

ENVIRONMENT / CONSERVATION

For a natural balance

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A National Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights stresses the need to work towards conservation projects that are equally sensitive to the needs of wildlife and local communities.

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CAN tigers and tribal people co-exist? Can the interests of wildlife conservation and those of people's livelihood rights be integrated? How would such bridges be built? These and similar vexed questions were the subject of a lively discussion at the recently held Building Bridges: 4th National Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights, at the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple (BRT) Wildlife Sanctuary in southern Karnataka. Over 50 participants from across the country, including wild life researchers and conservationists, social activists, forest officers, representatives of non governmental organisations (NGOs), local community representatives and academics, came together to explore the possibilities of reconciling the imperatives of biodiversity conservation with the needs and aspirations of local rural communities.

The meeting was co-organised by the Vivekananda Girijana Kalyan Kendra (VGKK), the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), and Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group. The VGKK hosted the meet at its base within the BRT sanctuary. This organisation, under the leadership of Dr. H. Sudarshan, winner of the Padmashree and the Right to Livelihood Award is known for its initiatives in health and community development among the Soliga tribal community. It has also started a forest-based enterprise involving the Soligas, using in particular medicinal plants and honey. ATREE has been involved in an interesting study (the first of its kind in the country) based on ecological monitoring of this enterprise. The venue of the workshop thus offered a good opportunity for the participants to look at the collaborative work of the VGKK, ATREE and the Karnataka Forest Department on the use of non-timber forest produce (NTFP) to ensure the livelihood security of the Soligas, while attempting to keep the conservation objectives of the BRT sanctuary in mind. It also provided abundant proof that adivasis and forests are inextricably linked. Where the sanctuary and the tribal people had protected the forests, it had helped protect their nutritional and health basis. Dr. Sudarshan gave various instances of diseases/conditions such as appendicitis, colonic cancer, vitamin deficiency, ischaemic heart disease, hypertension, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), which were once unknown among the Soligas. Also caesarian deliveries and eyesight disorders were absent among them.

This real-life example of an alternative approach provided an ideal backdrop to discussions that dwelt on several critical national issues. At the outset, the context for the dialogue was set on the basis of the experience of conservation initiatives taken in the past few decades in India.

In an attempt to conserve the depleting forests and wildlife in India, the Wild Life Protection Act (WLPA) was enacted in 1972. It made the creation of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries (protected areas) the main means for wildlife conservation. There were significant initial successes, spurred by the interest and support of political leaders, Indira Gandhi in particular. The tiger and other large mammals were brought back from the brink of extinction, and thousands of square kilometres of forests, grasslands and wetlands were protected. That all had not been secured became clear only a little later. A beginning was made to consolidate the gains but the political will for conservation began to slide rapidly particularly in the 1990s. The very governments that had created protected areas (PAs) were throwing them open to highly destructive commercial and 'developmental' activities such as mining, building dams and industries, promoting tourism and laying roads. And with no mass support for conservation few people stood up against this sell-out.

The last few years witnessed serious conflicts in many of the PAs and other wildlife areas, between officials and NGOs involved in wildlife conservation on the one hand and local communities and

social activists on the other. The Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka, the Ranthambhor Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan, the Shoolpaneshwar Sanctuary in Gujarat and the Rajaji National Park in Uttar Pradesh are but a few examples. A top-down model of conservation, which has ignored the dependence and rights of local communities on the resources of natural habitats, as also their traditions of conservation, has been one of the important reasons for these conflicts.

Calculations based on surveys conducted in the mid-1980s by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA), Delhi suggest that over three million people live in areas that are designated as national parks and sanctuaries and millions are dependent on the resources from them. Conservation efforts did not take into consideration these people, their rights or even needs. The conflicts were waiting to happen. Yellappa Reddy, retired forest officer and former Secretary, Environment and Forests, Karnataka, pointed out that the traditional harmony between tribal people and forest officers at the Nagarhole National Park was spoilt by a recent move to shift the tribal people out of the part. "If the government does not change its attitude, many more Veerappans will be created," he said.

