

Communities and conservation

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Imagine a Naga village elder who is the Chairperson and Managing Director of a wildlife sanctuary? This is no flight of fancy, but a recent development in the north-eastern state of Nagaland. The Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary, spread over 7,000 hectares and containing threatened species like the Blyth's tragopan has been notified, not by government, but by the villagers of Khonoma. Why? Because they felt increasingly concerned about the rampant shooting of this bird and other wildlife in the forests surrounding their village. So the Khonoma Village Council set up the sanctuary, enacted a set of rules and regulations about hunting and tree felling, and appointed Tsilie Sakhrie as the 'CMD'!

And this is not an isolated case from a 'remote' part of India. There are literally thousands of such areas, and species, that are under community protection across the country. So far completely neglected by urban wildlifers, this growing phenomenon needs support from the government and NGO sectors.

Community Conserved Areas (CCAs) are of diverse kinds, with varying levels of protection afforded to different areas. In Assam's Bongaigaon district, for example, the villagers of Shankar Ghola are protecting a few square kilometres of forest that contain, amongst other things, a troop of the highly threatened Golden langur. Another initiative with the same species as a key indicator was triggered by the work of the NGO Nature's Beckon, which facilitated villagers in protecting a large area of moist forest and then lobbied to get it declared as the Chakrashila Wildlife Sanctuary. In Tehri Garhwal, Uttaranchal, the villagers of Jardhargaon have regenerated and protected several hundred hectares of oak and rhododendron forests. The results have been impressive, with leopard, bear and other wildlife, even the occasional tiger, being sighted more frequently. Not far away, in Dehradun district, the village of Nahin Kalan has not only successfully fought against a destructive mine, but also conserved a large area of sub-Himalayan forest.

Perhaps the most famous conservation-oriented community in India are the Bishnois of Rajasthan. They have strong conservation traditions and are famous for their self-sacrificing defense of wildlife and trees. Bishnoi villagers have often risked their lives while trying to save blackbuck from hunters. Their dedication is indicated from the fact that there are currently two wildlife sanctuaries in their territories and they extend all possible human and financial help to the resource strapped forest department for effective protection of these sanctuaries. The tribe's zeal to protect wildlife began about three centuries ago, when dozens of villagers preferred to be hacked to death rather than letting the trees in their area being cut down by the local *raja*.

Sariska in Rajasthan's Alwar district is one of India's better-known tiger reserves. However, most visitors are unaware of the role played by the NGO Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) and villagers in improving the water regime of this dry forest, resulting in improved wildlife density while providing more secure livelihoods. The villagers and the forest department are now discussing collaborative methods of protecting wildlife. Outside the reserve, in several dozen villages in the district, villagers have resurrected the water regime, regenerated forests, and in one case (Bhaonta-Kolyala village), even declared a 'public wildlife sanctuary'. Similarly, in Manipur, youth clubs from villages around the Loktak Lake have formed a Sangai Protection Forum to protect the highly endangered Brow-antlered deer, only found in this wetland. They participate in the management of the Keibul Lamjao National Park, which forms the core of the lake.

One of the better-documented and known instances of community conservation has been the 1,800 hectares of deciduous forest saved by the villagers of Mendha (Lekha) in Maharashtra's Gadchiroli district. The people fought off a paper mill that would have destroyed bamboo stocks, stopped the practice of lighting forest fires and moved towards sustainable extraction of non-timber produce. Though there still is some hunting pressure, the area harbours considerable wildlife including the endangered central race of the giant squirrel.

Though weakened by the forces of modernisation and commercialisation, in many areas, traditional protection to sacred groves, village tanks, Himalayan grasslands, and individual species is still widespread. Several sacred groves have preserved remnant populations of rare and endemic species that have been wiped out elsewhere. There are even new “sacred” sites: in parts of Uttaranchal, villagers are dedicating forest areas to local deities, thereby creating a strong motivation for local people to protect the area.

Aside from specific protection afforded to habitats, many traditional practices of sustainable use actually benefited wildlife conservation. For instance, pastoral communities in Ladakh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and other states had strict rules regarding the amount and frequency of grazing on specified grasslands. Ornithologists have recorded that these helped to maintain viable habitats for species like the Great Indian bustard.

The Spotbilled pelicans of Kokkare Bellur in Karnataka are well-known. Here, as at numerous other sites where large waterbirds survive on village tanks and private trees, villagers offer protection against hunting and untoward disturbance. Some ornithologists are beginning to think that for species like the Greater Adjutant Stork and the Spotbilled Pelican, community protection may be the most effective.

