

## **Tiger Conservation**

**Initial efforts towards Tiger Conservation:** In 1972, Guy Mountford met up with the then prime minister, Indira Gandhi and urged her to take active steps towards tiger conservation. A highly specialized committee, under Karan Singh was set up and this task force submitted its report in August 1972. This was the blue print for what later came to be called- Project Tiger.

Under this 8 tiger reserves came up and later the Sunderbans were also added and these 9 reserves became the first official tiger reserves of the country. An area of 1,500 sq. km was demarcated and these areas fell within the preserved reserve forests, the idea being that these forests would provide enough space for the tigers to roam around in. The core area of 300 km was closed for all purposes to human activity. The task force report read- "...the forms of human disturbance, such as commercial felling, collection of minor forest produce, mining, excessive traffic, heavy grazing by livestock are clearly detrimental and must be phased out for complete elimination".

The task force also was keen on maintaining a genetically viable population of tigers and that this would require larger areas than the reserves and their adjoining areas provided. The members were opposed to habitat modification or artificial breeding.

This report presented a detailed management plan, administrative framework and legal provisions. It even set out measures to counter poaching and listed the equipment required to manage the reserves effectively. By 1980s, there were 15 tiger reserves in the country in an area of 24,712 sq. km.

In the early 1980s, the PM wrote to all state chief ministers emphasizing on the need to follow the guidelines issued by the cabinet secretariat and the ministry of agriculture. In 1983, another task force committee, Task Force on Public Support for Wildlife Conservation, chaired by Madhavrao Scindia submitted its report which, conservationists feel, would have been very useful for India's conservation policy if it had been implemented. This report was concerned about "the growing of apathy and indeed, antipathy, towards wildlife among different classes and sections of the public." This report discussed the issue of forest dependence communities and what

ought to be done about their present situation. The task force did say that biotic pressure had harmful impact on the forest cover, at the same time it also pointed out that conservation strategies could only work in compliance with and cooperation of the people. Instead of blaming the people and talk about usurping their rights, this report stressed on development funds and project oriented work to be undertaken with the forest communities living in the fringe areas of the reserves. For this purpose, it recommended Special Areas for Ecodevelopment programs, with higher per capita inputs on development based upon conservation bias. It also recommended generating employment benefits from reserves, for the local people. Failure to reach these measures, the report said, would create "islands of conservation" which would hamper rather than facilitate the conservation process. It also warned that these "islands": would prove to be ecologically inadequate, not being able to function as vibrant genetic pool.

Though the recommendations were very good, the measures were not implemented well. An ecodevelopment World Bank project was initiated in 1990s but it was not conceptualized well as it merely was a program aimed at putting aside some money to wean away forest communities from the protected areas.

Madhav Gadgil also submitted some recommendations regarding community based conservation practice model to be implemented in Nilgiri biosphere reserve, which includes Bandipur Tiger Reserve to the government in 1981.

But by 1990s the Project Tiger was facing many challenges. In 1994, a parliamentary committee on Science, Technology and Forests recommended an evaluation of the program. A committee headed by JJ Dutta, former chief conservator forest, MP, was made. In 1996, this committee submitted its report. It discussed, for the first time, what needed to be done in terms of the legal status of what is called "enclaved villages", human habitations inside the park. It said that removal of these enclaves would be necessary but at the same time were not a management imperative. It said that links corridors must be identified and ways must be devised to facilitate the management of the forests outside the reserves. This was also the time when WWF-India released its action plan to serve tigers, listed in Tiger Call and Tiger Conservation Strategy and Action Plan which focused of

involvement of local communities in forest conservation strategies and processes as well as measures to improve anti poaching networks.

Project Tiger had very well out strategies for tiger conservation. The tiger reserves were required to prepare management plans covering a period of six years, to be implemented through annual plans. A format of annual plans was also sent off to the states which they were to implement, after consultation with the Centre. Funds were to be released by the Centre once the annual state reports were given in. This report was to be received by the third quarter of every financial year. The field director and other gazetted officers were to be appointed only with the Centre's approval, for a minimum tenure of three years. Capacity building and training was to be facilitated with Centre's help. The states were given prescribed formats for monthly and half yearly reports to monitor progress. The Centre was to keep a close vigil on the state department's work and disbursement of funds was to be done accordingly.

Although initially there was a high degree of political and administrative commitment to the Project, by 1980s, the situation started changing. In early 1980s, after the 14<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Indian Board of Wildlife (now National Board of Wildlife) it was found that despite specific instructions issued by Central government, a number of states were lagging behind in their performance. Only about 13 wildlife wings had been set up by some 13 states by then. Although the other states were pulled up and instructions were given by the central govt. under Indira Gandhi, the implementation was not willfully carried out.

