

# Fenced out

Wildlife research in India



**KARTIK SHANKER AND  
M D MADHUSUDAN**

One of the common engagements that the public has with wildlife is reading about wildlife or ecological research in newspapers and magazines. Exploration of remote areas, the discovery of new species, and testing of new hypotheses help to promote the mindset required for supporting conservation. While a good deal of press is reserved for the travails of wildlife survival and the angst of conservationists, research and discovery remain the positive aspect of this engagement. Now, much of this research has to be carried out in areas protected by the state and this has led to serious conflicts.

The Indian Forest Service was handed down by the British and tends to function in the largely colonial style of its predecessor. The forest department calls itself the custodian of the forest, but often behaves like a landlord. It sees itself owning not just all that is physically in forests, but intellectual property on forests as well. This attitude manifests itself in several ways including opposition to community-based conservation, and in recent arguments over the Tribal Rights Bill. For researchers, however, it amounts to going through tiers of bureaucracy for research permits. When the environment and forest ministry sanctions a project or gives a permit, the state's chief wildlife warden can turn it down. When the chief warden gives a permit, the park warden can reject it. None of these need explanation, and can be based on an officer's whim.

The National Biodiversity Authority, state biodiversity boards, and the Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision of Experiments on

Animals can be used to obstruct wildlife research. Public pressure created by animal rights activists posing as conservationists does not help either. In the shrill demand for conservation, research becomes a victim: it's seen as inimical to animals. However, conservation is not about protecting individual animals. Without adequate taxonomic studies, one wouldn't know which species were endangered. For lower vertebrates and invertebrates, this requires collection. One has to study the ranging behaviour of large vertebrates, and this requires telemetry. That these methods cause discomfort to individual animals cannot be denied. But there is a larger goal that justifies this research.

## Basic science devalued

Perhaps the most insidious of the reasons for conflict is the expectation that the science must be relevant to conservation or management. In wildlife research alone, government policy indirectly discourages basic science from which all other science must derive. To put it simply, it would shock a forest officer if a young researcher seeking permission were to tell him that his work had no relevance to conservation, offered no assistance to the forest department and was merely being carried out to further science. One speculates that permission won't be granted.

On the flip side, there are several reasons why forest officers are justified in their ire at researchers. Many

researchers simply do not take the trouble to make their work accessible to forest officers, whether it has relevance or not. Most researchers do not understand that the department works under trying conditions. The socio-economic milieu in which forest officers work is often far beyond their control. They are often critical of the department's inability to carry out its duty. So, constructive communication between researchers and the forest department is needed.

This is not to suggest that these conflicts are due entirely to the whims of individual officers, or the idiosyncrasies of particular researchers. They arise from a system that does not recognise the value of fundamental research both to society and to conservation. Forest officers are never rewarded for supporting research; they are more likely to be taken to task either by their superiors or the public (and sometimes the researchers too) if things go wrong. The fact that much research has been carried out in protected areas is a tribute to many officers' vision. But, one cannot let the progress of science rest on such slippery ground. Basic science in wildlife research must be promoted. Applied research to aid management must be developed independently, perhaps even within the forest service itself. ■

*Kartik Shanker is with the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore. M D Madhusudan is with the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore*

