

Wildlife conservation is not a numbers game. If it were, we would have little cause to worry, judging by the number of national parks and sanctuaries in the country, the international, regional, national, and local seminars held on the issue, and the various organisations calling themselves conservationist—India has no dearth of these. Yet, its wildlife continues to perish, and its natural ecosystems continue to dwindle. What explains this paradox?

The conservation coin in India has two seemingly conflicting sides—one, the range and diversity of wildlife and wildlife habitats, and second, the intense human use of these habitats.

Of the first, what can be said can never be enough. From the freezing heights of the Himalayas to the searing sand dunes of the Thar Desert, from the perpetually moist evergreen forests of the North-east to the arid thorn scrub of the Aravallis, from the salt wastes of the Rann of Kutch to the abundantly alive coral reefs of the Andamans...an entire lifetime would be inadequate to see the entire range of natural habitats in India. It is but inevitable that such diversity would produce an explosion of wild animals and plants. On two per cent of the world's surface, we have over 5 per cent of its animal species. This includes over 12000 species of birds, 500 species of mammals, and 45,000 species of plants. The sheer diversity of these and other living creatures is quite wonderfully bewildering.

But there is the other side of the coin—human presence. Very little land in India is completely free of human activity, though of course the

kind and intensity of such activity vary considerably. Natural areas have been used for lightweight purposes like herb collection, but they have also been drastically altered by mining, urbanization, deforestation, and a whole host of other 'developmental' projects. It is this latter set of activities that has largely been responsible for the present crisis situation.

And it is quite clear that we are in the midst of a crisis. Wildlife has suffered grievously in India, especially in this century. While hunting was the primary cause of destruction till a few decades back, driving species such as the rhino, the swamp deer, the tiger and the lion to near extinction, this factor has been far eclipsed by a more recent phenomenon: habitat loss. Natural ecosystems everywhere have been destroyed or degraded—forests razed, wetlands drained out or polluted, grasslands built upon, and mountains blasted open. There is no estimate of how much we have decimated, but if the state of our forests is an indication, then well over half of what constituted wildlife habitats has already vanished. Replaced by agricultural fields, cities and towns, roads and industries, or simply barren, desertified land.

And with the loss of habitat there has been a concomitant decimation of wildlife, species like the cheetah have disappeared completely, while others have suffered a great decline in numbers.

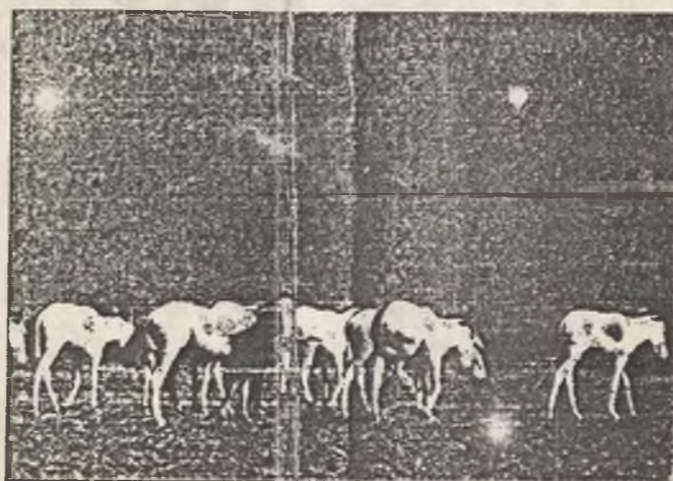
NOT YET OUT OF THE WOODS

No one can deny that India's conservation effort has been stupendous. This includes the enactment of a series of state legislations, culminating in the national Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972, the formulation of the National Wildlife Action Plan in 1982, the creation of a rapidly expanding network of national parks and sanctuaries (numbering 465 at present), the implementation of special conservation projects starting with Project Tiger, and the attempts at artificial breeding and reintroduction into the wild of several endangered species. These and other efforts, by both the government and people's organisations, have helped to check the rampant destruction that had been taking place earlier. But they have not, unfortunately, reversed the overall decline, except in the case of a handful of favoured species like the tiger.

