

Civil Society

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COVER STORY



EVERYONE LOVES THE TIGER

A quick survey of what conservationists of different convictions are saying as the PM goes to Ranthambore and the tiger task force gets down to work.

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The dead tiger's tale

It has become fashionable to talk of economic reform in India only in terms of banking, stock markets and industry. Privatisation debates make our economists and administrators turn pink with excitement. All progress is invariably hooked to FDI and GDP. But when it comes to managing India's biggest natural asset, its forests, no one seems interested in finding solutions. Reform must reach here. It only requires a few chartered accountants and MBAs to get the government out of companies. But getting the government out of forests, so that they can be used to create wealth for everyone, is a much more complex task.

The disappearance of tigers from the sanctuary at Sariska and the rapid decline in their numbers elsewhere in the country has once again shown up the colonial moorings of our forest policy.

The tiger deaths have made headlines, but the rot goes much deeper. India is not only losing wildlife, but its forests remain under utilised and degraded. Used creatively, they can provide widespread prosperity. Healthy and well managed forests are also needed for a wider ecological balance.

Forest policy, as we know it, has been inherited from the British. Its chief supporters have been the conservationists who believe that armed guards can stop felling and poaching.

Under this policy, tribals and other local communities have been excluded even though traditionally they have been efficient managers of forests. These people, mostly alienated and hostile, now either live illegally within forests on in abject poverty on the fringes. They are harassed by the forest service and are easy recruits for poachers and smuggling syndicates who put their traditional hunting skills to use for their nefarious business.

If the tiger and other forms of wildlife are to be saved, then forest policy has to change. It has to be fashioned at ground level because years of neglect have made issues complex. Activists, alienated communities and the government can work together. In a country as diverse as ours, it is perhaps foolish to look for a single answer.

Several local level solutions are needed – solutions that are as different from each other as the Sunderbans is from Sariska. It is for this reason that we have tried in our cover story to talk to a cross-section of people who may not normally find a voice in the media. Many more need to be spoken to and our point is that that there should be a multiplicity of views.

It is important to note that where the tiger is hale and hearty and safe from poachers, local people have been involved and governance has come with flexibility. This message should not be lost. It is also necessary to look at other countries. Nepal, for instance, has taken a big leap into community forest management and benefited from it.

With this issue we begin a new section called Insight devoted to grassroot research. We begin with an offering from Harnath Jagawat on the Hariyali programme for watershed management.

We are also proud to launch a column by Harivansh, chief editor of our editorial ally, *Prabhat Khabar*.

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'Communities have an important role'

Civil Society News
New Delhi

ENVIRONMENTALIST **Ashish Kothari** of Kalpavriksh strongly believes in involving tribal and local communities in forest management. There is a need for protection, even more guns and guards, but this needs to be done in the framework of greater community involvement.

"How long will we protect tiger habitats in the midst of hostile communities, made more desperate by the denial of basic livelihood resources?" he asks.

Why do you think the tiger is disappearing from India's protected areas?

Conservation in India has been subject to 'development' technocrats who view wildlife habitats as sites for dams, mines and industries. It has failed to involve and benefit local communities who are long-standing residents of wildlife habitats. Conservation strategies have not adequately reached out to urban residents, horribly alienated from nature, demanding more and more of the country's natural resources.

Policies and programmes on conservation (especially protected areas) have made enemies of traditional dwellers and users of natural habitats, ignored their own traditions and knowledge related to conservation, and assumed that a 'guns and guards' approach will be adequate to save wildlife. This is the single biggest failure of formal conservation policy in India.

What do you think needs to be done?

Conservationists who ask for more guns and guards to protect wildlife habitats are ignoring the political and social context of wildlife conservation. This is not to deny the need for more protection, even for more guns and guards. But this should be done within the context of a package of measures.

These include partnerships between officials, communities, and NGOs through joint management committees and channelling revenues from protected areas into local conservation and community welfare activities. Legal status should be given to traditional resource use rights and responsibilities, within conservation limitations. Alternatives can be provided for those activities that are irreversibly damaging. Rural development funds should be targeted into ecologically sensitive livelihood activities for villagers. A diversity of collaborative and community-based conservation initiatives must be encouraged.

Stop all destructive 'development' mega-projects from tiger habitats. Also, combine traditional knowledge and practices with modern ones. Depute

'Build partnerships between people, officials and NGOs through joint management committees.'

more and better trained staff, build local community capacity for conservation and provide security and arms against powerful poaching gangs. There should be regular public dialogues at the level of each tiger habitat and each state

Are there any models we can follow?