Important nesting sites for sea turtles such as Galjibag beach in Goa and Kolavipaalam beach in Kerala have been protected through the action of local fisherfolk, with help from NGOs and the Forest Department.

There are probably thousands of other such initiatives, some within officially declared national parks and sanctuaries, but most outside. And they are complemented by struggles by communities across India to save their ecosystems and resources from the destructive impact of ‘development’ projects. For instance, across hundreds of kilometres of India’s coastline and adjoining waters, the National Fishworkers’ Forum has staved off destructive trawling, fought for the implementation of the Coastal Regulation Zone, and assisted in movements against industrial aquaculture. Several big projects, such as Bhopalpatnam-Inchhampalli (Maharashtra-Chattisgarh), Bodhghat (Chattisgarh), and Rathong Chu (Sikkim), which would have submerged valuable wildlife habitats, have been stalled by mass tribal movements. Over several years, villagers in Sariska have successfully fought against mining, which the forest department was unable to stop as the government itself had sanctioned it! Many such movements have saved areas equal in size, and sometimes bigger than, official protected areas.

The flip side

However, this is not to give the impression that communities everywhere in India are conservation-oriented. Even if in their thousands, initiatives like the ones above would still be small compared to India’s enormous landmass. In many, many more communities, traditions of conservation have been eroded, and natural ecosystems have been converted to other land uses. Nor are we implying that all village level initiatives are unqualified successes. Like official protected areas, community conserved areas too have a host of serious problems to contend with. These include dissension and inequities within the community, weaknesses in countering powerful commercial forces from outside, lack of knowledge regarding the full range of biodiversity and its value, the pressures of abject poverty, and so on.

Nevertheless, the network of CCAs in India provides a wonderful system of biodiversity conservation that is complementary to the government-run network of protected areas. And indeed, in the way many of them are managed, they provide important lessons on how to tackle the conflicts between local people and wildlife officials, which plague official protected areas over India.

Emerging Lessons

One of the most critical lessons we learn from CCAs is that areas important for biodiversity conservation are often also important for the survival and livelihood security of traditional communities. The issue of people within and around official protected areas has plagued conservationists for decades. Increasingly there is recognition that livelihoods will need to be integrated without compromising the existence of ecosystems and species. Many CCAs provide valuable insights into how this can be done. One important path towards wildlife conservation is to first meet people's most critical survival needs, like water, biomass and health, and tie up biodiversity imperatives with these.

No single agency is capable of saving India's wildlife. The forest department, even if highly motivated, has simply too few resources, manpower and knowledge. Local communities often find themselves helpless in the face of powerful outside forces, while most NGOs are too small to handle the complex and enormous problems that natural habitats face. So the solution is to combine the strengths of each of these... and help each other to tackle weaknesses.

Another lesson is the need for local communities to have a secure stake in the conservation of an area. All too often, conservation policies and programmes have alienated local people, so that they not only do not help in fighting forest fires and catching poachers, they often even aid and abet poaching. In all the examples above, the community has established some form of actual or legal control over the resources, providing the security to carry out conservation and sustainable use practices.

It is also interesting to see the varied forms of rules and regulations by which communities manage conservation areas. In most cases, these are not explicitly written out, but are known and accepted by the whole community. Violations invite social boycott, fines or other punishments. In some cases, the community has actually written and codified these customary rules. In the case of the Bhaonta-Kolyala Public Sanctuary, for instance, these are written on the face of the small checkdam made by villagers at the foot of the forested hills.

Box 1: Some Community Rules

Community Rules

The village of Mendha (Lekha) has a set of self-generated rules and regulations that govern forest use. These were arrived at after discussions about forest produce requirements at the gram sabha and at their unique *abhyas gat* (study circle), and concluded that personal consumption would not damage the forests, but commercial exploitation of timber would. Limits were placed on the amount of firewood, bamboo, and timber that could be extracted; and commercial extraction of bamboo and timber was prohibited. Setting fire to the forest was discontinued, and though tendu (*Dioscorea*) leaves are extracted, this is under strict supervision of the villagers. Realising that fruit production was going down, they decided that there would be no felling of green and fruiting trees, and no felling for honey collection. Encroachment on forest land is also banned. Conventional silvicultural practices of the Forest Department, such as removal of climbers, was also stopped as the villagers argued that these are essential components of the forest.

At Bhaonta-Kolyala, Rajasthan, the rules are simple: no hunting, no felling of green trees. Grazing is allowed inside the protected forest, but regulated in an informal manner. Here and at other CCAs, violations of the rules invite fines and social sanctions. In some places, the fine depends on the wealth of the offender, the richer violators having to pay heavier penalties.

