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An eye on the forests

ROLE OF COMMUNITIES

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In a country like India, forests constitute a fiercely contested battlefield. Studies indicate that local communities can be powerful allies for the forest, providing protection against poachers, and regenerating the forest, observes Harini Nagendra

Forests cover a third of the world's land area, harbour two-thirds of the earth's biodiversity, and contain a major fraction of the world's carbon, apart from providing major services such as the regulation of climate, soil and water cycles. In India, they hold a place of importance in terms of their social, cultural, and sacred values. Most forest areas in India are neither remote or pristine — over 70 per cent of our population lives in rural areas, many of these adjacent to forests. The pressure on our natural ecosystems is tremendous, while the need for maintaining forests for our future survivability is no less critical. How do we balance these dual pressures?

Part of the answer can be found in innovative collaborative management approaches that consider humans as part of the solution instead of the problem. Many South Asian countries have been home to pioneering approaches of community forest management. Bhutan has maintained high levels of native forest cover, carefully monitoring rural land use and providing incremental exposure of rural areas to economic growth. In Nepal, once infamous for its degraded hill slopes, the situation has turned around in about two decades.

India has also recorded an impressive record in tree plantation — although large areas have been planted with exotic and water hungry species such as eucalyptus, and native forest cover continues to decrease and degrade in many areas. We face many challenges, and the recent debates on tiger conservation, forest rights and river flooding, have captured national attention in the past months.

In a country such as ours, with pressing demands of development, economic growth and food security, forests constitute a fiercely contested battlefield. Largely, local forest dwellers, small farmers, woodcutters and grazers are blamed for the problems of environmental degradation. Concessions are sometimes made in national and local debates for the extreme poverty and helplessness of these rural citizens, who may have no choice but to further degrade the forest.

Well-meaning NGOs, politicians, and prominent personalities talk (often patronisingly) of the need to better educate these simple minded rural folk about the importance of forests for water, or the need to tolerate wildlife attacks on their food, cattle and children in the larger goal of nature sustainability. This debate is ill-framed and misleading. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of instances across the country (and the world) of traditional communities who fiercely protect forests and wildlife.

The community can do a lot...

In our own collective memory, the story of the Chipko movement stands out, as does the reputation of the Bishnois, the Rajasthani community known for their fierce protection of the blackbuck.

More govt control: How helpful?

When a hue and cry was raised about tiger populations suffering due to the depredation of forest villages, the Bilgiri Rangaswamy Wildlife Sanctuary, home to the Soliga tribe, quietly reported an increase in tiger densities. This should have been a signal to affirm the capacity of peopled forests to support wildlife, and to recognise the importance of having communities like the Soligas, with their incredibly detailed knowledge of plants, animals and natural landscapes. Yet, the response has been to strengthen government controls on the forest, declaring this area a Tiger Reserve, perhaps involving eventual resettlement of these communities, despite strong protests about this unfair and unscientific appraisal.

This is a scenario repeated across India, with thousands of forest dwellers resettled, largely under conditions of extreme distress. In the recent television debates and fundraising promotions for tiger conservation, many public personalities talked about the need for various measures including the provision of more funds to hire guards and guns, and the need to "educate" forest villagers about why they should give up their sentimental attachment to their land and forests, and move out to promote tiger conservation.

Leaving aside the human rights problems of such resettlements for a moment, the scientific rationale for this thinking is not clear. There is the need for some large, inviolate protected areas, and some of these can do well in the short term if monitored by guards and guns, with large influxes of money. Yet, such monitoring creates severe conflicts with local communities in the short term, and is largely unsustainable over the long term. Given that we have over 170,000 villages living within or close to forests in our country, is it really possible to continue with this exclusivist approach to conservation?

There are many careful scientific studies from across the world, and within India, that indicate that local communities can be powerful allies for the forest, providing protection against poachers, and protecting and regenerating the forest. What they require is the presence of facilitating conditions such as the rights to monitor and punish offenders, and to devise their own rules for forest management. Indeed, the recent provisions of the Forest Rights Act for local community rights to

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protect forests is based on this recognition. Despite this, an acceptance of this possibility in the public consciousness remains distant, and the growing number of communities applying for community forest protection across India continue to battle with official interference and public apathy.

Forests threatened

Far more damaging, yet less recognised, are industrial threats and other large-scale developmental impacts on our forests. Roads and railways irreversibly fragment our forested landscapes. While studies of this important issue are few and far between, some studies in Bandipur-Nagarhole indicate that high speed traffic along our forested roads kill tens of thousands of animals a year in a single forest. Yet, there is hardly any discussion of this in mainstream spaces, and we would find it hard to consider simple measures to ban road traffic within forested areas - all in the name of unimpeded development.

Water scarcity issues are at the forefront of national discussions, and industries and the energy sector are some of our biggest water users and polluters. Large-scale mining projects are rampant across India, and forest managers appear to be powerless to control mining in ecologically important forests, despite the obvious lack of compatibility between mining and conservation.

Massive industrial projects like POSCO are granted clearance despite their location near one of the largest feeding grounds of the heavily endangered Olive Ridley turtles. If this were the tiger, and a local community had wanted to set up a farming and grazing outpost in its breeding grounds, the chances of its coming to pass would be laughable.

We are a poor country, with high levels of inequity, and challenges of food security. We do need economic growth. Yet, growth cannot come without costs. And these costs cannot be dealt with later, once a mythical late stage of development has been attained. These costs are in the realm of the here and now.

Sustainable development can only come with some limits on growth, particularly through the conventional fossil fuel-industrial model of expansion. Instead of looking at simplistic solutions for complex problems such as how to save the tiger (press "like" on a Facebook page! call a toll free number or send an email and declare your support!) we need to wrestle with the much more challenging problems of how we approach development. In a country that will host the next meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2012, we need to demonstrate our commitment to the environment by making some hard decisions and engaging in some real debates on these complex issues.

(The writer is a DST Ramanujan Fellow, ATREE and Asia Research Coordinator, Center for the Study of Institutions, Population, and Environmental Change (CIPEC), Indiana University)

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