By 1990s only these guidelines were still carried out by the state depts.-

- A narrative report was submitted in a summary form of the events that happened in the reserve
- Monthly report of deaths of all wildlife in reserves.
- Reports on poaching, unnatural death of tigers and leopards
- Annual report from tiger reserve
- Annual utilization and expenditure certificate.

All other guidelines were discontinued. At this time, the State's autonomy and power were growing and hence their accountability to the Centre reduced considerably. At the same time, the Centre's interest in the Project also probably began to wane off.

**Between the Center and the State:** Following the 42<sup>nd</sup> amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1976, the subject of forests and wildlife was transferred from State list to Concurrent list, with the Central government acquiring overriding powers to ensure protection and preservation of forests and wildlife. This created a rift between centre-state relationship and by 1990s this rift was quiet apparent. Thus in 2000 the Supreme Court, acting on a PIL, directed the secretary, Union ministry of Environment and Forest, to convene a meeting of chief secretaries of tiger habitat states, to evolve a joint strategy for tiger conservation. Although much of the reform agenda, like the center should disburse funds on time for states to work well and to be able to fill staff vacancies, protection of fringe areas as important a consideration for state forest depts as the reserve area, harnessing a relationship b/w communities and officials as a conservations strategy etc were agreed upon, but in the absence of a careful follow-up with the state, many recommendations were not followed up.

Some feel that further centralizing the decision making by creating an authority that can be given powers to coordinate the work of tiger reserves and oversee implementation, may prove to be an effective strategy. In April 2005, the amicus curiae in the TN Godavarman forest case, ongoing in the SC, filed an application asking for an authority to be created for wildlife management. It reads, "state govts and their officers, for whatever reason, have been unequal to the task of protecting and preserving our national parks and sanctuaries. It is therefore necessary that it is submitted as a matter of law, that the Central government takes effective steps, including by way of constituting an authority". This authority would comprise of civil servants and outsiders who will be overseers to the working and management of at least 25 areas of which most of them area tiger reserves. State govts. Will have to work in tandem with these bodies and consult them on appointments, postings etc of officials and staff. How feasible or pertinent this measure would be, is difficult to say.

As early as 1973, the then PM Indira Gandhi wrote to all chief ministers, asking them to introduce a specialist management for parks and sanctuaries. She had suggested that states create wildlife departments under the forest depts.; a separate wildlife service and forest officers to be given a choice to opt for these services; special trainings to be given to cadres to look after

National parks and sanctuaries. In 1976, the Central govt. had given guidelines for the creation of wildlife wings in the states. In 1980, a report of the Committee for Recommending Legislative Measures and Administrative Machinery for Ensuring Environmental Protection, also called the N D Tiwari committee, also deliberated on this issue. None of these measures were seriously thought through. Currently the training for Indian Forest Service officers is conducted primarily in Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy in Dehradun. The institute offers training in wildlife courses but no specialization of any kind. Thus rather than create new institutional frameworks, the need is to experiment with the existing apparatus and make it more dynamic and all encompassing, considering the current conservation needs and scenario.

**Tiger Trade and the Law:** The trade of the tiger in India is banned under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and the tiger is classified as a Schedule I species, which means that it is endangered and hence needs strong protection laws. In 1994, a committee under S Subramaniam, a former senior police officer submitted a report on illegal tiger trade practices and the measures that could be adopted to prevent the same. Its recommendations included setting up a central task force that would oversee and coordinate the work of central wildlife crime data bank (also proposed in the report) and the intelligence report. It proposed a legal cell that could pursue important cases with regard to tiger trade violations in the courts across the country, an investigation wing for cases with national and interstate reach and an operation to carry out undercover raids on organized crime. It also recommended strengthening enforcement with regard to the same.

Since then, the Union ministry (as the Tiger Task Force Report notes) has been toying with this idea, it is revived and debated over every year but is never implemented in any concrete manner. Recently, because of the Sariska pressure and the action initiated by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES), the idea has again gained momentum. At the March 2005 meeting of the National Board for Wildlife, the ministry submitted a proposal for a national wildlife crime bureau. It provide for 260 new posts at various levels. The bureau is to be headed by the additional director general of forests (wildlife) and have positions created both at the Centre and regions for monitoring and

enforcement. The Tiger Task Force Report notes that the "proposal is too ambitious and personnel- heavy".

