

# **The Hunting of the Snark: Seeking Transcendence in the Indian Conservation Debate**

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IN OUR ARTICLE, *Conservation as if Biological Diversity Matters*, we attempted a brief overview of the Indian context of two globally-influential approaches to conservation: preservationism and sustainable use, which have seemingly attained the status of paradigms, spawning research programmes, policy documents and management action. We point out in our article that, against the backdrop of growing conflicts between people and parks, the Indian conservation scene, across its academic, activist and administrative domains, has witnessed a polarisation between these two approaches. In briefly assessing how the two approaches have fared with on-ground conservation, we observe that a debate on the utility of these approaches is hamstrung by a paucity of field data demonstrating their capacities to conserve fragile elements of biodiversity, or sustain their 'successes' into the future. In the concluding paragraphs, we consider the way forward for conservation in a fraternity that is fractured over the ideology and implementation of conservation even as it stands together to bemoan the loss of biological diversity. Finally, we emphasise that, if we are at all serious about the survival needs of fragile species and ecosystems, it seems futile to embrace a single conservation maxim in a country as bewilderingly diverse as India, and we urge the adoption of situation-specific stances that to build on the respective strengths of the two approaches.

The responses to our article from Karanth, Peluso and Rodgers exemplify an interesting range of views held by practitioner-academics on conservation issues, and the approaches that might be taken to address them if conservation is to be effective and enduring. Rodgers seems to suggest that the divide we perceive between use and preservation is an imagined one because they are in fact two

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distinct facets to a common policy of conserving biodiversity. However, the positions held by Karanth and Peluso plainly demonstrate this divide. Karanth maintains that, in post-colonial India, paradigms of ‘use’ (realised via local political processes) rather than preservation have held far greater sway over the course of land-use (and therefore, conservation). So much so that, to this day, preservation is not a serious priority even within most wildlife reserves. Peluso, on the other hand, is equally clear that it is not local users, but the biological scientists and the centralised powers that they align with that have been the most powerful actors in the conservation world. Even at the turn of this century, she notes, it is the preservationists and their strategies to legally enclose nature and criminalise its use that continue to command ‘great rationalised power’. As relative beginners in this field, to us, this dissonance in the line of reasoning used by these veteran scholars is both perplexing and disturbing. Thus, we still do see the polarisation that our article points to as a real one, and one that exists, not so much in response to the all-embracing *concept* of a protected area (be it a community set-aside or state reserve) as to its *on-ground expression*. And this schism has helped neither people nor wildlife, but only made debates about it rather weary.

Below, we would like to react to a few specific points made by the respondents. First, while agreeing with Karanth that India has always been characterised by an assortment of conflicts, we maintain that India’s nature reserves (including reserve forests) have been—and will likely remain—foci of relatively higher levels of conflict. Because they constitute the last remaining repositories of natural resources with far too many claimants for it, deciding the priorities for these pieces of land has always been a process laden with conflict. Champions of various causes continue to press claims for these reserves to be transferred to meet, variously, the subsistence potential for livelihood users, commercial potential for industry, development potential for the state, or conservation potential for biodiversity. Since none of these causes seems to be going out of favour but only gathering more force, and because we do not see a possibility that all these goals can be simultaneously achieved, we do believe that nature reserves will remain veritable cauldrons of conflict. Karanth also mentions the overwhelming historical slant towards ‘use’. We do agree with him but clarify that our contention about the relatively recent ascendance of ‘use’ was specifically with reference to its application *as a means for conservation*, and not as an end in itself, as Karanth interprets it. Last, we remain troubled that preservationism does not appear to concern itself with some of the most important issues threatening even the ecologically fragile groups of animals that it pleads for. For example, it seems not to have answers on how to deal with demonstrable damage caused by intense grazing by tens of thousands of livestock across prime habitats of many ecologically fragile wild herbivore species. We are not persuaded that this important issue can be satisfactorily tackled merely through better law enforcement within park boundaries.

Peluso’s checklist of the ‘major flaws’ in our article is a long one, and here, we will only address some of the more important ones. Peluso takes strong exception first, to our ‘surprising ignorance’, and then, our ‘highly selective reading’ of many

Indian examples of work on environmental history and socio-political aspects of resource conflict. While we defer to the importance of these perspectives for conservation, we must clarify here that our essay was never meant to be an exhaustive review of the historical or socio-political origins or outcomes of conservation conflict. Our omissions, therefore, are no more unexpected or shocking than the exclusion of mainstream ecological literature on endangered species in the historical, sociological or political reviews of conservation that Peluso mentions. Peluso also faults our ‘failure to differentiate between the very different histories of creation and preservation of plant and animal biodiversity’, and our ‘political sleight of hand’ in equating biodiversity to large mammals. While we hold no prejudice against species that are not large mammals, we also refer Peluso to the considerable ecological literature that examines how and why large-bodied animals, mostly mammals, are differentially vulnerable to anthropogenic pressures, and are therefore deserving of the special treatment they are often accorded. We also concede that we did not think it relevant to debate issues of ‘creating’ biodiversity (or agro-biodiversity) when we are still grappling with the challenges of conserving what already exists; we believe we are justified in focusing more narrowly on those elements of biodiversity that are under greater threat of extinction. In the end, we did feel a little short-changed with regard to Peluso’s own position as a political ecologist vis-à-vis the focus of the debate: how conservation conflicts may be reduced without sacrificing biodiversity amid a polarised conservation fraternity. If she had a position, it was kept well hidden.

In his response, Rodgers says that he ‘found nothing new or profound’ in our article. We are not entirely surprised with that observation, because, to be sure, we did not attempt to say anything new or profound in our article. We merely revisited old conservation problems that nag, to try and find if newer salves might exist. We also cannot agree with Rodgers’ contention that because the ‘protected area’, as a concept enshrined in the IUCN, embraces ‘use’ as well as ‘protection’, there can be no debate about the real-world face of such a genial concept. But, he does concede that the reality is quite different, blaming it on a vague ‘policy-to-implementation disconnect’, which, to our minds, seems very much the lack of common ground between the polarised approaches of preservationism and sustainable use that are only nominally linked in the concept of a protected area. Rodgers also points out issues with aspects of tone, style, appropriateness of citations and the absence of case studies to substantiate some points we make. In an overview as brief and general as ours, it is only possible to cite (as we have done)—and not feature—case studies.

Following this debate, we are certain about one thing: transcendence remains elusive as ever. We are, however, very sanguine that solutions can and will be found. We believe it is less likely to happen within academic debates, driven as they are by deep and dogged convictions to divergent ideologies, that any common ground which might exist remains as chimerical as the Snark. As Karanth notes, we may need to learn from non-academic workers, who—perhaps less burdened

by ponderous ideological baggage but concerned more with a pragmatic engagement with social, political, economic and ecological complexity—have begun demonstrating nameless but robust reconciliations between the conflicting needs of people and wildlife.