

The peacock's last dance

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Peacocks are widely found in the Indian sub-continent. It is our national bird. Yet, this has not helped secure its future.



The peacock may not be content with its "dumb beauty" but humans have always been enamoured by this familiar and spectacular member of the pheasant family. A beautiful ocellated train, a shimmering blue breast and the long, slender neck of the male *Pavo cristatus* make it a spectacular bird. The female is a sober mottled-brown with some metallic green on the lower neck but lacks the train. The peacock is called "the bird with one hundred eyes" due to the eye-like patterns on its tail. It is believed to be a harbinger of the approaching monsoon, with its elaborate courtship dance seen all over the country before the rains. Many associate this spectacular bird with fertility and good luck.

Widely found in the Indian sub-continent from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka, it is our national bird, a position that has not necessarily helped secure its future. Its status as the *vahan* of Subramanya or Kartikeya, son of Lord Shiva and its role in Hindu mythology has offered it some immunity over the years. But unfortunately this is fast changing.

Today, its population is under threat due to habitat destruction, poaching and contamination of its food sources.

Fallacies

Peacocks are in demand for their beautiful feathers and even for their fat, which is erroneously believed to be useful in the treatment of arthritis. Primarily poached for its feathers that are sold openly in India and abroad, peacock populations are plummeting across India. Peacock feathers are sold openly in Udhagamandalam and other tourist destinations. Incidents of locals poisoning

waterholes to kill peacocks and deer for their meat in protected areas such as Melghat in Maharashtra have also been reported. More and more peacocks are being killed in villages that once venerated the birds.

The most shocking was the death of around 40 peacocks in Morena in Madhya Pradesh — a place that derives its name from Mor (peacock) and has a sizeable peacock population. The post-mortem reports in most of these cases revealed the consumption of insecticide-washed seeds from nearby fields. The bird is protected under Section 51, 1-A of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and killing it is strictly prohibited. The export of peacock tail feathers, articles and handicrafts made there from, has been banned under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and the export-import policy of India.

There is a blanket ban on the export of birds from India, yet the illegal trade continues. Peacocks are still being smuggled. Their feathers are used to make costumes and fans. The Indian peacock is bred in captivity in the U.S. Thousands are sold each year as pets and also for medicinal use. The legs and claws of the bird are boiled to extract "anti-arthritis oil".

Food chain

Peacocks and other birds in the food chain are crucial. They are important biological control agents. By feeding on insects and controlling weeds, they increase the nitrogen content of the soil.

People who use peacock feathers do not realise that a peacock has been killed in the process of procuring that feather. Snake charmers and *madaris* bringing bears and monkeys to dance in our cities and towns abuse these animals. When we patronise them or visit circuses or buy birds as pets, we encourage poaching. Let us not abuse nature's bounty by misusing it. Peacocks and vultures are dying from pesticide use today; tomorrow it could be us. The threads we unravel today may ensnare us tomorrow.

What I can do

In the U.S. they saved their national bird, the Bald-Headed Eagle by creating awareness — national campaigns, articles, talk shows and discussions in schools.

We could create awareness about the peacock. Talk to friends, relatives, and family about it and how it is an endangered bird.

Write about such issues in your school newspaper or write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

Get more information. Hold discussions in school, do a project in your school about the need to save your national bird.

Refuse to buy any artefacts or other products made of wildlife animal parts.

In collaboration with Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group