them to field trips with our guides. There are video and audio presentations as part of the



HANDS ON: Vedharajan Balaji creates awareness about marine ecology. He conducts free classes for rural students at Organisation for Marine Conservation, Awareness and Research

trip,” said Balaji. When he launched OMCAR in 2012, he would go to the school and conduct awareness classes. But now, things have changed. “I used to go to government-run schools and conduct training classes for students and teachers. But now they have started coming to our centre. I have also included more programmes to cover various fields and species,” he said.

A year ago, the carcass of a dugong (sea cow) was washed ashore. Balaji documented the event until the marine animal was buried in the sand. “There are many marine animals that students have no idea about. Dugong is one

among them. This is a marine animal which survives on sea grass. I have noticed a high presence of dugongs where healthy sea grass is available. It was an eye-opener for many students,” said Balaji, who also shows underwater films, conducts scuba diving demonstrations the institute.

“If we train them at a young age, it opens up their mind. The demo scuba diving sessions are done with the idea to provide an opportunity for students to see the marine world,” said the 39-year-old, who has also been mapping the sea grass population in Park Bay for a decade among other initiatives.