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A task force and its options

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Local communities need to be involved if tiger conservation projects are to succeed.

THE Tiger Task Force appointed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in the wake of the horrendous Sariska crisis has a historic opportunity. It can either go the conventional way, asking for a vastly multiplied retinue of forest staff, guns and fences, or it can chart a bold path, trying out new models for governing the country's wildlife habitats.

Following the 'discovery' that tigers no longer inhabit the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan, various factors were blamed: the presence of villages, the lackadaisical attitude of the Forest Department, inaction of the State and Central governments, and so on. Undoubtedly, all these contributed to the crisis. But there are deeper issues at play here. Rather than find out who is to blame, the Task Force would do well to look at what is to blame. In other words, examine the system that has created the disaster, not the specific actors within it

Two deep-rooted elements of this system stand out. One, the failure to involve and benefit the local communities which are long-standing residents of wildlife habitats. Two, the folly of entrusting conservation to a bureaucracy that is part of a government bent on industrialisation at any cost.

India's national parks and sanctuaries have staved off many a mine, dam and industry which would otherwise have decimated critical wildlife habitats. They are the centre-piece of official wildlife conservation. There are many heroes here, from the conservationists who fought to get sites declared protected areas, to the forest officers who risked their lives to protect them.

Unfortunately, these heroes are unlikely to be popular with communities that live within and around the protected areas. Envisaged on a Western model of conservation, which separates humans from nature and puts all powers into the hands of a centralised bureaucracy, the management of these areas has ignored such communities. Ancient traditions and community-based institutions that have historically conserved natural resources have also been sidestepped. Local communities, most of which had used the protected area for generations, were never consulted or informed. Worse, they were told to stop or curb their resource use overnight, and in many cases they were displaced forcibly. Over four million people who live within such areas, and several million more in adjacent areas, have been affected adversely. Some may have benefited by getting jobs as forest guard, and some from the protected area having kept away a destructive mine or dam. But an overwhelming number of such people have only been impoverished further.

The second issue is as serious. The Prime Minister's recent words on tackling the tiger crisis are certainly music to one's ears. But his government (like all its predecessors) is hell-bent on giving clearances to industrial and infrastructural projects in many of India's best wildlife habitats. Mining alone threatens 80 protected areas; highways, ports, refineries and tourist resorts threaten many more. No government in New Delhi has taken a clear stand to leave critical wildlife habitats alone. And since the Forest Department is part of the government, there is only so much it can do to withstand pressures from the 'development' departments eyeing minerals, rivers, trees and other resources needed for the industrial economy.

In this context, Sariska provides a challenging case. Crores of rupees and lakhs of mandays in staff time have gone into its management. What went wrong?

After serious decline, the last 15-20 years of the 20th century perhaps saw a revival of Sariska's wildlife. At a meeting in 2000, Forest Department officials and well-known tiger conservationists praised the water and forest regeneration efforts of local villagers as one of the causes for this revival. It was then agreed to set up a Sariska Management Committee, involving villagers in

managing the reserve and letting them reap benefits from the activity. Officials from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) promised funds for such a participatory model. However, none of this happened. On the contrary, letters written by the villagers to the Forest Department with leads regarding poaching were reportedly ignored. Mining, curtailed through heroic efforts by villagers, continued in some parts of the tiger reserve because the government was not interested in stopping it. Was the resulting disillusionment among the local people a contributing factor to the current crisis? Did their interest in conservation go down, and did hostility get revived? Could we have expected them to protect the tiger, with no power or resources in their hands?

Sariska failed because it was only a half-hearted attempt at people's participation. Conservationists were naive in believing that communities would voluntarily conserve natural resources, while the real power to decide on these resources remained with the government. Never once were the villagers of Sariska involved in decision-making, never did they have any formal stake in the park. And with a severely under-staffed and ill-motivated department, disaster was lurking around the corner.

Across India's protected areas, a major factor reducing the efficacy of conservation measures is local hostility. Communities that would earlier rush to stop forest fires could not care less now. Rather than report poachers, villagers in many areas now guide them to their quarry, both out of desperation for some source of earning, and out of a feeling of revenge. And why not? What, after all, has the protected area given them but harassment, displacement and loss of livelihood? And when they see rich tourists running amok in the same areas where they have been denied access, what else are they to feel but resentment?

Increasingly, villagers have also turned to unsustainable livelihoods. Alienated from their own surroundings, or enticed by the expanding market, what options do they have when their own needs expand without any alternatives?