But the fault lies not only with the government. The increasing politicisation and commercialisation of the rural areas, the breakdown of traditions, and demands made by the growing human and livestock populations have all contributed to the present situation. The net result: wildlife, wildlife habitats, and the resource base of rural and tribal communities continue to be destroyed.

In a situation of growing despair, there was a realisation in some quarters that wildlife habitats and the livelihoods of the affected communities were actually the targets of the same powerful commercial/industrial forces. Wildlife conservationists and social action groups would have to come together if this common threat is to be fought. The process of building bridges between them was initiated in the mid-1990s, during a series of workshops involving NGOs and government agencies.

In 1994, a meeting on Joint Protected Area Management (JPAM) organised by the IIPA, Delhi, resolved to carry the process forward in a systematic manner. One of the significant events that helped in this effort was the Jungle Jivan Bachao Yatra (JJBV), in early 1995, organised by Tarun Bharat Sangh, Kalpavriksh, the IIPA, Ekta Parishad, Sanctuary magazine and Ekjoot Sanghatana among others (Frontline, March 10, 1995). About 35 villagers, activists and researchers started this journey from the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. Over a period of 45 days they travelled about 15,000 km, passing through 18 national parks and sanctuaries in Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. The most important conclusion of the JJBV was that the greatest threat to protected areas came from commercial demands and development projects, and a common front had to be forged against them.

The JJBV was followed by a number of activities, eventually leading to Building Bridges: First National Consultation on Wildlife Conservation and People's Livelihood Rights, held at the ashram of Tarun Bharat Sangh in Alwar district, Rajasthan, in April 1997. The second and the third national consultations were held in Alwar and Bhopal in 1998 and 1999. These annual dialogues have become important events in carrying forward the mutual understanding and joint actions of parties that were in conflict previously.

The period between the first and the fourth consultations also saw the evolution and concretisation of a national Conservation and Livelihoods Network (CLN), with the following guiding principles:

- * recognising the fundamental right to existence of all wild animals and plants and the need for protected/conservation areas and legal measures to ensure this right;
- * recognising the fundamental right of local and tribal communities to their traditional livelihood resources and to participate equitably in conservation programmes;
- * protecting threatened wildlife species across the country, by creating certain inviolate zones (demarcated in a participatory manner) and making changes in existing resource use activities;
- * declaring as unacceptable forced displacement of traditional communities from PAs or other wildlife habitats; and
- * declaring as unacceptable the imposition of large-scale destructive models of 'development' on

wildlife habitats and local communities, and finding alternative paths to achieve human welfare.

THIS was the background in which the discussions were held at the 4th consultation. The deliberations covered a range of issues, and reached the following major conclusions:

1. Maintaining the integrity of wildlife habitats: Several activities (agriculture and construction of dams, railway lines, roads and so on) cause fragmentation of forests and other ecosystems, with serious impacts on wildlife. There is an urgent need to understand such impacts, and to avoid fragmentation in critical wildlife habitats and corridors. Also important is biological monitoring, to ensure that human activities do not cause loss of biodiversity. As ecological damage is often not immediately visible such monitoring is needed even for traditional activities which may not be causing apparent destruction.
2. Commercial/Industrial Threats: Activities such as mining (the Kudremukh National Park, Karnataka), construction of dams (the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh), roads (the Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu) and railway lines (the Rajaji National Park, Uttar Pradesh), aquaculture (the Bhitarkanika Sanctuary, Orissa), tea and coffee planting (the BRT Wildlife Sanctuary, Karnataka), and encroachments by large farming interests (the Bhadra Sanctuary, Karnataka), were cited as the greatest threats to PAs and local people's livelihoods. The participants were unanimous that these activities needed to be strongly opposed. The current model of development, which involves sacrifice of critical ecological areas and threatens local community livelihoods, has to be seriously questioned and changed. Participants also recognised that urban and elite lifestyles and unbridled consumerism are major factors in these threats. The Environment Support Group (ESG), Bangalore, made a presentation on the mining activities in the Kudremukh National Park. Based on this, an independent statement was issued at the end of the Consultation asking for the stoppage of and a ban on mining activities in the park. Several participants agreed to join hands if legal action is necessary for the purpose.

