

Wildlife in Villages: A Paradigm Shift in Conservation



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Background

Villages and urban habitats are the principal man-made ecosystems in contrast to natural forests. It evokes a general perspective in the common peoples' mind, that among the biodiversity it consist only of domestic ones like cultivated plants and domesticated livestock. But on the contrary to this popular belief wild elements like uncultivated plant species, naturally occurring species of fishes, mollusks, crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles, birds and mammals are also found largely to coexist in these human-altered habitats. From the conservation point of view many of these wild elements are hugely important and thus several are mentioned in the Schedules of Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and specified in the IUCN Red list (2020) (like Bengal Fox, Fishing Cat, Indian Flap-shell Turtle, Monitor Lizards etc.). Many of them contribute significantly as sources of food (for e.g., indigenous fishes, edible mollusks, prawns and crabs, edible wild leafy vegetables, roots and fruits, mushrooms), medicines (wild herbs) and other livelihood biomass (as fuel, as fodder and for thatching huts) to the local people. Interestingly wild animals without having any socio-economic benefits (like Asiatic Jackal, Bengal Fox, Smooth-coated Otter, Hanuman Langur, several species of snakes etc.) are also coexisting within typically human made ecosystems like villages.

Classical idea vs. traditional concept of conservation

Classical idea of conservation revolves mostly around few charismatic wild species (like Tiger, Lion, Rhinoceros, Crocodiles, few rare birds like

Great Indian Bustard etc.) living in forests or in other natural habitats. Such efforts are usually based on isolating wildlife and their habitats from any kind of human interference under strict supervision of different government agencies. Concept of different protected areas (like National Park, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Conservation and Community Reserve) are raised based on this ideology. But, this typical practice has ignored many other small and less gorgeous species that naturally inhabit the rural and urban landscape. Moreover it also overlooks the enormous knowledgebase gathered traditionally over centuries by the native and indigenous people to conserve their surrounding biodiversity. Whereas the modern conservation strategies just cover only 5% of the country's terrestrial landscape and still struggle to maintain the wildlife species from different threats like habitat destruction and poaching. On the other hand several wild biodiversity still survive adjacent to human altered habitat like villages without any kind of formal conservation measures. These contradictory visuals prominently raise certain questions on the ignorance of traditional conservation practices by the indigenous or local people for wildlife.

Actual Scenario

A study reflects that villages of south West Bengal traditionally comprise considerable richness of wild fauna (total 107 species with 40 mammals, 52 reptiles and 15 amphibians) with varying range of sizes (biomass ranges from few grams (worm snake) to 200 kg (Wild Boar)) in their traditionally managed ecosystem. Diversity and mosaics of habitats (mud bund in the cultivable land, wetland

banks, waste lands etc.) evolved and maintained in a village ecosystem under traditional land use regime allow many habitat-niches to be created for different wild species to hide, rest, hunt or forage for food, survive and breed for generations. These habitats being distributed in patches and connected by corridors allow a patch dynamics of metapopulations that is healthy for conservation of these wild species at genetic and population levels. Along with the presence of suitable habitats traditionally acquired indigenous knowledge, folktales, mythological and religious stories, indigenous art form and different cultural activities also reflects the perceptions and attitude of people towards this human-wildlife co-existence. Traditional ecological knowledge like monitor lizards eat snakes and their eggs in the locality and thus, maintain the snake population under control is the reason for tolerating them within village areas. Sacred identity of small tree groves helps it to transform into mini-forest within the locality. Associated religious beliefs restrict human invasion within grove area and act as safe refuge for several wild species. The commonest quote from the villagers when asked-‘Why the animals are not killed despite of having several negative characters like presence of venom or act as pest?’, is - ‘why should we kill them unnecessarily! These animals are also inherent part of the ecosystem and serve the balance, it’s not ethical to wipe them out completely’. It reflects their ethical and moral attitude towards all living organisms.

This practice covers many species those are to be considered as wildlife worth to be spotted and photographed by nature lovers and wildlife tourists. These include number of species under Schedules (31% of total wild fauna of rural south West Bengal belong to the Schedule I and Schedule II of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972) for conservation in the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India and IUCN Redlist (12% come under

‘Threatened’ category) conservation priority categories etc. This may be a case study of a particular state but attitude of native people towards nature and biodiversity are same in other parts of the country as well as in many parts of the world.

Paradigm shift

The native and indigenous people “managing” these wildlife for millennia adopting different traditional methods but the practices are never entitled as “conservation” according to the modern conservation scientist or wildlife activist. The truth is different indigenous people throughout the world have achieved useful and sustainable process of resource utilization over thousands of year that meet most rigorous definition of conservation.

Recently these trends are changing when ecologist like Madav Gadgil, Asish Kothari, historian like Ramachandra Guha and many more intellectuals raised their voices for this traditional model of conservation practice. Their statements clearly reflects it is not possible to conserve the every wildlife species by separating human race from natural ecosystems. Involving native people in conservation practice using their long accumulated traditional ecological knowledge is the future of wildlife conservation. Maintaining large protected areas for few charismatic species is important but to manage earth’s overall ecological balance it is necessary to concentrate on all the less gorgeous wild species residing within village and urban landscapes. For that in this period of world environment day where the theme is ‘Time for Nature’ it is time to acknowledge and incorporate the traditional ecological knowledge accumulated by human over centuries from nature and apply it for the betterment of entire range of wildlife found in protected areas or in human altered landscapes.

References:

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