

✓ Protected Areas as Common Property
and India's Sundarbans National Park

12-3-93
SYMPOSIUM IN POLITICAL THEORY
AND POLICY ANALYSIS
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REPRINT FILES - CPR

Good morning. I am honored to be here with you at this Third Conference on Common Property.

As global environmental problems emerge, regional planners and policy-makers, alike, will increasingly turn to us for answers to land use dilemmas. We live in a world in which human population is expected to more than double within the next 50 years. It has already exceeded 5.3 Billion.

While consumption of natural resources is increasing, and the environment is degrading, it is imperative that we offer the knowledge and ideas that we hold.

A [I came here this morning to talk about conservation, common property, and India's Sundarbans National Park. I'll begin by describing the Sundarbans and giving a brief history of its conservation and land use. Then, I'll discuss the Sundarbans National Park and Biosphere Reserve and its three different levels as a common property resource. Finally, I'll conclude by briefly summarizing what I have said.

The Sundarbans

The Sundarbans is a unique ecosystem that stretches across West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh. It is best described as a combination of wetlands and jungle, including fifty-four highly saline islands constantly transformed by floods, cyclones, and tidal activity.

Covering approximately 10,000 square kilometers of the Indo-Gangetic plain, the Sundarbans is well-known for its once endangered Royal Bengal Tiger. The area is increasingly gaining recognition for its immense biodiversity, including over 400 species of fish, the endangered Olive Ridley Sea Turtle, and one of the world's largest and rarest crocodiles, which can reach up to 27 feet in length.

Indian Conservation

The diversity of life within this tropical ecosystem has been appreciated since before 2000 B.C., when Hindu sages began recording the habitats and preferred foods of India's animal species.

Before the colonizing powers made an impact upon the country's landscapes and wildlife, India had a strong tradition of conservation and respect for all life. Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist belief in the equality of all creatures could be seen in the way with which nature was revered, even by the most powerful kings.

India's first known conservation law was recorded in 252 B.C. under Emperor Ashoka. It stated that certain animals should be preserved and that "forests must not be burned, either for mischief or to destroy living creatures." Conservation was fervently endorsed.

Later conservation laws were decreed by the royalty for purposes of preserving hunting grounds.

Perceptual & Physical Transformations

Unfortunately, neither India's conservation ethic nor recognition of the Sundarbans' great biodiversity was enough to afford the region long-term protection. The colonizers' perception of this whole ecosystem as a dense and formidable mangrove swamp is reflected in both their behaviors and their writings.

One British author described the Sundarbans as a "den of beasts," noting the threat of both tigers and crocodiles. Unfortunately, this isn't far from true. Between 1948 and 1986, 814 people were killed by tigers. That number has decreased to about 20 killings per year.

Certainly, this region presented some challenges to those wishing to inhabit it. Aside from wildlife and cyclones, it was well known that smugglers, pirates, and thieves inhabited the jungle. In addition, the reigning Indo-Turkish sultans and Mughals both had a great disdain for fishing as an occupation and were greatly responsible for popularizing the Sundarbans' deforestation for the sake of rice cultivation.

These incentives, coupled with that of a rapidly increasing population, is what spurred the development of the Sundarbans.

Outside pressures continued to affect the region's use as a commons. And, just as in World War I, the Second World War saw the destruction of many animals through hunting and poaching as guns abounded in rural India. Anti-British sentiment ran high, and India's independence, granted in 1947, saw rebellious Indian citizens fighting against anything smacking of the old Empire, including laws and regulations of protected areas and wildlife.

The pressure of war placed a great pressure upon the forests, as timber was badly needed. The Sundarbans, like many of India's unique ecosystems, did not escape unharmed.

THE COMMONS

Both the wars and the desire to make this area "useful" greatly affected this ecosystem, as laborers were imported from as far as Southeast Asia for forest clearing and the desalinization of land for cultivation. The region's original inhabitants, while rarely mentioned, were certainly impacted.

The jungle provided a common resource for its inhabitants, who lived in scattered villages within the jungle and along its periphery. They used the Sundarbans' for their subsistence, collecting thatch and firewood for home use and fish, honey, and wood to sell in the local markets.

However, it was not until 1969 that the Sundarbans was widely recognized for its own value as a diverse ecosystem. That year, the 10th General Assembly of the IUCN, held in New Delhi, brought international attention to Indian conservation and the nearly extinct Royal Bengal Tiger.

In 1973, World Wildlife Fund's Project Tiger was initiated in the Sundarbans. It has been successful in increasing the tiger population, through both legislation and the protection of its habitat. 1984 saw the creation of the 513 sq. mile Sundarbans National Park and its surrounding 998 sq. mile Reserve.

In 1987, a conference was held in Washington, D.C., on Societal Pressures, Ecological Integrity, and the Common Property Resources of the Sundarbans.

