

## COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION

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**Ashish Kothari** of Kalpavriksh, Pune, gave an overview of community-based conservation in India. He specified three areas that needed to be focused on, namely community conserved areas (CCAs), protected areas (PAs) and landscapes outside CCAs and PAs.

CCAs can be roughly defined as natural and modified ecosystems that contain significant biodiversity values, ecological services and cultural values that are voluntarily conserved by indigenous/mobile/local communities through customary laws or other effective means. In most cases these areas have been beneficial for the local ecosystem, the biodiversity, the people and the adjoining areas.

Internationally, several policies have been formed to acknowledge CCAs, like the Convention on Biological Diversity, which has been ratified by India. There are also several Indian laws and policies that could back CCAs or co-managed (CM) areas. The National Wildlife Action Plan talks about CCAs and CMs; Wildlife Protection Act (amended in 2002) brought in concepts like Community Reserves and Conservation Reserves; The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, mentions community forests; the Indian Forests Act, 1927, mentions village forests. However, challenges still exist in the form of appropriate implementation of these laws and policies. Furthermore, destructive development projects and globalisation have led to the watering down of these laws and policies.

While acknowledging the importance of PAs to protect certain species and ecosystems, one must realise that over 3 million people live inside them and the creation of such PAs has led to the displacement and disempowerment of these individuals. This has caused several problems like loss of traditional forms of conservation, clashes with the forest department, illegal poaching and timber extraction, to name a few. This often negatively affects conservation itself, and defeats the purpose for which PAs were created, apart from creating enormous human suffering. But there are some initial changes taking place, such as Periyar Tiger Reserve where officials were working with local adivasi communities to enhance their livelihoods and involve them in protection. In this case too, developments in international policies such as the CBD Programme of Work on Protected Areas, which

emphasised collaborative management and the integration of conservation with livelihoods, could lead to more equitable conservation within India.

The landscape approach seeks to connect different areas under conservation and sustainable use, and form extensive stretches of conserved areas rather than little islands of protection. This could include CCAs, PAs and many other forms of conservation sites to form a strong mosaic of conservation.

The overview emphasised the need for participatory methods of conservation that ensured wildlife protection and the rights of local people to life and livelihood.

**Kanhaiya Gujjar**, a villager from Bhaonta-Kolyala villages working with the NGO Tarun Bharat Sangh in Rajasthan, spoke on community-based landscape conservation in Rajasthan with reference to the River Arvari in Alwar district in Rajasthan. The area had thick forests, but lost them during colonial rule. This trend continued after India became an independent nation and caused many problems like the drying up of the Arvari, severe droughts during dry seasons and excessive soil erosion during the monsoons. In 1987, along with the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), the villagers conducted a meeting to address various local problems. They decided to regenerate their forest and revert to traditional forms of water management to restore the ecological balance of the area. To achieve this, rules about forest use were implemented and traditional water harvesting structures (*johads*) were constructed. Their efforts paid off when the river regenerated and started flowing again. Currently, there are 30 tanks in the area as opposed to the 4 that existed when the movement started.

Several threats have cropped up since the revival of the river. One of the main problems was the fishing contracts leased out by the government to private bodies. The TBS opposed this and won the struggle. They realised the need for their own governing body that would protect the river from such instances in the future. They formed the Arvari Sansad (Parliament). This is the first peoples' parliament in the country. It has 242 elected members and various internal communities that look into matters related to the river (including water sharing, wildlife and forest conservation, inter-village disputes, and others). However, they still face



various challenges including boundary issues with their neighbours, threats of mining and other development projects, election politics that threatens to fragment their society and insufficient cooperation from government bodies.

**Tsilie Sakhrie**, an Angami tribal from the Khonoma Tragopan Sanctuary Trust in Nagaland, spoke about community conservation of the Blyth's Tragopan. Khonoma is a village in Kohima district, Nagaland, that is rich in biodiversity and home to the threatened Blyth's Tragopan. Sakhrie and a few others set out to protect this bird and conducted various conservation activities. Since, hunting was traditionally acceptable and glorified in Khonoma, they initially faced a lot of resistance and opposition to their conservation efforts. Through continuous interactions with the community, Sakhrie and his colleagues made people realise the importance of conserving the Blyth's Tragopan and the village moved away from hunting and towards conservation. In 1998, the Khonoma Nature Conservation and Tragopan Sanctuary was officially established. It is managed and supported by the local community.

**Vijay Jardhari**, a farmer, spoke about community conservation in his village Jardhargaon in Uttarakhand. This village is situated in the Himalayan foothills at an altitude of 1,500 metres. It has 17 settlements with 8-10 families each. The major occupations here are agriculture and animal husbandry. They rely on local forests for firewood, fruits, fuel and medicinal plants. By 1980, deforestation activities conducted by the forest department and local people had left the forests almost bare. Jardhari was a part of the Chipko movement and was aware of the power of peoples' movements. In 1980, the people of Jardhar had a meeting and decided to work towards regenerating their forests. They formulated rules and appointed guards to protect the forests. They formed a *Van Suraksha Samiti* (VSS) or Forest Protection Committee, and appointed a forest guard with their own resources. Within three years, the forest had regenerated substantially; within 30 years it had become dense with high biodiversity.

