



# Wetland Conservation with Kalpana

*Cynthia Tuthill*

*Whenever* I think of Kalpana Chawla, my dearest friend and one of the astronauts who perished in the crash of the space shuttle Columbia in February of 2003, I remember her sweet brown eyes and her delicate graceful form ... she was as elegant as a crane.

Kalpana and I had become intimate friends through many precious, fantastically enjoyable times together ... flying small planes and sleeping under the wing, hiking mountains, birding ... I often think longingly of her smile, her infectious laughter, her impish sense of humor. Her profound curiosity and desire to learn everything. I remember our nights spent sleeping outside under clear skies, filled with stars ... gloriously remote ... reading poetry out loud to each other and enjoying the beauty of the words. And during the night, the sound of coyotes barking.

Kalpana had aspired to the stars in her career as an astronaut, but she was deeply committed to stewardship of the environment, and what she grew to care about more than everything else was the protection of the beauty of nature. Our discussions about saving the planet became some of the most intimate and endearing moments in our relationship. One day she announced to me that when she retired from being an astronaut she wanted to devote herself, her energies, and her efforts to conservation. She insisted that I was to join her. She said it was the only way to save the world.

Kalpana explained to her friends and family that in lieu of birthday gifts, they should donate to environmental organizations. She prepared an album containing the cards outlining each donation, and referred to these as the most precious gifts she'd ever received.

Kalpana enthused about a visit to Nebraska, during which she watched, enraptured, the Sandhill Cranes during their spring migration. Her passion inspired me to take a similar trip, and the wild cries and

dancing wingbeats of tens of thousands of huge cranes roosting along the river was unforgettable. I'll never forget the mesmerizing harmony of being surrounded by the calling and trilling - thunderous at times - I was ecstatic with the sublime orchestra. At dusk and dawn, the sight of these tall, stately birds, flying in skeins across the sky or dancing together on the banks of the river, was magnificent.



Sandhill Cranes at Nebraska. © Jim.

***Kalpana's* fascination** with birds, and cranes in particular, was another aspect of her deep appreciation of the natural world; her interest in ecology and protecting the environment.

The depth of this passion has compelled me to become a Board Member of the Indian Cranes and Wetlands Working Group (ICWWG), in order to help protect those cranes that she loved so deeply.

In our discussions we returned again and again to the issue of ecology, and the importance of protecting wetlands and oceans, for the survival of the diverse and miraculous creatures on our planet. We read Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" together ... a wonderful, important, and remarkable book. We also loved reading Carl Safina's "Song for the Blue Ocean," and "Eye of the Albatross," exquisite books extolling the importance of protection of the species in the oceans and upon the oceans, not only for the health of the earth but for the health of our spirits as well. Kalpana was so enamored of these books that we went over them essentially line by line together, and she carried one with her on the Columbia.





“Each action carries consequence, not just for the acted upon but for the actor as well.

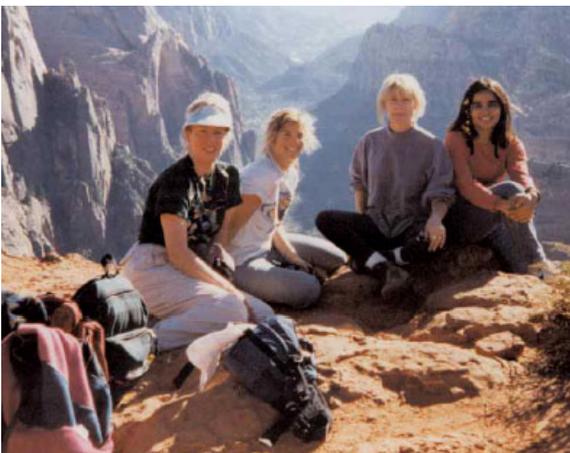
Perhaps if we look further and deeper, and be patient, the world will begin revealing itself, at a rate matching our openness and willingness to receive.

Recovery. Restoration. Regeneration. Peace.

It makes me ... proud to live in a time when we are also capable – in our best moments – of higher hope, and healing.

The irony that ideals and hope can flourish at the tattered edges of human existence, the hope that if ideals can flourish here, they can melt civilization’s jaded heart.”

*I remember* standing in the wetlands at the bottom of the deep canyon in Zion National Park, one of her favorite places, out under the stars at midnight and watching Moonrise over the towering cliffs of red rock. It was divine. We danced in circles, holding hands, laughing.



Cynthia Tuthill (second from left), Kalpana Chawla (right extreme) and friends at Zion National Park, Utah, 1995. © Cynthia Tuthill.

From the space shuttle, Kalpana once emailed me:

“Looking out of the window, watching the Earth unroll its secret islands, beautiful atolls, much like jewels, and

rivers and mountains; it’s like a fairy tale.”

*Kalpana Chawla* was a joy as a friend, a deeply sincere and dedicated woman, and as part of her legacy I want to help to keep this Earth like a fairy tale. As Kalpana wrote,

“The path from dreams to reality does exist.

May you have the vision to pave it, the courage to find it,

And the perseverance to stay on it.

Wishing you the best journey.”

*In supporting* the ICWWG I am walking along that path, and hope that others will join me. Kalpana said that from space you can see no borders – it is as if the Earth is one large campground – and that is one reason I’m proud to join the Indian Cranes and Wetlands Working Group although I live in the United States. We are all campers together.

In losing my dearest friend, I still have her legacy to uphold. As Safina tells us,

“A strong wind and intermittent rain has the albatrosses flapping, their wings waving, waving, waving. Some are preparing to leave, as are we.

As we all must.

They are reminding us there are other skies to fly in.”



*Cynthia Tuthill is a member of the advisory board of ICWWG helping to build the Kalpana Chawla Fund for Cranes and Wetlands.*