And, in 1990, the U.N. Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization upgraded the Park and some its surrounding region (totalling 5,980 sq. km) to the status of World Heritage Site. This reflects growing international concern over the conservation of biological diversity. Meanwhile, India has upgraded the Park by designating 9,360 sq km of the Sundarbans a Biosphere Reserve.

COMMON TO WHOM?

Of course, these changes in the legal status of India's Sundarbans have changed its perceived value to outsiders, bringing the inherent values of this tropical ecosystem to light on a global scale.

With the establishment of protected areas has come a new type of common property. What was once a region commonly used by its inhabitants for firewood and thatch collection, as well as small-scale fishing, mariculture, and honey collection, was now legally off-limits to these uses but open to others.

This created conflicts over land and resource use that are not unique to the Sundarbans. Worldwide, the protection of ecosystems is increasingly viewed as a prerequisite for global sustainability. This cordoning off of whole ecosystems, however, has left many indigenous populations homeless and without alternative means of subsistence.

Once a local common property resource, the remaining Sundarbans mangrove ecosystem, protected under its status as Biosphere Reserve, is now seen not only as a national but also an international commons.

LOCAL COMMONS

In the past, the Sundarbans was governed by various rules for its common use. Locally, the Park and Reserve still serves as a common subsistence base for its inhabitants, albeit illegally.

While the southern part of the Sundarbans is protected, 2.6 million people, mostly tribal, inhabit the northern part. This has created a great pressure upon the remaining mangrove ecosystem for firewood and other resources. Project Tiger tries to provide firewood to the locals living outside the Reserve.

However, local use of this area has resulted in the denudation of trees for thatch and firewood collection as well as deforestation in the fringe areas.

In addition, some residents outside the protected areas are now resalinizing their paddy lands for aquaculture, and many fear that this will turn the land infertile and threaten the integrity of the whole ecosystem.

NATIONAL COMMONS

The designation of the remaining Sundarbans forests as National Park & Biosphere Reserve created a commons on a national level as well. This region was once seen as a nuisance... Now, in light of the world's environmental problems, maintaining the Sundarbans' remaining biodiversity is on the national agenda.

The Indian government plans to develop the non-protected Sundarbans in order to strengthen the region's economy and create jobs for those using the Park as their common subsistence base.

Development could also enhance tourism which, if managed well, could provide a strong incentive for local protection of the Sundarbans.

Tourism is becoming increasingly popular and, while not very well established, its popularity is expected to increase with the establishment of Sagar Marine National Park this year. The 200 sq. km park, proposed for Sagar Island at the mouth of the Hooghly River, would host scuba diving and an open sea aquarium.

Aside from the economic incentives of international tourism, the worldwide pressure upon India to maintain the Park and Reserve's biological integrity for its own sake is strong. Also, the money attracted to its protection provides an incentive to the Indian Government that goes beyond that of just maintaining biodiversity.

GLOBAL COMMONS

As humankind has begun to understand its dependence upon healthy ecosystems for its survival, conservation has become a global concern. Understanding the Earth as a living network of interdependent ecosystems has helped us to realize that the whole planet is a global commons.

The Sundarbans National Park and Biosphere Reserve, as well as other protected areas, is an easy target for conflicts over land use and conservation. Of course, conflicts over the needs and uses of the different commons participants, including indigenous and resident populations, are valid and must be attended to. These populations must be involved in land use management policy, planning, and implementation.

The real issue is one of globally sustainable land use, including both protected areas and private lands. We need better planning for our urban areas, better technologies, and the means to provide for the subsistence of a rapidly expanding global population into the future.

CONCLUSION

In concluding, I would like to point out that, throughout its history, the Sundarbans has been characterized by transformation.

This transformation was not only physical, through the conversion of forests to paddy lands--it was also perceptual. This change in perception is what saw the establishment of the Sundarbans National Park and Biosphere Reserve.

It's important because, as the Earth is becoming appreciated for its non-extractive value, and as necessary to our survival, we are changing our attitudes and resulting behaviors towards it.

The Sundarbans has provided a common resource base for its residents for a long time. Only recently, with the understanding of protecting its biodiversity, has the population of common users been seen to include the nation on an economic and political level and the world on a sustainability level.

In protecting the global commons, parks and other protected areas are not the sole answer. Living sustainably is. There is no way that we can realistically address commons issues and long-term land use outside the context of sustainability. In protecting the global commons, we must be sure to focus not only on protected areas rich in biodiversity but also on restoring and sustainably inhabiting degraded areas.

Somehow, the economic needs of the local users must be met in a way that will sustain the long-term, healthy existence of the Sundarbans, protecting a resource base that is truly common to all.

In this 500th anniversary of Columbus' expedition, and in light of the U.N.'s declaration of 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, it is surprising how little attention is paid to indigenous populations, including the Native Americans in this country.

We have many challenges ahead of us, and we share the responsibility of creating solutions. Our skills and familiarity with commons and land use issues will enable us to address some of these weaknesses, finding opportunities for positive change in land use policy worldwide.