

Tigers and Goats – Protection of Wildlife Can be in Harmony with Sustainable Livelihoods of Villagers

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While there is widespread and increasing support for the protection of wildlife, avoidable obstructions have been created by the insistence of some conservationists and project authorities on pursuing conservation work in ways that involve the displacement of many villagers. Hence an avoidable conflict has been created, ignoring the alternative of pursuing conservation in ways that avoid such displacement and disruption of rural communities.

In fact in some places such disruption of rural communities has been accompanied also by a lot of violence against rural communities, at least partly to increase pressure on them to move out early.

Around 2000 people are alleged to have been killed and 30000 driven from homes to create a wildlife reserve in Myanmar (Panos background paper on 'Parks and People').

Currently thousands more are threatened by displacement caused by expansion of parks in Tanzania, particularly under the REGROW project.

This is extremely tragic, and entirely avoidable. As several experts have been pointing out, conservation models which are compatible with villagers' sustainable livelihoods are not just possible, but may also have higher chances of success. Ramachandra Guha, delivering the keynote address to the Conference on Wildlife and Human Rights in Asia at the University of Oslo said,

"The belief in a total ban on human intervention is misguided. Studies show that the highest levels of biological diversity are often found in areas with some (though not excessive) human intervention. In opening up new niches to be occupied by insects,

plants and birds, partially disturbed ecosystems can have a greater diversity than untouched areas.”

According to David Western, in East Africa,

“the ending of human activity in the parks, such as fires and shifting cultivation, has reduced biodiversity. Those human activities created the patchiness of terrain that encouraged more species. By pulling out the human components, and maintaining too many elephants we are losing biodiversity.”

In Bharatpur Park area of India (Rajasthan state), some years back villagers protested when the authorities banned grazing. In the ensuing conflict seven villagers were killed. Yet the Bombay Natural History Society concluded that here buffalo grazing was “an integral part of the ecosystem, helping to counter the tendency of the wetland to turn into a grassland.” Hence there was no need, even from a conservation viewpoint, to put a ban on grazing in the first place. The conflict, which caused the loss of life of innocent villagers, was thus entirely avoidable.

In some other cases also, including the famous ‘Valley of Flowers’ in Himalayan region, bans on traditional grazing had a negative impact on diversity and required a reintroduction of grazing or grass cutting.

Such research findings indicate that the interests of both human population as well as wild species in most situations can be better served by giving up the notion of parks as areas devoid of human intervention. A more rewarding approach will be to look at how local people can prove helpful in protection of animals and birds, trees and plants, and evolve a system based on involving as well as rewarding the people for their help, making creative use of their impressive knowledge of local forests as well as their various skills.

According to the Panos paper on People and Parks, the Kuikuru people in the upper Xingu valley of the Amazon rainforest can differentiate between 262 kinds of trees or plants and even more forms of animal life.

Forests play an important role in the food security of several indigenous communities by providing free of cost food which is shared much more equally and generously compared to cultivated and market-purchased food. A study by Living Farm organization in the Odisha tells us that 121 types of food available from forests are known to the tribal communities which are shared by the community and are particularly useful for meeting needs of several micro-nutrients. During the lean season and during drought years the importance of this forest food increases further.

Several communities of forest dwellers have been living in harmony with wildlife. They have self-imposed restrictions on forest-use as well as on hunting or causing any other harm to wild animals. There is much to learn from them regarding the way of peaceful coexistence with wildlife. Instead of officials and rangers trying to form such an understanding, more often the highly unfortunate trend has been to follow a policy to remove them from park areas, or at least to curtail their forest and other livelihood rights in a big way, thereby creating pressures on them to move away sooner or later.

When villagers are displaced from park areas, or their livelihood is gravely jeopardized then chances increase that some of them will be trapped by poachers and smugglers to work for

them, thereby increasing the risks to wildlife as well, and turning protectors and potential protectors of wildlife into those who can threaten wildlife.

So removal of villagers from park area can be harmful not only for them but also for biodiversity. The approach should be to involve them in the protection of biodiversity. The famous ornithologist from India, Salim Ali, had made a strong pitch for this. He stated,

“No conservation laws or measures can succeed fully unless they have the backing of informed public opinion, which in our case means the usually illiterate village cultivator.” He added that we (the conservationists) have to find the right approach for involving the villagers, not excluding them. He added, “We have never really tried enough. Devising a realistic strategy is now a challenge to all conservationists.”

The significance of this viewpoint - of working with people and not against them - can be seen very clearly in the example of van gujjars, a semi-nomadic pastoral community which is being displaced from Rajaji National Park area in North India. For several years forest and wildlife officials have continued to propagate van gujjars' pastoralism as being harmful for forests and wildlife, but this view was contested by voluntary organizations working with van gujjars like Vikalp and Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra (RLEK).

RLEK also prepared a plan for Community Forest Management in Protected Areas (CFM-PA) to enable van gujjars, in cooperation with other villagers, to manage a part of the Park area. This plan document, prepared on the basis of detailed, meticulous fieldwork, provided a view of van gujjars' relation with wildlife and forests which is very different from the dominant view propagated by most officials. (All quotes below are from the CFM-PA plan prepared by RLEK).

“All forest animals, whether fierce or gentle, are seen as interrelated components of the natural world and therefore to be cared for by mankind. “They are our children,” it is said, “for they have the same life as our own.” Moreover, ‘buffaloes have us to care for them but just because wild animals have nobody to care for them does not mean they should be harmed.”

“Jackals, snakes, leopards and even the irascible elephant are all given a respected place within the moral order of the natural world. Though different, like the five fingers of the hand, each has its part to play in the great scheme of things.”

“Since they are regarded as kin, no creature of the forest may be killed and even injury to one is cause for personal disgrace and discipline before the elders. No forest creature may be eaten or skinned and if found dead should be buried, preferably with a prayer similar to that used for human or buffalo burials.”

After describing this thinking of van gujjars this document adds,

“To walk through the forest with a van gujjar guide is a lesson in biodiversity; every species of tree is known, its quality as fodder, the timing of its leaf-fall, medicinal properties and so on. Every sound has meaning, every bird known and its habits noted, every fallen branch or tree noted.”

Clearly such communities can be a very big asset for the protection of forests and wildlife. Members of such communities can with a little training emerge as barefoot botanists and zoologists. Collectively, these communities can play a very important role on keeping away

poachers and smugglers of forest produce.

Unfortunately such potential is not even considered by those officials or managers who approach the entire issue with a colonial or neo-colonial thinking which is ranged against the communities and the protection of their rights from the outset. They see their role more as policemen out to discipline people and remove them when required, instead of trying to become partners of communities in creative and cooperative efforts to save environment and at the same protect sustainable livelihoods.

Once such possibilities are explored in very creative and interesting ways for such cooperation, it will be found that sustainable livelihoods can not only co-exist with protection of wild-life but in addition the two can be mutually supportive in very interesting ways. To give just one example, a community in an area where poaching is a threat can be involved in steps to check poaching either in terms of full-time or part time jobs for some of its members, or in terms of an annual collective grant to the community for supporting various welfare activities.

In areas of conflict like the Ruaha National Park in Tanzania from where large-scale displacement is planned and from where reports of terrible violence against villagers are already being received, there is a strong case for entirely changing the approach and the existing plans to avoid displacement and disruption of livelihoods, and instead embark on an approach that integrates protection of wildlife and forests with protection of sustainable livelihoods of communities.

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