In the Periyar Tiger Reserve, forest officials have, over the last five or six years, turned around a situation of intense poaching, hostility from local people, and 'porous' boundaries to one of much greater security for wildlife. How did they do this? They used some seed money from a project on eco-development to reach out to communities, understand and help them in enhancing

livelihoods, involve them in anti-poaching and other management activities, and guide them to earn from ecologically sensitive tourism. In the Chilika lagoon (which includes a bird sanctuary), the Chilika Development Authority arrested the process of wetland decay and biodiversity loss by involving local fisherfolk, combining modern with traditional knowledge, and taking other participatory measures.

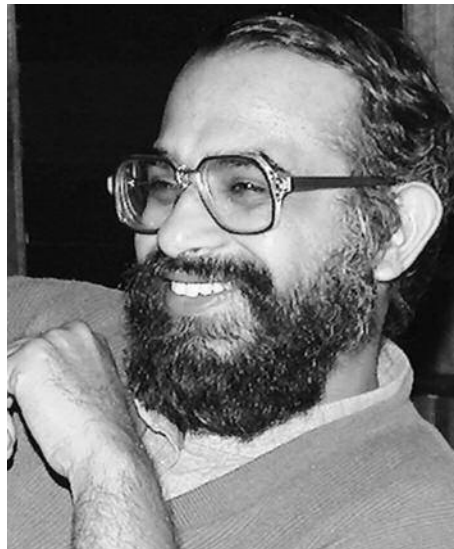
How can it be ensured that traditional resource rights to communities don't destroy forests?

There are enough examples where rights have led to sustainable use and conservation but also where they have led to misuse and ecological destruction. Some initiatives have been

successful for a number of reasons. First, rights to natural resources are clear in their scope and extent, and provide for in statutory or other laws. Secondly, these laws are accompanied by explicit sharing of decision-making powers relating to natural resources and accompanied by conservation responsibilities, and there are clear deterrents if responsibilities are not being met. Thirdly, these rights are not alienable (either by selling or other means) and exercised on the basis of adequate capacity. Lastly, these rights are regulated by institutional mechanisms, including checks and balances provided by official agencies and/or NGOs.

Initiatives by communities, across virtually all states of India, demonstrate that the above is possible. For instance, communities have been able to curtail and stop encroachment in Mendha-Lekha, Maharashtra. They have effectively prohibited hunting and timber theft in Luzophuhu, Phek, Sendenyu, and dozens of other villages in Nagaland. They have changed resource extraction and use practices to make them more sustainable, for example in Jardhargaon, Uttaranchal, Bhaonta-Kolyala in Rajasthan and the Biligiri hills, Karnataka.

(For more information on community conserved areas, or other initiatives, contact Ashish at ashishkothari@vsnl.com, or Neema Pathak at natrails@vsnl.com).



Ashish Kothari

area will have to look for local innovative solutions. In the Sunderbans, for instance, the entire habitat of the tiger is undergoing a change.

Rise in sea level and temperature, coastal erosion and population pressures are playing havoc on the deltaic island system of the Sunderbans and severely affecting its biodiversity. The changes are so severe that half a million environmental refugees are expected to be displaced in the region by 2020, according to a study conducted by the School of Oceanographic Studies, Jadavpur University under Prof Sugato Hazra.

If we sum up what people we spoke to across the country had to say, this is what we would get:

PEOPLE: Give local people rights over land and forest produce with adequate safeguards. Involve communities in the protection of animals. Ensure sustainable livelihoods.

HABITAT: Parks and sanctuaries must have healthy forests. There should be no mining, plenty of water, animals for the tiger to prey on, trees and grasses and so on in the core area of the sanctuary.

POLITICS: Saving the tiger must be a political effort.

FOREST SERVICE: Modernise the service. Make it younger. Let it look for creative local solutions.

TOURISM: The tiger can be a means of generating tourism revenue, which should then be used locally. People around forests should benefit.

DATABASE: There is a need for accurate data on wildlife crimes and wildlife.

GLOBAL CRIME: Crack down on smuggling syndicates. Create awareness, international pressure.

INVOLVE THE YOUNG: Conservation should be the work of the young both in cities and the rural areas. There should be ways of bringing them in.