

Protected Areas and the Conservation of Biodiversity in India

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INTRODUCTION

IN SOME WAYS an article that provokes or moves one to reply could be said to be doing its job in broadening or enriching a dialogue. That role becomes even more important in the case of conservation if that dialogue leads to improved conservation. The essay by Madhusudan and Shankar Raman does provoke me to reply. But, I confess that some, but certainly not all, of that provocation is frustration, as well as a desire to enter a discourse.

I think that all readers of this journal will agree that the state of India's protected areas is perilous. The state is perilous for both the conservation of biodiversity values, and perilous for the many millions of people whose livelihood is still dependent on the resources in those Protected Areas (PAs) and whose livelihood is threatened by the conservation process. Yes—there are some recent gains in the conservation movement; the strength of the Supreme Court process is an enormous support to conservation at the moment (for example the logging ban in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands). But this gain is perhaps offset by the inherent antagonism to PAs within the political processes at the state level; and the weakness of central—state relationships for maintaining conservation. Any casual reader of *Sanctuary Magazine* in this last year will find many examples of PAs in peril from the private sector and government-led 'development' schemes. In theory the Constitution of India and the complex array of conservation policies in India do support the maintenance and sustainable use of biodiversity. In practice—the reality is different, there is a policy to implementation disconnect. The worry is that the Supreme Court rulings, which are policy directives, will not be translated into practice.

No one pretends that the conservation of biodiversity in India will be easy. Maintaining the integrity of natural ecosystem processes in the face of huge and still growing populations, and populations with long traditions of high resource dependence, will be very difficult. There has been an evolution of conservation process over several millennia. Much of what we see practiced today is based on the past colonial practice of reservation of areas of land that curtail all or most of

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people's past access to resources on those lands. We have well over a century of experience, both positive and negative, of managing Reserved Forests, and more recently Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks.

CONSERVATION AS IF BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY MATTERS—A RAPID CRITIQUE

Madhusudan and Shankar Raman do agree that conservation is not working as well as it should. Why then does it frustrate so much? Several reasons spring to mind:

1. The article attempts the big picture, but replaces analysis with rhetoric. There is little that is profound or new.
2. Yes, the article states that there is conflict, and even suggests that the conflict be minimised. But the writing fuels the conflict rather than providing solutions, or even setting out the basis for such a set of solutions. The article is full of provocative terms (polarised, strident, forceful, bleak, cauldrons of conflict) that do not provide an environment conducive to consensus.
3. There is a great generalisation, based on non-proven (non-tested!) assumptions. These assumptions are given spurious credibility by the phrase 'there is undoubted agreement' or 'undoubtedly'. And, linked to this latter concern, there is an almost total lack of field example or case analysis. The authors claim that 'the terms sustainable use and sustainable development have been remarkably successful in projecting solutions . . .'. They claim that 'the sustainable use approach undoubtedly succeeds in raising local interest and involvement in conservation'. Wow! I wish we could see their analysis and case studies.
4. Whilst there is an interesting reference list, it is not used well. For example, a highly specific study from Anamalai (Umapathy and Kumar 2000) is used to generalise a supposed fact that preservationist approaches do not address the larger landscape issues!

The article by Madhusudan and Shankar Raman starts off with a grandiose comment on the rationale for conservation, and the rather naïve belief that governments have bought into the principles of the global Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The reality is that national rhetoric exceeds practice in the fulfillment of the goals of this, and most, conventions. How much have the principles of conservation, sustainable use and equitable sharing of benefits been mainstreamed into ongoing programmes of the Governments in India (or elsewhere)?

Their article spends much of the ten pages arguing about what are seen as 'two forceful but polarised conservation paradigms'—the paradigm of 'preservationism' which is here defined as creating and managing protected areas, and the paradigm of 'sustainable use'. I dislike the use of the word paradigm in these contexts.

Neither concept has been tested, proven or even broadly accepted across the practitioner's community.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CONSERVATION AND IN THE CONSERVATION DEBATE

I prefer to use the terms 'concept' and 'principle'. The principle of Protected Areas (PAs) has been accepted and as *in-situ conservation* has been acknowledged within the Convention on Biological Diversity. 'Who protects what and from whom?' is irrelevant at the broad principle level—this could be an internationally accepted national park, or a village resource that is managed by community traditional practice! I cannot see any alternative to this principle of setting aside areas that are protected in some way to allow 'the wise use (= conservation)' of resources. International practice has acknowledged that there are a great variety of types or categories of PAs in practice. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has argued for at least seven categories; the first six of which have a function that is designed to support conservation of bio-diversity in some way. Category 1 is a strict nature reserve with NO disturbance, Category 2 is a standard National Park; Category 6 is an area of natural habitat which is set aside for sustainable resource use, but which still maintains the integrity of that natural system. The unlisted Category 7 would include heavily transformed use-areas, and even plantations.

Planning for protected areas in India as elsewhere in the tropics has accepted the principle of zonation to allow different patterns of resource use and protection. This follows the Man and Biosphere concept of UNESCO, and is the rationale behind the core and buffer zones that are typical of many of India's PAs. Most of the buffer zones can be described as zones that permit greater levels of resource use—use that is hopefully sustainable. Such uses would include grazing, timber and other biomass exploitation, including 'minor' forest produce. The core zones would be the less disturbed, less exploited areas of the PA.

This conservation activity, widespread through all the states and union territories of India, shows clearly the integration of both the concept of conservation through creating and managing PAs, and the concept of allowing different levels of sustainable resource use within the different zones of the PAs. There are not two separate and competing paradigms; they are two distinct parts of a common policy for the conservation of biodiversity! The article by Madhusudan and Shankar Raman does a disservice to Indian conservation by stressing their separateness.

That said, it does not mean that the current practice of conservation is working! There are concerns on all fronts. Biodiversity in most protected areas is being lost—populations of tigers, countrywide, provide a good example. Little of the widespread and intensive practice of resource use is sustainable—ecologically or sociologically. Two simple parameters can show the scale of the problem in most Reserve Forests and Sanctuary/ Park buffer zones: vegetation is not regenerating

and soil cover, and so overall productivity, is being lost. There is conflict between people and conservation agencies.

Unfortunately these are the only concepts and principles for conservation we have to work with. Where we do see opportunity for change is the way that these concepts are put into practice. Current principles suggest greater levels of stakeholder participation and involvement, from planning through implementation to monitoring stages. We are still not good at doing, as opposed to talking, about that. I do not think we understand the principles of sustainable use, what it is and how to achieve it. I do not think we have answered the question of how much biodiversity is enough—in face of growing rural populations and pressures? How big should a core zone be? How many parks and sanctuaries do we need?

Successful conservation is increasingly seen to be about building agreement, consensus and partnership. Partnership will be between government (all sectors) non-government organisations (NGOs), the private sector and communities. We are not good at this with still great disagreement within different sectors of government (let alone between government and the others), between different NGOs, and between communities! Partnership requires reduced antagonism. Reducing antagonism will not be served by articles such as that by Madhusudan and Shankar Raman.

The reference list is striking in the lack of detailed analysis of situations and of detailed analysis of policy and implementation of policy. Robust frameworks cannot be established in the absence of such empirical information. We must move beyond mere generalities!

Reference

Umapathy G. and A. Kumar (2000), 'The Occurrence of Arboreal Mammals in the Rain Forest Fragments in the Anamalai Hills, South India', *Biological Conservation*, 92: 311–19.