By far the most important reason for this paradoxical situation is our dismal failure to reconcile wildlife protection measures with human interest. The conservation policies and efforts of the last two decades have been dominated by members of the urban elite, people who are either out of touch with the socio-political realities of rural India, or know these realities but are fundamentally unsympathetic to the genuine needs of our rural and tribal communities. And so the approach has been to either ignore these communities, or actually curb

their activities in areas sought to be conserved. Indeed, if some influential wildlife enthusiasts had their way, people at large would have been expelled from every national park and sanctuary in India.

Stemming from an essentially western concept of conservation, this attempt at creating 'bottled-in' wildlife reserves has rebounded in many ways.



The wild ass sanctuary in Gujarat is threatened by a car rally in February, 1990

Its most serious repercussion has been the creation of hostility amongst local communities, tragically even those communities which may have been essentially conservationist. Lakhs of people have been transformed from rights-holders to 'offenders' by some simple administrative stroke of a pen. No wildlife area can survive very long under such conditions. Many people have as genuine a dependence on natural areas as

do wild creatures, and that needs to be respected. What is therefore urgently needed are programmes that not only ensure fulfilment of the survival needs of local people, but actually offer them employment and other benefits stemming from the conservation project. The rickshaw-pullers of Bharatpur National Park, who take in tourists and who are trained in bird identi-

while local people are made the scapegoats, the most severe disturbance to wildlife areas often comes from urban and industrial sources. A large part of our wilderness areas, including national parks and sanctuaries, are still open to mining, industrial use, dam construction, and other such activities. A detailed report recently published by the Indian Institute of Public Administration (IIPA) revealed the startling fact that 56 per cent of national parks and 63 per cent of sanctuaries were still used for non-conservation purposes by government agencies themselves. Much of this is in clear violation of the Wildlife (Protection) Act of 1972. The reported clearance, by the government of Gujarat, of a car rally to be organised through the Rann of Kutch, home of the endangered wild ass, is symptomatic of the short shrift still given to wildlife by the government.

This stepmotherly treatment is also seen in other spheres. While state governments have been quick to set up wildlife protected areas, they have been far less eager to put their money where their mouth is. Expenditure by state governments on national parks and sanctuaries, which is a major chunk of their spending on wildlife, is still less than 3 per cent of their Forest Department budgets. Compared to the total state budgets the outlay is miniscule. Wildlife areas remain hopelessly under-staffed, under-equipped, and under-researched, so that management is reduced to ad-hoc, knee-jerk responses. There are a lot of

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Another major lacuna in our conservation efforts, also stemming from the ivory-tower dominated approach, is the continued neglect of traditional conservation beliefs and approaches. The Bishnois, the 'sacred groves' of many a rural area, the Asokan edicts...these and other shining examples are often cited but rarely imbibed into modern conservation programmes. The fundamental ethical position that humans are an essential part of nature, yet only one of its many equal parts, is still lost on the urban conservationist. In a country where human rights are so grossly violated, an acceptance of the rights of animals is clearly difficult. Yet it must be forwarded.

Also relevant here, as another failure, is the almost exclusive concentration of conservation efforts of large animals. So distorted is this approach that the very term

'wildlife' is identified with tigers, lions, deer, elephants. The tens of thousands of species of plants, insects and other invertebrates, and other such small creatures have been completely ignored. How many have already been wiped out of existence is anyone's guess, but clearly there is a crying need to focus attention on these lower levels of the ecological pyramid. There is a similar need to conserve long-neglected wildlife rich habitats like grasslands and wetlands.

What seems most urgent now is to integrate wildlife conservation into local, regional, and national land-use plans, in such a way that human usage of land does not conflict with it, and the needs of local people are fully assured. This sounds grandiose, but it can be done. But to do it, urban conservationists within or outside the government will have to face up to rural realities, learn from local communities, and integrate themselves into the grassroot environmental movements that are fast spreading in India. A failure to do this will ensure that wildlife does become a numbers game—figures in someone's computer on what once was, but is no more.

Ashish Kothari

YOGA WEEK

■ *Yoga week:* The Department of Tourism, along with U.P. Tourism is organising an International Yoga Week (2-7 February, 1990) at Rishikesh. A series of yoga and meditation demonstrations and discourses by eminent yoga experts such as Swami Ranganathan, B. K. S Iyer, J. G. and a host of eminent philosophers, will be held.

The price for the package, which includes transport and accommodation is \$ 500 for the week; on a per day basis, inclusive of boarding but excluding transport is US \$ 45 per day. The registration fee without boarding is US \$ 15 per day.