

Let's look beyond tigers

By KARTIK SHANKER

The ongoing diatribe against human occupation of areas designated as national parks and wildlife sanctuaries raises the question: Is harmonious coexistence a myth as some make it out to be? Maybe, but I do not share this school of thought's view on conservation. In fact, I don't think the four million people living in protected areas — some of who are tribals — would, either.

Voices being raised for pristine protected areas may seem shrill, but they come from a minuscule section of urban society. The eloquent dialogue on environmental conservation addresses the urban few, who, while being receptive, continue to live in a culture that damages the environment in ways worse than might the communities that interact with it directly. No wonder local communities worldwide see conservation as their enemy.

Protectionists who want people removed from national parks and sanctuaries argue that only 4% of land area is protected — and so it needs to remain inviolate — while the remaining 96% is used by humans. They also argue that people living here impact it greatly and so must be moved. The problem is, cause and effect are seen only at the local scale. On a regional or global scale, mythicising harmonious coexistence becomes untenable.

The plunder of South American rainforests for North American furniture, the over-consumption of oil in the West, and the submergence of humungous tracts of forest to provide electricity to urban dwellers worldwide are a few examples. We're all responsible; so we must all change our ways.

The view that nature is valuable only in its pristine form is not shared by all. Harmonious coexistence is not possible when this pristine vision is seen as the end objective. We need to have a more consensual vision of nature and our place in it. Another view being imposed is that wildlife is large charismatic mammals like tigers and elephants. Scientists say that protecting a few species could help protect a number of others. It is clear that several habitats such as wetlands, dry forests, deserts,

grasslands and coasts get short shrift because of this undue emphasis on flagships such as tropical forests and tigers.

In the current Indian model of conservation, only the urban rich gain and they use the government to protect their territory. Certainly, there are ecosystem services, but again, urban centres consume more and benefit disproportionately. One could argue that a larger pool of stakeholders could create a larger constituency interested in protecting these resources, perhaps even creating inviolate spaces. But what are these areas being protected from? Surely, there is greater danger from developmental forces such as industries and mining. Does the relocation of local communities outside parks increase or decrease threat from such forces? Also, what happens

to communities when they come out of the forest? In the current framework, eventually, they become like us.

The forest department and wildlife conservationists have spent considerable effort on large fauna and protected areas in



the last 30 years. However, the question is, how much will things improve if we expend all our effort on this small land area? Huge investment in time and money will lead to disproportionately small improvement in conservation. In other areas, however, capacity for improvement is enormous, and we are barely attempting to reform these landscapes. The returns in terms of conservation of biodiversity and gaining peoples' support could be enormous.

Is the rift between protectionists and people-friendly conservationists so insurmountable? In practice, most protectionists do see the importance of fair relocations. Most champions of people's rights see the need for inviolate spaces. One might even acknowledge that all forest-dwelling people are eventually likely to relocate. Currently, the eloquent call for pristine spaces is being heard by too few to make a difference. However, if local communities continue to have a stake in these forests and an interest in environmental concerns, they could turn out to be our strongest allies in the quest to create inviolate spaces.

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