In March 2002, the ministry set up the wildlife crime cell in the office of the director, Project Tiger. In April 2004, the office was shifted to Project Elephant. When it was set up, it was decided that the office would have two joint directors to do the work. But till date these positions have not been filled and the work hence has suffered a lot. In addition to this, the ministry has a separate directorate of wildlife preservation, headed by additional director general of forests (wildlife) which consists of four regional offices headed by officers holding the positions of deputy directors and three sub regional offices (headed by assistant directors) located in Amritsar, Cochin and Guwahati. The mandate of these offices is to regulate import and export of wildlife items; to coordinate wildlife crime prevention with state agencies and to monitor crime trends and provide reports to the central office. . the directorate plays the role proposed for wildlife crime bureau. Though the ministry has proposed many posts etc. the appointed posts still lie vacant. The TTF noted how the post of regional director, Kolkata, had been vacant for a very long time, while the deputy director in charge of Chennai (again an important post) has been holding additional charge. In 2003, the ministry transferred the post of the assistant director, based in Guwahati, to Delhi. The reason given was that the illegal trade has shifted from the northeast to other parts of India. This, the TTF points out, is a difficult claim to believe since the main export route is supposed to be concentrated on the routes to China and Myanmar, through this region.

Even though, in the states that have tiger reserves, the chief wildlife wardens are expected to coordinate the cases related to poaching etc and maintain a wildlife crimes database, this is never followed in reality. Prosecution for wildlife crimes is also minimal.

In order to check this, Project Tiger has suggested that an external consultant be employed to collate the data related to these crimes and analyze them properly. The Wildlife Protection Society of India, an NGO, maintains an independent database of tiger seizures.

**Eco development in Tiger Reserves:** Harini Nagendra, a researcher with the Bangalore based Ahoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment

(ATREE) has studied the tussel between the people and the forest dept. Inside the Tadoba-Andhari tiger reserve in Maharashtra, and her assessment reads that the villages outside the park which are connected to the markets etc by road networks have more influence on deforestation and forest fragmentation compared to isolated, interior villages. Therefore she recommends that instead of relocating the villages from the park, it makes much more sense to work closely with these communities on conservation issues within the reserve so that both can prove to be mutually beneficial to each other. Another study conducted by M D Madhisudan of Nature Conservation Foundation in Bandipur reserve also shows that lack of resources and livelihood in the fringe relocated villages around the reserve, drove the communities to overexploit the immediate available resource at their disposal, the forest.

Ecodevelopment entered conservation debate in 1983, when the India board of Wildlife (now National Board for Wildlife) set up the Task Force on Public Support for Wildlife conservation, headed by Madh Rao Scindia and it recommended the creation of " Special Areas for Ecodevelopment". These were to be focus fringe areas around the parks, where multitude use of forest and land could be allowed. The task force recommended that in these areas there would be greater inputs on per capita basis for development based upon a 'firm conservation bias'. The report recognized the forest communities and their close livelihood ties with the forest produce and suggested that these communities should be involved in working on soil conservation, afforestation, silviculture and other forestry activities etc to mitigate the huge biotic pressure that their lifestyles exert on the forest land.

There have been two planned experiments which attempted eco-development as a conservation strategy. The first was called Forestry Research Education and Extension Project (FREEP) which was implemented in two national parks- the Kalakad-Mundanthurai tiger reserve in TN and the Great Himalayan National Park in HP. This project began in 1994. It was planned to be a precursor to a much larger project, India Ecodevelopment Project (IEDP) that began in 1996. Both projects got part funding from the World Bank and the Global Environment Facility. The IEDP involved a prolonged consultation of one and a half years before it was put to practice. The union ministry hired Indian Institute of Planning and Administration in New Delhi to chalk out the 'indicative plan', a proposal submitted to the World Bank to

launch formal negotiations, which the department of economic affairs took up with the Bank in 1994.

The Project began with 8 sites in mind, however Simplipal in Orissa was rejected later because here the state government had already relocated the villages as the project was under way and the Bank was clear on its stand of not working with relocated communities. Finally 7 sites were agreed upon out of which all but 2 were tiger reserve sites- Gir national park and Nagarhole national Park. The latter was then added on, some time later, with Bandipur tiger reserve.

Ecodevelopment was introduced as a conservation strategy to reduce the negative impact that local people exert on protected areas. Administratively, the project went on to create a parallel set of village level bodies called village eco-development committees. These consist of villagers along with the forester or guard as the official secretary. The president is elected from among the committee members. This committee was supposed to collaborate with the forest dept. and the NGOs to come up with a micro plan of all the activities that it would conduct during its time period. In response to the forest dept.'s promise to provide alternative livelihood opportunities to the villagers, the villagers agreed to assist the dept. in protecting and conserving the forest. Each eco-development committee member was allocated Rs 10,000 against which he/she would then contribute 25% of the costs, Rs 2,500. The money could then be used to invest in various schemes and productive assets either in individual or community basis. This money could then be used to generate livelihood facilities as the project had envisaged. The forest dept. could in turn also improve its infrastructure and administrative framework.

