

Living with the Blackbuck : A Unique Tale of Coexistence in Vetnai, Odisha



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Introduction

In a remote corner of Ganjam district in Odisha, nestled amidst the dry deciduous forests and open grasslands, lies a tiny village with an extraordinary story. Nestled within the scenic blue-green hills of the Eastern Ghats, this valleys support a population of over seven thousand Blackbucks, establishing it as the largest contiguous natural habitat for the species in eastern India. The people of Vetnai have turned coexistence into a cultural ethos, fostering a relationship with the blackbucks that transcends mere tolerance. This is the story of Vetnai, a village that has embraced the blackbuck not as a threat, but as a neighbour, a symbol of pride, and a part of its soul. The history of blackbucks in Vetnai dates back several decades. Once widely distributed across the Indian subcontinent, blackbucks (*Antilope cervicapra*) saw a drastic decline in population due to hunting, habitat loss, and agricultural expansion. By the mid-20th century, their numbers had plummeted, and in many regions, they vanished altogether. Yet, in the open scrublands and fallow fields of Vetnai, the blackbuck found an unlikely sanctuary.



Local elders recall stories from their grandparents about the arrival of the antelopes. According to the locals the area experienced a severe drought, impacting agriculture and forcing villagers to consider migration. One day, villagers spotted a herd of Blackbucks, an unusual

sight, and the following day, heavy rains arrived, rejuvenating the region. This led to the belief that Blackbucks are divine messengers and should be protected, with villagers worshipping and cherishing them. But more than just ecological convenience, the blackbuck found safety in the local ethos.

The blackbuck population in Odisha's Ganjam district has tripled over the past 12 years, marking a significant conservation success in the state's only habitat for this graceful antelope species. The latest biannual census, conducted by the state forest department on January 29, 2023, recorded 7,743 blackbucks—up from 2,194 in 2011. Previous estimates put the number at 6,885 in 2020 and 7,352 in 2021.

Classified as a Schedule I species under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and listed as 'Near Threatened' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the blackbuck's survival in Ganjam is a positive sign. The recent count revealed 4,753 females, 1,472 males, and 1,518 juveniles. The Ghumusar South division reported the highest number of sightings (4,636), followed by the Berhampur division (2,757), while the Ghumusar North division recorded the lowest (350).

Conservation efforts, including improved habitats and active protection by both forest officials and local communities, have been key to this rise. Although a few blackbucks have succumbed to causes like road accidents, territorial fights, and dog attacks, no cases of poaching have been reported in recent years, according to forest department sources in Vetnai.

The Ecology of Coexistence

The blackbuck is a highly sensitive and shy animal, usually wary of human presence. But in Vetnai, their behavior defies textbook descriptions. Here, herds of up to more than 300 blackbucks can be seen grazing near schools, wandering along dusty roads, or even

hopping through crop fields. This intermingling is made possible by a unique balance maintained by the villagers. The villagers, primarily dependent on agriculture, share their land with the blackbucks, sometimes even at the cost of crop loss. Farmers recount how the animals often nibble on their crops, especially groundnuts and lentils. Yet, rarely does one hear words of anger or complaint. "The blackbucks, in return, have adapted their routines to human rhythms. They graze early in the morning or late in the evening and avoid movement during peak human activity. Their comfort in proximity to humans is a unique example to the non-threatening environment of this region.

Cultural and Spiritual Connect

The emotional connection between the people of Vetnai and the blackbuck cannot be overstated. The animal is often referred to as "Krishna Mruga" in local dialects, symbolizing its association with Lord Krishna. Festivals, folklore, and songs often feature the blackbuck, portraying it as a divine companion or a noble creature to be revered. During the Rath Yatra and other village festivals, prayers are offered not just to gods, but also for the well-being of the blackbucks. Villager's light lamps near the open fields at dusk to "keep away predators and bless the herd." Children grow up hearing bedtime stories where the blackbuck is a hero, a friend, and a protector. This spiritual and cultural layering of the human-animal relationship transforms what could have been a conflict into an alliance.





Conservation without any Fences

Unlike most conservation models in India that involve strict protections, forest guards, and even relocation of people, Vetnai has achieved a remarkable conservation success story without building a single fence. The village, in fact, serves as an open sanctuary. The blackbucks roam free across paddy fields and all over the villages without any fear. In 1990, the Odisha Forest Department declared the 2.5 square kilometer area around Vetnai as a blackbuck conservation zone. But even before this official recognition, villagers had taken upon themselves the responsibility to prevent poaching and habitat destruction.

The important is the informal surveillance system run by the community. If a blackbuck is injured or found trapped in a barbed wire fence, it is the villagers who alert authorities, carry the animal to safety, or summon a veterinarian. There was no armed guards, no legal threats, just trust, tradition, and collective responsibility.

Challenges to Coexistence

Despite the utopian picture, the story of Vetnai is not without challenges. Increasing population pressure, changing land use patterns, and infrastructural developments pose real threats. In recent years, some villagers have started building concrete houses, fencing their lands, or shifting to commercial crops, hence reducing the open grasslands that the blackbucks thrive

in. Moreover, stray dogs and occasional poaching incidents have started to crop up. Climate change and erratic monsoons are also impacting vegetation, water sources, and ultimately, the availability of food for both people and wildlife.



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Towards a Sustainable Future

Recognizing both the uniqueness and fragility of Vetnai's coexistence model, several NGOs and researchers have begun documenting and supporting local efforts. Awareness workshops, sustainable agriculture training, and veterinary outreach programs are being organized, often in collaboration with local schools and youth groups. Sustainable ecotourism could offer economic incentives to preserve this model.

One promising initiative is the introduction of "coexistence curriculum" in local schools. Children are being taught not just biology and conservation science, but also the stories, songs, and cultural traditions that have shaped their community's relationship with the blackbuck. This blend of modern science and local wisdom may hold the key to long-term sustainability. In a time when human-wildlife conflicts dominate headlines, Vetnai offers a radically different narrative. It tells us that peaceful coexistence is not only possible but also deeply enriching. The story of Vetnai challenges our notions of conservation as something to be enforced by law, separated by fences, or managed from top-down. It invites us to imagine a world where empathy, tradition, and community values can shape conservation as powerfully as policies and patrols. As India and the world grapple with biodiversity loss, habitat degradation, and climate uncertainty, perhaps the answer lies in small villages like Vetnai, where humans and blackbucks walk the same paths, share the same fields, and look at each other not with fear, but with quiet familiarity.

Conclusion

The tale of Vetnai stands as a rare and inspiring example of harmonious coexistence between human and wildlife. In a world increasingly marked by habitat loss and conflict, this small village in Odisha has shown that conservation need not rely solely on fences, enforcement, or external intervention. Instead, empathy, cultural reverence, and community stewardship have allowed the blackbuck population to flourish. The villagers' unwavering respect for wildlife has nurtured a sustainable model of coexistence that balances ecological needs with human livelihood. Vetnai's story is about reimagining our relationship with nature.

As the world seeks inclusive and sustainable conservation solutions, Vetnai reminding us that true coexistence begins with trust, respect, and shared belonging.

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[All photographs are taken by Author during the study]

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