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**SUJATHA PADMANABHAN**

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## **A movie, marmots and tourists...what can be the connection?**

Marmots are those large adorable looking rodents that you find in the grassy meadows in the Ladakh mountains. With their buckteeth and their short and squat bodies that fill out in the summer months, they surely are lovable. You may just feel like cuddling up to them. But try and get a little close, and they would scurry away into their burrows. In a jiffy, the entire colony of marmots would vanish underground. One of them always keeps guard while the rest munch away on the grass. They need to double their size or more (no weight-watching here!) to prepare for a long period of hibernation over six months of winter.



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exits.

## Off to Ladakh

“3 Idiots!” Sounds familiar? Of course, the Aamir Khan film which in all likelihood you would have seen. What’s the connection with marmots, you may ask? There is one, unfortunately, that has led many tourists who go to Ladakh to behave in a rather idiotic manner.

The film released in 2009. It was a box office hit and millions of us Indians went to see it. And in one of the climax scenes, we watched the heroine and hero meet against the backdrop of a spectacular lake in Ladakh with glistening turquoise blue waters: the Pangong.

Since the release of this film, the numbers of Indian tourists who travel to Ladakh have skyrocketed. No prizes for guessing what must be their most favoured destination there: Pangong Lake of course! Tourists go in hordes to not just view the beauty of the lake, but to take photographs of themselves at specific spots where the heroine of the film supposedly stood, and even to sit on a yellow coloured scooter like she did. Cafés adorn the area now, with name boards that remind you of the film: Rambo café, Three Idiots Café and so on.

## Human friends

But the marmots? Well, enroute to Pangong there are grassy patches where these creatures live, and tourists now stop by to feed them. Guess what? Bread and bananas, and snacks like biscuits and cake! The tourists experience a momentary pleasure seeing these creatures venture closer to them for a morsel, not giving a thought to how the food offerings could affect the health of the animals. Marmot behaviour has changed as they now seem to have lost their fear of us humans. Walk up to a colony and you no longer see them scurrying into their burrows. Instead they scamper up to you in the hope that you have something to offer them. And this is not seen just in the marmot colonies before Pangong, but in others as well that live alongside the roads that tourists take in Ladakh.

When we set off on holidays we need to behave as mindful tourists. And feeding wild animals is surely an irresponsible act.

*This series on Conservation and Nature is brought to you by Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group. ([www.kalpavrisksh.org](http://www.kalpavrisksh.org))*



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