Here, then, lies the Task Force's challenge. What are the four million people in India's protected areas to be considered as - enemies of wildlife to be harassed and displaced (though most can never be resettled), or protectors of wildlife given the right stakes and incentives? A few decades of treating them as part of the problem have only created conflicts and ineffective conservation. Can we now explore models that treat them as part of the solution?

A NEW paradigm in conservation is needed. In India itself, there are many initiatives to learn from. The Chilika lagoon in Orissa, rich in wildlife, was almost dying a few years ago because of siltation and commercial shrimp farming. A heroic effort by officials partnering with local fishermen to integrate conservation and livelihoods has made it possible for the lake to breathe again. In the Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala, officials have gone out of their way to consult people and provide them sustainable livelihoods, with significant conservation benefits. These officials assert that if the law allowed more power-sharing, the results would be even more dramatic.

Thousands of community-led initiatives are also showing the way. More than a dozen village wildlife sanctuaries have been declared in Nagaland in the past decade; several critical heronries are protected in village wetlands; thousands of hectares of rich mixed forests are conserved under Van Panchayats in Uttaranchal; populations of big mammals are reviving in forests regenerated by communities in Orissa, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and other States. Around Sariska itself, ecological restoration by people has been successful in bringing back wildlife, but its lessons have been lost on the tiger reserve.

Outside India too, participatory conservation is showing success. The Bwindi reserve in Uganda, home to one of the last populations of the mountain gorilla, is today much better protected owing to a collaborative management system. Australian, Canadian, Bolivian and many other indigenous peoples are given the powers to protect their territories as protected areas, with considerable success. The Makuleke community reserve, carved out of the famous Kruger National Park in South Africa, is now protected by the people as well as it was by the government.

In India, such experimentation has never been allowed. Not a single protected area in India has come under a fully participatory model of governance, even though India is committed, under the Biodiversity Convention, to move all its protected areas towards a participatory model.

India's commitment under the Biodiversity Convention reads: "Full and effective participation by 2008, of indigenous and local communities, in full respect of their rights and recognition of their responsibilities, consistent with national law and applicable international obligations, and the participation of relevant stakeholders, in the management of existing, and the establishment and management of new, protected areas." (from 'Programme of Work on Protected Areas', February 2004)

It is this challenge that the Tiger Task Force must take up. It must promote, experimenting with a few protected areas to begin with (such as Periyar, where a good base has been built), the following:

- * Genuine partnerships among officials, communities and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) through joint management committees (States have not even set up the Sanctuary Advisory Committees required under the Wildlife Act);
- * Putting all revenues earned from protected areas back into local conservation and community welfare activities, and mandatory employment of local people in each protected area;
- * Recording and giving legal status to traditional resource use rights and responsibilities of people, with limitations needed to ensure that they are in harmony with the conservation objectives of the protected areas;
- * Provision of alternatives for activities that are irreversibly damaging (such as overgrazing);
- * Directing all funds for rural development, tribal welfare, and so on, to go into ecologically sensitive livelihood activities for villagers;
- * Recognition for community conserved areas (CCAs), managed in accordance with local customs and institutions rather than through a uniform government-imposed structure;
- * Keeping away destructive mega 'development' projects from protected areas and community conserved areas;
- * Combining traditional knowledge and practices with modern ones, as a base for management planning and research;
- * Deputing more and better trained staff, building local community capacity for conservation, providing security and arms against powerful poaching gangs, and activating an independent wildlife crime cell that involves local people as informants; and
- * Holding regular public dialogue at the level of each protected area and State, especially for conflict resolution.

These measures can be undertaken within the context of a much more flexible system of protected areas. Internationally, the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the Convention on Biological Diversity advocate a varied range, from strictly protected areas to those with multiple resource uses, and from government-managed areas to completely community-managed ones.

With the above steps, India can actually put more than 10 per cent of its territory under the protected area system, with at least 2 per cent strictly protected - that is, a doubling of today's protected area network. Whether this requires some relocation, preceded by a fully acceptable rehabilitation package, can only be determined once the above steps are taken.

Hopefully, the Task Force can break away from the faltering model of the last 100 years, learn from the innovations taking place around the world and from our own traditions, and advise the Prime Minister to chart a new territory. Failure to do so could see Sariska being replicated in each of the tiger reserves of the country.

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