The meeting expressed its concern about the Prime Minister's proposal for a network of expressways linking up the whole country, and the revival of the "garland canal" proposal to link the major rivers of the country. While on the face of it these appear to be great development projects, their potential ecological and social costs have not been studied. Such projects may cause further fragmentation of wildlife habitats, displacement of local communities, waterlogging and salinisation of land. These, as also the doubtful benefits of such mega-projects, needed to be highlighted.

3. Tourism and pilgrimage: Barring a few exceptions, the rapidly expanding tourism industry is proving highly destructive to wildlife and local people. The Consultation suggested that a code of conduct that would make tourism an environmentally and culturally sensitive activity be formulated and enforced strictly. This would often happen only if local communities and wildlife officials/NGOs are empowered to manage and earn revenue from tourism. The major part of the revenue generated should go back to the management of the wildlife habitat. The Periyar Tiger Reserve (Kerala), the Morjim beach (Goa) and the Khanchendzonga National Park (Sikkim) - where locals benefited and ecological principles were applied - were cited as alternative models in this regard. However, participants noted the need to document these cases in more detail. Members of the North Eastern Society for the Preservation of Nature and Wildlife (NESPON), Siliguri, West Bengal suggested a Joint Tourism Development (JTD) scheme modeled on lines of Joint Forest Management (JFM), where the local communities and the authorities concerned could work together.

Another sensitive topic discussed briefly was the adverse and serious impact of increased and commercialised pilgrimage activities on protected areas such as the Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary, Maharashtra, the Periyar Tiger Reserve and the Gir National Park, Gujarat. It was felt that a concerted effort involving religious leaders and those in charge of these pilgrimage sites were needed to tackle this problem.

4. Settlement of rights: The Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 requires that the rights of people dependent on areas to be notified as PAs be settled by the State government concerned. However, the current process of settlement of rights, resulting from a Supreme Court order of 1997 in a case filed by the World Wide Fund for Nature-India, or WWF-India, continues to be a matter of major concern (Frontline, July 30, 1999). Misunderstandings and varied interpretations of the court order have led to the harassment of local people in many areas, and the denotification of parts of PAs in others (for instance, the Great Himalayan National Park, Himachal Pradesh). The process of

settlement of rights has also become a front for the entry of various vested interests such as mining and hydro-electric power companies. Groups such as KHOJ, Srujan, and Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA), Nagpur, that have worked on this issue in the PAs of the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra (particularly the Melghat Tiger Reserve), made presentations on the situation there.

The participants felt that there was an urgent need for a set of guidelines for the process of settlement of rights, so that instances of denotification can be minimised and the customary rights of people can be recorded and established. It was pointed out that the work by the Maharashtra government along these lines could be critically reviewed and emulated elsewhere.

5. Externally-aided projects: Serious concern was raised about the adverse impacts and lack of sustainability of many externally-aided projects related to forestry and wildlife. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) Ecodevelopment project and the World Bank's State forestry projects (such as those in Madhya Pradesh) came in for criticism from Shaswat and other groups. Members of Kalpavriksh also alerted the participants to the implications of the recently released National Forestry Action Plan, which, while containing several progressive elements, could also move the country towards further commercialisation of forests, and towards a view that the main ingredient needed to protect the country's forests was money. An interesting presentation was made on the ecodevelopment project in the Kalakad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) in Tamil Nadu. Unlike the general record of ecodevelopment efforts, the presence of motivated forest officials, NGOs and community elders at the KMTR seemed to have produced several positive results.

The participants stressed that internal funding sources should be explored, and that foreign aid need not be a stimulator for community-based management of natural resources. They recommended that both internally and externally funded projects should ensure the complete involvement of the local communities concerned, the integration of wildlife conservation concerns, and transparency in their formulation, implementation and monitoring.

