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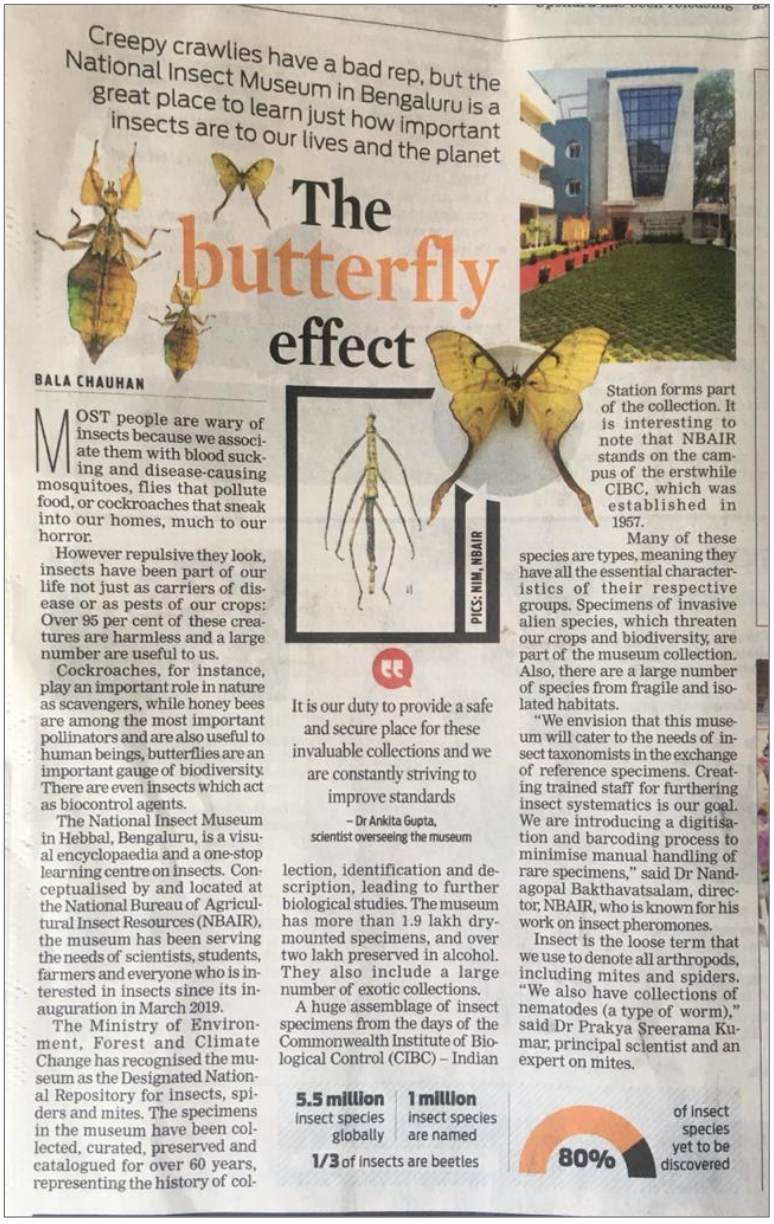
The butterfly effect



Creepy crawlies have a bad rep, but the National Insect Museum in Bengaluru is a great place to learn just how important insects are to our lives and the planet

The butterfly effect

BALA CHAUHAN

MOST people are wary of insects because we associate them with blood sucking and disease-causing mosquitoes, flies that pollute food, or cockroaches that sneak into our homes, much to our horror.

However repulsive they look, insects have been part of our life not just as carriers of disease or as pests of our crops: Over 95 per cent of these creatures are harmless and a large number are useful to us.

Cockroaches, for instance, play an important role in nature as scavengers, while honey bees are among the most important pollinators and are also useful to human beings, butterflies are an important gauge of biodiversity. There are even insects which act as biocontrol agents.

The National Insect Museum in Hebbal, Bengaluru, is a visual encyclopaedia and a one-stop learning centre on insects. Conceptualised by and located at the National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources (NBAIR), the museum has been serving the needs of scientists, students, farmers and everyone who is interested in insects since its inauguration in March 2019.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has recognised the museum as the Designated National Repository for insects, spiders and mites. The specimens in the museum have been collected, curated, preserved and catalogued for over 60 years, representing the history of collection, identification and description, leading to further biological studies. The museum has more than 1.9 lakh dry-mounted specimens, and over two lakh preserved in alcohol. They also include a large number of exotic collections.

A huge assemblage of insect specimens from the days of the Commonwealth Institute of Biological Control (CIBC) – Indian Station forms part of the collection. It is interesting to note that NBAIR stands on the campus of the erstwhile CIBC, which was established in 1957.

Many of these species are types, meaning they have all the essential characteristics of their respective groups. Specimens of invasive alien species, which threaten our crops and biodiversity, are part of the museum collection. Also, there are a large number of species from fragile and isolated habitats.

"We envision that this museum will cater to the needs of insect taxonomists in the exchange of reference specimens. Creating trained staff for furthering insect systematics is our goal. We are introducing a digitisation and barcoding process to minimise manual handling of rare specimens," said Dr Nandagopal Bakthavatsalam, director, NBAIR, who is known for his work on insect pheromones.

Insect is the loose term that we use to denote all arthropods, including mites and spiders. "We also have collections of nematodes (a type of worm)," said Dr Prakya Sreerama Kumar, principal scientist and an expert on mites.

PICS: NIM, NBAIR

It is our duty to provide a safe and secure place for these invaluable collections and we are constantly striving to improve standards

– Dr Ankita Gupta, scientist overseeing the museum

5.5 million insect species globally | **1 million** insect species are named

1/3 of insects are beetles

80% of insect species yet to be discovered

Link: https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/bengaluru/2021/may/24/thebutterflyeffect-learn-about-the-creepy-crawlies-innational-insect-museum-in-bengaluru-2306573.html