

Wildlife Conservation and Local Communities in India

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 northeastern 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 is the Bishnoi community occupying parts of Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. They have strong conservation traditions and are famous for their self-sacrificing defence of wildlife and trees. A Bishnoi villager was recently killed while trying to save blackbuck from hunters. The tribe's history records a similar incident, three centuries ago, when dozens of villagers who were protecting trees by hugging them were hacked to death by a king who wanted the timber. In Punjab, Bishnoi lands have been declared the Abohar Sanctuary in recognition of their wildlife value.

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 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 Uttarakhand, 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 Spot billed 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 Spot billed Pelican, community protection may be the most effective. It would be interesting to mention here Vedanthangal village in Tamil Nadu that fought against hunting of water fowl in their traditional irrigation tank by government officers and others as early as in 1800s. Subsequently the village was able to get an order to stop hunting and a right to prevent people from hunting in their tank in 1860. Vedanthangal is today one of the oldest declared sanctuaries in India. In Kheechan in Gujarat thousands of Demoiselle Cranes are not only protected by the villagers but also fed using their meager resources.

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

There are probably thousands of other such initiatives, some within officially declared national parks and sanctuaries, but most outside. In a documentation undertaken by Kalpavriksh nearly 300 such examples have been detailed, this is without taking into account hundreds of ha. under community forestry in Orissa, under joint forest management in West Bengal and other states and thousands of sacred groves and sacred water bodies in the country. These conservation efforts 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 and biomass, 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 internal and 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.

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! Unless urgent 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.

Invariably, whenever communities take a decision to conserve they do it by establishing specific and effective local institutions. Examples like Kudada in Bihar, Mendha in Maharashtra and many others indicate that these institutions often have a deep understanding of principles of fair and successful governance. Many of these institutions ensure equal participation in decision making, transparency of functioning and accounts handling, keeping the flow of information to help them make informed decisions, etc. It is important that when efforts are made to recognize community conservation efforts, their institutions of management are also recognized, accepted and supported, making an intervention towards change only where such institutions are not equitable and transparent.

The recently-released National Wildlife Action Plan 2002-2016 has taken a bold step in recommending support to CCAs. Legal teeth could soon be provided by the proposed amended *Wildlife (Protection) Act*, which contains a new protected area category of Community Reserves. Care must be taken, however, that the government does not take over these CCAs in the guise of legally empowering them. And since most CCAs are likely to remain outside the purview of such official systems, the greatest need is for conservationists to recognise them as a complementary system of biodiversity conservation. A truly happy moment for Mr. Sakhrie of Khonoma and thousands of other innovative people like him, would be if the next meeting of the Indian Board for Wildlife were to have as much focus on CCAs as on official protected areas!

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