Having dealt with their forests the villagers also decided to stabilise their farming methods. Chemical fertilisers had affected farming in the area so they reverted to traditional forms of farming. They collected and distributed local seeds and started the *Beej Bachao Andolan* (Save the Seeds Movement). Despite their success they face several problems. There has been a significant increase in human-wildlife conflicts, the community natural resource management enjoys no legal backing, and government policies that promote chemical intensive farming methods are in direct conflict with their traditional methods of farming.

**Anil Bhardwaj** of Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, talked about the ecocodevelopment project in Periyar as an

example of successful local community involvement in a tiger reserve. In the 1980s and 1990s, Periyar was viewed as a rich forest, but was actually riddled with problems ranging from ganja cultivation and poaching to waste problems caused by tourists and pilgrims. The roots of these problems lay in poor park management and heavy dependence of local people on the forest. Thus, it was decided to pilot an eco-development project to meet the needs of conservation and livelihood. Local people would be involved in protecting the PA and alternate forms of livelihood would be made available for them to offset the losses accrued by changing their traditional methods of using the forests. The project also envisioned converting poachers into protectors, forming women groups and local self-help groups to create a strong base of local people who would support the project with their knowledge of the forest and learn new skills to propel the project further. They worked towards creating several eco-development committees that handled different issues, helped local people get rid of their debts and arranged for them to be involved in conservation and documentation work. Local communities are trained to conduct eco-awareness camps and are part of regularising the pilgrims in the park. Through a slow process that began with creating a relationship based on trust between the local people and forest officials, a working model of joint conservation has been created.

**Charudutt Mishra** of Nature Conservation Foundation and the Snow Leopard Trust spoke on community-based management of human-wildlife conflict, with special reference to the work going on in Spiti, Ladakh. He spoke about two basic dimensions of the effort – understanding the conflict in the area, and managing it. While undertaking the first part, one must take stock of the situation and understand the perceptions and psyche of the people in the area apart from the actual information on losses. These are extremely important when it comes to actually implementing the management plans. In Spiti, Snow Leopards were highly dependent on livestock in some areas and were responsible for *c.* 12% of the livestock losses. The perceptions of the damage caused by the animal were magnified because of a lack of data (actual losses, causes, circumstances of loss) and because of insufficient and delayed compensation for livestock losses. The best way to deal with human-wildlife conflict, was to address all three of these simultaneously – reducing livestock losses, economic offsetting and increasing the social understanding of the situation. In Spiti, they reduced livestock losses by putting better herding methods in place, and increasing the populations of wild prey of the Snow Leopard. They created community-based insurance which is run by the community and gives complete compensation much faster than the government bodies because of simpler



verification and disbursement procedures (uncovering false claims is easy in a small community). Conducting educational programmes and giving incentives to undertake conservation have increased social understanding. This programme has been running successfully for over five years and livestock losses have reduced dramatically. Mishra pointed out that while it was important to have community-based management plans, there should also be governmental support.

#### Panel discussion

**Madhu Ramnath**, an ethnobotanist, talked about the importance of lesser known non-timber forest produce (NTFP). He said that while the most prominently discussed forms of NTFP tend to be profitable ones like Tendu patta (*Diospyros melanoxylon*), sal seeds (*Shorea robusta*) and Mahua (*Madhuca indica*), there exists a rich diversity of non-commercial NTFP that are vital for the health and subsistence of local communities.

The commercially viable forms are used to make a variety of products from cigarettes to alcohol. The collection processes are often highly politicised, involving power struggles between local communities, forest departments, local governments and private bodies. The other forms of NTFP exist in the form of fibres, leaves, poisons, berries, yams, etc. with specialised functions related to health and survival.

With 20% of our population still directly dependent on such produce, one should not undermine the power of these forms of NTFP. Ramnath stated that although commercial NTFP assured local communities some money, the non-commercial ones were far more important because they could ensure good health, food security and sovereignty. They also required and could ensure the maintenance of healthy, biologically diverse forests.

**Sharad Lele** from the Institute of Social and Economic Change in Bengaluru, spoke on forest-based enterprise and community-based conservation. He enumerated the barriers that impeded the two from interacting effectively. The attitude of those in power is the biggest barrier that prevents local communities from taking part in conservation activities. He pointed out that in all the case studies discussed in the seminar, local communities had to prove their worth as conservationists to external bodies before they were allowed to partake in the process of conservation. Often, when the local communities are involved in conservation processes, they are given menial tasks or ones with lower levels of responsibility. This is indicative of the level of trust extended by external bodies to the community. The right of local people to be intricately involved with wildlife conservation and eco-tourism in their own area should be acknowledged. Ultimately, instrumental

approaches to CBC have been used rather than focusing on rights-based approaches. Another problem was the paucity of formal spaces where local communities could legally partake in conservation efforts. This could change with the implementation of the Forests Rights Act because it has potential to acknowledge these rights. Lele also reminded external bodies that it is alright if the fiscal profits expected by local communities from eco-tourism and other profit generating enterprises are lower than what the external bodies expect.