The total cost of India Ecodevelopment Project over 7 years was Rs 288 crore, including the 7% contribution made by the people. The project was expected to invest Rs 118.72 crore on people oriented activities. But the funds were not spent till very late in the project. The TTF notes how the eco-development brought in as much money in six years for seven tiger reserves as Project Tiger had spent on all the 28 tiger reserves in three decades.

The implementation of the project was also unsatisfactory. It is interesting to know how the project looked at the idea of 'fringe'. It was a random

delineation that the project came up with, in regard to defining the fringe areas. In case of Buxa tiger reserve, even though the project was aware that there exist 125,601 scheduled tribe people working in the surrounding tea gardens, it finally excluded them from within its ambit of work. In Nagarhole, the population in the project was 72,652 but the project identified only 66,507 people to work with. In all IEDP decided to consider 3,715 villages spread around seven parks, it would involve itself with 164,786 families and a population of 823,928 people. This was not the total fringe population, only the segment of people the project thought it feasible to work with.

The money was also not disbursed transparently and in time in certain cases. In case of Nagarhole, large financial discrepancies were found. Stoves and inferior quality pots were given to people. People were given training to become drivers and nurses in areas where there are no cars or hospitals. Some communities benefited more than their neighbors as in case of Buxa where money was invested to buy community assets like tractors etc by one community while the other remained bereft of these and this created a village rivalry between the people.

The network of communities, NGOs and Forest dept. which was to work effectively also proved to be an eye-wash as most of the NGO and dept. people were not knowledgeable enough in the field of conservation to carry forth a meaningful dialogue.

The biggest debate that arose was from ecodev. Was what to invest in. Even though micro plans were made, people were seldom consulted. The idea was to provide tools and machinery that would wean people away from using forest resources. This however was not backed by any local understanding of people and their relationship with the forests. In one case LPG connections were given to people, but since maintaining these would be more cost intensive for the locals, they soon sold it off in the nearby markets. Wherever, the project worked keeping local life patterns and demands in mind and intervened, it proved to be successful. In Kalalad-Mundanthurai a biogas plant was set up which helped reduce pressure and dependence on local firewood collection. In Buxa, villagers who once fought with the forest dept. over crop depredation began cooperating with the department once they saw crop compensations coming in a timely fashion.

The project failed wherever it worked in exclusion. In Ranthambore, a wall was built to seclude villagers and prevent them from grazing livestock in the park. This created hostile conditions b/w the department and the people. The wall was broken down many times at several places and on July 21, 2000, the forest guards even resorted to firing 17 rounds during a clash with 10 villagers of Uliana who were found grazing a herd of about 150 buffaloes in the core area of the park.

Another problem with the way the project worked was that instead of working with intrinsic, existing administrative units of the village communities, like panchayats it created parallel committees on ecodev. This meant investing more on creating this parallel network. Traditionally also the forest dept. has had a strained relationship with the locals, and to rebuild that confidence, it would have made more sense to work from within the existing village structures rather than setting up alternative departments. Kerala's Periyar reserve, Pench in MP and Kalakad-Mundutharai in TN are considered better examples of successful ecodev. project work.

Vishwas Sawarkar, member of Expert COMMITTEE FOR Monitoring and Evaluation of Tiger Reserves set by Union govt., states the agenda for the future thus, "It is...time now to think and reorder and as necessary combine our traditional and sectoral rural dev. Programs in at least the forested rural sector on the lines of ecodevelopment program. Ecodev. Conforms to all objectives of the traditional rural development and much more in the sense that it does not believe in the popular adage; 'one size fits all'.; it does not import modern perceptions of development; it has essential flexibility to mould itself to suit the crucial site specific needs, it is developed with the full participation of the people concerned."

Joint Forest Management was initiated in the early 1990s to create reciprocal rights over forests b/w the forest dept. and people. Under the prgm. people were given rights over usufruct- grass and minor forest produce- in return for protection on degraded forest land. In 2000 the guidelines for the prgm were extended to cover forest land which was classified as dense forest (canopy cover of over 40%). The prgm was also institutionalized; forest development agencies were created in states as federations of the JFM committees.

According to the report, Forest and Wildlife Statistics, India 2004, taken out by the union ministry of environment and forest, the prgm covers 150,000 forest fringe villages and more than 2,500 forest villages.

The gains are however not so good. The investment in afforestation is low and the initiative remains poorly coordinated. The key problem is that institutions created for this prgm also fail to involve and work effectively with the local communities. Also the benefits of JFM have remained concentrated in few areas and few states. Also while in some cases, state provisions have been made for legal agreements b/w forest agencies and communities, in most, the collaboration remains ad-hoc with no statutory guidelines.