The need for support

Such initiatives can do with considerable support from NGOs and government agencies. There is an immediate need for further studies on these initiatives, so that their full biodiversity and social value can be gauged and others can learn about and from them. It may also often be necessary to accord them legal backup, especially so that communities can enforce their customary or unwritten rules. In a few places, there may be need for financial support, usually

small-scale. Finally, many communities need help in adapting appropriate ecologically friendly technologies to enhance their livelihoods, and where relevant, linkages with consumers and sensitive markets in order to generate resources. This of course comes with the strong precaution that markets can also destroy, if not carefully controlled!

One irony that has cropped up in several CCAs needs urgent resolution. Due to the regeneration and protection of habitats, wildlife populations have increased, and in some cases in West Bengal and Orissa, elephants have returned, sometimes causing considerable damage to crops, livestock, and even human life! Often the species that is protected by the local communities such as the black buck, nigai, peafowls, etc. themselves reach steep populations difficult to be sustained in the surrounding ecosystem. Unless some supportive measures are considered, the communities' tolerance levels may be crossed. Both traditional and new methods of resolving these conflicts need to be tried out.

The recently-released National Wildlife Action Plan 2002-2016 has taken a bold step in recommending support to CCAs. Legally, the 2002 amendment of the *Wildlife (Protection) Act* provides for a new protected area category of Community Reserves. This category could have provided legal protection to a whole range of community conserved sites. Welcome though, the wording of this provision has not moved beyond the restricted and distrustful approach of conservation policies so far. First and foremost, the community reserves are applicable only to community and private lands. On ground, the examples mentioned above and other efforts at conservation and management by the communities are mostly in habitats that legally "belong" to the government. Thus this category is not applicable to most of the community conservation areas in India.

In addition, the Act specifies a uniform format of administering these CRs, which may stifle the very large and diverse range of institutional and customary structures/rules that communities have evolved.

Box 2: Community Reserves and Conservation Reserves under Wildlife Protection Act

Community Reserve

"The state government may, wherever the community or an individual has volunteered to conserve wildlife and its habitat, declare any private or community land not comprised within a National Park, sanctuary or a conservation reserve, as a community reserve, for protecting fauna , flora and traditional or cultural conservation values and practices."

"The state government shall constitute, a Community Reserve Management Committee, which shall be the authority responsible for conserving, maintaining and managing the community reserve"

"The committee shall consists of five representatives nominated by the village panchayat or where such panchayat does not exist by the members of the gram sabha and one representative of the state Forests or Wild Life Department under whose jurisdiction the community reserve is located"

Conservation Reserve

"The state government may, after having consultations with the local communities, declare any area owned by the government,....., as Conservation Reserve for protecting landscapes, seascapes, flora, fauna and their habitat"

*"The state government shall constitute a conservation reserve management committee to **advise** (emphasis provided) the chief wildlife warden to conserve, manage and maintain a conservation reserve."*

It is likely that a community or an individual who wants to declare their land protected would often have local institutions or rules already in place for its management and conservation (as is shown in examples mentioned above). Even where such institutions or rules do not exist it is unlikely that the proponent would be agreeable to handing over the responsibility of management

of their land to *sarpanches* and government officials who would have little, if any, concern or connections with the ecosystem. This appears to be a recipe for more conflict than resolution. In most situations control would move away from the proposing community or individual to new institutions under the law. There are numerous examples in the country to prove the ill effects of cooption of well functioning local institutions under programmes such as Joint Forest Management or Ecodevelopment. Before implementing the new amendment lessons from the past must be kept in mind. An appropriate action would be to bring about an amendment in the Act. However, till that happens, and before the creation of any community reserves and conservation reserves it is imperative that certain guidelines are drafted based on lessons from the ground and in consultation with people on ground. The guidelines need to specify participatory processes of establishing local institutions, rules and regulations. In the absence of such guidelines the country would have lost an excellent opportunity for building a strong support for conservation. Community Reserves and Conservation Reserves will remain as much enmesh in conflicts as are other Protected Areas in the country. Communities and individuals will remain unwilling to bring their areas under law for the fear of being alienated from their lands. For the sake of the biodiversity in these sites it must be ensured that the new amendment Act does not become a tool to take over CCAs in the guise of legally empowering them. A truly happy moment for Mr. Sakhrie of Khonoma and thousands of other innovative people like him, would be if CCAs become an accepted form of conservation in the country with hundreds of individuals and local communities proudly and trustingly declaring their areas conserved, and when well deserving communities are allowed to conserve even in the government owned lands and where conservation is the “development” that people want!

As published in BNHS Journal 2003