**Tushar Dash** from Vasundhara in Orissa, spoke about community conservation and the Forest Rights Act. Orissa is a state with 62 tribes where 13 primitive tribal groups are mostly forest dwellers, 44% of the land is scheduled area and over 40% of the people are critically poor and dependent on the forest for livelihood. Thus, it is important to recognise the rights of local people, whose lives have been and continue to be, intricately linked with the forest, while looking into conservation issues. He talked about two forms of conservation: the exclusive approach and the community conservation initiatives (CCI) approach. The former works towards creating conservation enclaves and normally ignores or denies traditional practices, the rights of local people to be involved in conservation processes and their rights to livelihood. The latter is normally based on traditional knowledge and practices that have developed over time and addresses the issues of rights and livelihoods. Traditional forms of CCIs are present all over Orissa. Currently, there are about 12,000 forest protection groups working around two million hectares of forest rich in biodiversity. This includes initiatives in wetlands and coastal areas, and species protection and conservation based on cultural or spiritual beliefs.

These initiatives require legal backing, recognition of rights and protection from development threats. The Forest Rights Act (FRA) has, to some extent, achieved these goals. It has been used in places like Nayagarh where 200 villages have claimed rights over community forests that they have been protecting. In Niyamgiri, the Dongria Kondhs have used FRA to fight a mining project that threatens the area. Section 5 of the Act gives *Gram Sabhas* the right to form conservation and development committees, and Community Biodiversity Management Plans have also been used to increase local participation in conservation processes. Thus, the FRA has the potential to ensure greater involvement of local people in conservation efforts. But the main challenge lies in making more people aware of the act and in implementing it.

**Nitin Rai** of Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE), Bengaluru, talked about community conservation in Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary of Karnataka. There exist, within the sanctuary, several sacred sites of a tribe called the Soligas.



Most of these sites have not been identified on modern maps. There are five tribes with a total population of 12,000 who live in and around the sanctuary. They have created a cultural map, where 593 sacred spots have been denoted. The Soligas also defined various vegetative classes that were highly specialised, based on information like the contour of slopes, the composition of the area, the density of flora and several other similar pieces of information. This map, with its different vegetative classifications and cultural sites, is a historical and cultural map of the Soligas. They see it as a method of supporting their right to claiming the forest and argue that they can claim the land because they have used the same method employed by urban people to claim land – which is, naming and mapping areas. There are various efforts towards claiming these rights through Section 33b of the Wild Life Protection Act (2003 amendment) and Section 5 of the Forest Rights Act.

### General discussion

After the presentations and panel discussion, there was a question-answer session and a discussion. The discussion revolved around the problems of CBC. This included the fallouts, loopholes and unforeseen complications of this method of conservation.

One common problem in most of the successful sites was an increase in human-wildlife conflicts, especially with monkeys, wild boar and nilgai. The discussion brought out a variety of possible solutions ranging from culling and hunting to changing cropping patterns. However, the group acknowledged the difficulties in implementing these methods due to religious/cultural values attributed to the animal in question and due to ethical doubts about the right to cull animals. Other solutions were urgently needed.

Conflicts between generations based on changing values and materialistic desires are also common to these communities. Younger generations often do not wish to

actively continue with the traditional paths that the previous generations have created. This problem becomes acute when destructive development projects, that claim to offer employment and salaries, are proposed in these areas. While the youth focus on the money that could be earned through these projects, the older generations focus on the changes in the ecological conditions of the area and social fabric of the community. Kanhaya Gujjar shared his experiences with the group where families did not speak to each other because they differed over a mining project that was coming up in their area. However, when the youth saw the rapid changes in the society that took place because of the influx of foreigners, they realised that the social cost outweighed the monetary benefits and they too fought against the mining project.

Some people wanted more scientific data to prove the effectiveness of CBC. A need for scientists and researchers to conduct studies on the feasibility of these initiatives was identified. These studies could determine factors that have helped or impeded the CBC site and subsequently help with future endeavours.

Part of the discussion revolved around what urban people could do to contribute to CBC initiatives. One method was supporting similar activities in their own areas. An appeal was made to support laws and policies that helped CBC. The FRA was taken as an example of a law that could give people the rights they have long been denied. However, there has been misguided opposition to this act, and lawsuits aimed at nullifying the act because it is viewed as a threat to conservation. Rather than removing the act, people could work towards improving it through amendments and through its implementation, and ensuring that it aids conservation processes.

An important point from the talks that was repeated in the discussion was that the CBC may not work for all ecosystems and people. It is not a panacea for all situations, but one in a larger mosaic of conservation methods.

