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Conservationists vs. conservation

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A more balanced approach to conservation and livelihoods is urgently required since the current one is alienating local people. ASHISH KOTHARI

Even as the tiger crisis makes the headlines, conservationists should be doing all they can to garner greater public support for wildlife conservation. Instead, we are making many more enemies.

Across the country in dozens of sites, the fragile livelihoods that communities living within forests have carved out for themselves are being

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snatched away by insensitive conservation laws and programmes. The people, who have for centuries considered forests their mother, are being alienated from them.

Forest fires

In March this year, there were reports of widespread forest fires in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (BRT WLS), in Karnataka. Once famous as the hideout of Veerappan, BRT WLS is a stronghold of the elephant and other wildlife, as also home to a few thousand Soliga adivasis. Newspaper reports cited forest officials blaming these adivasis for the fires, suggesting that they were probably taking out their anger on the government for having banned collection of non-timber forest produce (NTFP).

An investigation by Kalpavriksh revealed that indeed the Soliga adivasis were angry and upset. The ban on collection of produce like *amla* (gooseberry), medicinal plants, honey, and lichen, had hit them badly. In some cases such produce comprised over 60 per cent of their income, apart from their own use for food, health, housing, and other requirements.

Gauramma, an elder of Kaneri Colony, a Soliga settlement, had this to say: “Ever since we have been stopped from collecting forest produce, we are in a desperate situation. We used to have

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two full meals a day, now even one is difficult to get.” She and her husband now migrate out of the sanctuary to work, earning a meagre amount as labour in the fields of non-*adivasis*.

Our investigation found that the Soligas could not be blamed for most of the forest fires.

However, the alienation caused by the NTFP ban led to a lack of interest in reporting fires or helping the Forest Department to douse them, as was the case earlier.

Additionally, local researchers reported that outsiders had chopped down several dozen *amla* (gooseberry) trees in the WLS.

In previous years, they would have been stopped by the Soligas who had a stake in protecting the trees. Clearly, the NTFP ban is not only causing widespread impoverishment and misery, but also backfiring on conservation itself. This will intensify if the anger among the Soligas grows, and if, as some local social workers fear, “Naxalite” groups active in nearby areas gain a foothold among the disgruntled *adivasis*.

BRT WLS is not an isolated example. A recent study revealed that thousands of families in various protected areas of Orissa have suffered a similar fate. In Baisipalli and Satkosia Sanctuaries, the ban on NTFP collection has reduced already thin earnings, by 50 to 90 per

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cent. Many families are migrating to find work, with serious impact on social life and greater chances of exploitation. The government has provided no alternatives.

This is an issue of grave constitutional and human rights violation, as the right to life can only be sustained if access to basic livelihood resources is ensured.

At the heart of the issue is Section 29 of the Wild Life (Protection) Act 2003, which permits the extraction of forest produce only as a means of wildlife management. Such produce is to go to local people, but only if the extraction is for “personal bona fide” and not for “commercial” purposes.

When conservationists in New Delhi formulated this provision, they undoubtedly had in mind large-scale industrial extraction of bamboo, timber, and NTFP, which are serious threats to wildlife. But, by providing no definitions to the term “commercial”, they also dealt a blow to small-scale community-based traditional collection of forest produce.

Interpretations

Adding to the crisis is a Supreme Court order. In February 2000, the Court directed that all states were required to refrain from ordering any removal of “dead, diseased, dying or wind

fallen trees, drift wood and grasses, etc from any National Park or Game Sanctuary...”

Subsequent to this, the Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) in 2003 and the Centrally Empowered Committee of the Supreme Court in 2004 greatly expanded the interpretation of this order by asking all State Governments to cease any further enjoyment of rights within protected areas, without central permission.

This over-zealous interpretation, coupled with the language of Section 29 of the WLPA, has prompted many State Governments into the kind of action mentioned above, mostly in the last year or two.

In the case of BRT WLS, the Deputy Conservator of Forests (DCF) in charge of the Sanctuary, Dixit Kumar, argued in 2004 that stopping NTFP collection would create suffering and backfire on conservation. He said that basic livelihood activities should be considered “bona fide” and not “commercial”.

This is an argument that State Governments could have used to continue NTFP collection. Of course there are many areas where even local forest use may be ecologically damaging but, in hundreds of initiatives across India, communities have shown that they can adopt restrictions and regulations to make it

sustainable, especially with government or NGO help. Ironically, in BRT WLS, scientists have shown that the NTFP extraction is already within sustainable limits... the last place a ban was justified.

Integrate livelihood

There is a crying need for a more balanced approach to conservation and livelihoods. The Wild Life Act is a valuable law, one of the few standing in the way of wholesale destruction of our natural ecosystems. But its proponents must accept that some of its provisions, and interpretations of these by the courts, are archaic and against the interests of conservation itself. Refusal to accept this has meant that human rights activists have become increasingly strident in their demands. Indeed, if conservationists had integrated livelihood concerns as part of conservation policy over the last few decades, adivasi activists may never have had to push for separate forest rights legislation.

As it now stands, the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest-Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act 2006 is likely to have very mixed results, with some substantial gains by adivasis and forests, and some disastrous losses.

Why many conservationists are blind to this

reality is baffling. Why can't we see the widespread hostility generated, creating situations where it is much harder to protect critical tiger populations?

Why would forest-dwelling communities report poachers and fires to forest officials when all they have received is suffering? Conversely, can't we see that most communities would not support poaching if their basic needs are being ensured by conservation programmes, if we help strengthen their long-term stake in protecting ecosystems and wildlife?

One needs only to look at what has happened in a handful of sites where officials have taken such an approach. At Periyar Tiger Reserve, communities (including hardcore poachers) have been aided with better marketing facilities for their agricultural produce, and alternative livelihoods such as ecotourism. In turn they actively patrol the forests and report untoward incidents. Both livelihoods and conservation are strengthened.

In BRT WLS itself, the availability of participatory monitoring, intense scientific research, Soliga traditions of conservation, and active NGOs provide an ideal situation for collaborative protected area management. Such initiatives are happening across the world but here, in India, we remain blinkered by outdated western conservation visions, which the West

itself is discarding.

The writer is a member of Kalpavriksh Environmental Action Group.

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