6. Laws and policies: Various laws and policies related to natural resource management were discussed in detail. The participants pointed out that there were several legal provisions that could be proactively used for participatory conservation. The ones specially highlighted included the National Forest Policy 1988, the Gramdan Acts of several States, provisions such as those of Village Forests in the Indian Forest Act 1927, the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 and the new Government of India circular extending the Joint Forest Management (JFM) scheme to good forests. At the same time, necessary amendments need to be made in laws such as the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, so as to allow for the participation of local communities in the management of PAs, and at the same time to keep destructive commercial forces out of environmentally and culturally sensitive areas. A need for greater stress on wildlife conservation in JFM programmes was expressed.

A need to understand better the linkages between various Acts and policy measures was also expressed and it was resolved to organise training seminars on this. The Centre for Environment Education, Pune, the National Law School, Bangalore, and the Conservation Education Centre of the Bombay Natural History (BNHS) agreed to take the lead in this.

7. Community conserved areas: It is estimated that today several million hectares of forests, wetlands and other ecosystems across the country are under protection in community initiatives outside the officially protected areas system. These remain largely unknown and undocumented, but it is becoming clear as more information comes in that these are playing a very significant role in the conservation of the country's biodiversity. Prominent examples include forest and agro biodiversity conservation in Jardhargaon in Tehri Garhwal (Uttar Pradesh), water harvesting in several hundred villages of Alwar district (Rajasthan), and forest conservation through tribal self-rule in Mendha Lekha village, Gadchiroli district (Maharashtra). It was strongly felt that more cases must be accorded recognition and considered as possible models of the integration of wildlife conservation and livelihood rights. There is also at the same time a need for ecological monitoring and research in these areas to get a complete picture, for which attempts would be made to secure commitments from research and scientific institutions. Research organisations such as the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Nature (SACON), Coimbatore and the BNHS, Mumbai, who participated in the Consultation, have shown interest in this kind of joint work with NGOs and local communities.

8. Conservation education: There is an urgent need to create awareness and raise information levels

on ecological and conservation issues (including social aspects). This is needed amongst various sections of society, including local communities, government officials, and NGOs. A substantial commitment to this end from the state was also called for.

IN conclusion, the participants of the Consultation felt that the ongoing collaborative work in the BRT sanctuary was an excellent example of a joint initiative that involves the Forest department, community-based groups, scientific organisations and local communities. It was recommended that this process be taken further in the direction of participatory or joint management of the BRT Sanctuary. One way of doing this was through formal recognition of the joint initiative that is already under way. Members of VGKK, ATREE, ESG and Kalpavriksh subsequently met the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests of Karnataka, Shantaram Adappa, to press for this. The response was cautious but positive, and the years to come will tell whether areas such as the BRT s anctuary can lead the way in achieving more effective, participatory and culturally sensitive natural resource conservation.

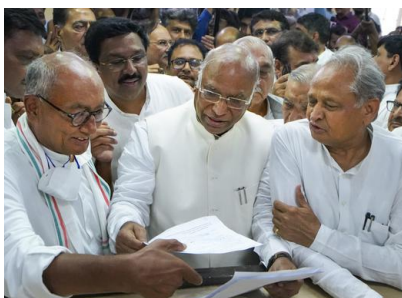
Overall, the participants expressed an urgent need to move towards modes of conservation which involved the local people in the planning and implementation of biodiversity conservation programmes. These modes need to be sensitive to both the special needs of wildlife species, and those of different sections of society. For all participants, there was a common bottomline: in critical natural areas, priority must be accorded to wildlife and to local communities, over urban/industrial developmental requirements. The CLN was given the mandate to carry this message forward through a series of activities.

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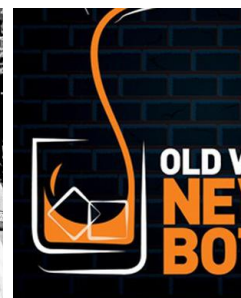
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