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change: notes on survival

OPINION

Change The Guard

The need of the hour is radical change in forest management. A new system that is dynamic and inclusive, not archaic and autocratic

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OFFICIAL CONSERVATION measures for tigers and other wildlife in India first began thirty-five years ago. And yet, we are facing the same problems today which were first identified in the 1970s. Sadly, our approach to solving them has also not changed over the past four decades.

In these years, very little research has been used to guide and manage our natural resources. The little research that has been done was mainly by agencies outside the government. The government has never acknowledged the value of this contribution. Instead, wildlife researchers have often been at the receiving end of wildlife managers' hostile attitudes. The system of forest management in place today suffers from inappropriate and outdated knowledge and training, which leaves those in charge of wildlife conservation ill-equipped to deal with the challenge of preserving our forests and wildlife. Natural systems require a system of constant monitoring and transparent assessment. But worryingly, those tasked with managing our forests have not modified their thinking to face new challenges.

No system has been put in place in the last three decades to encourage or institutionalise access to the available professional research in protected areas or to utilise the services of professionals and experts who work outside the government. We need to change the approach of our management from that of a guard protecting jewels, to a librarian managing a trove of knowledge, inviting people in for learning. Most management plans for protected areas are not based on scientific knowledge. More often, areas are managed on ad hoc annual plans of operation, which are governed by the individual forest officer's beliefs and prejudices, with no guarantee for continuity and accountability.

Many experts feel that wildlife conservation is facing its biggest crisis yet. The present management system has failed to arrest the degradation of our forest and wildlife; it is in a constant mode of denial and usually spends most of its energy in covering up its failures. When the loss of tigers from Sariska was pointed out to authorities, it was casually denied; senior officials merely said that the tigers had gone to the hills and would come back. The tigers did not return from their holiday and we lost all of them from one of our premier tiger reserves.

Indeed, more and more evidence points to the dismal fact that not just the tigers but a host of other species, large and small, are facing extinction and that very little effort is being made to halt this process. Only a few hundreds gharials are left in our river systems and they are disappearing very fast. We have almost forgotten the existence of the great Indian bustard. We don't know how many of these highly endangered bird species are left now. Decades of hard work done by the scientists of the Bombay Natural History Society is gathering dust in the record rooms of our wildlife managers' offices. We could have built on this knowledge base; instead we have dishonoured the fascinating research done. For the last hundred years, the Asiatic lion has survived in only one location – the Gir forest. A second home for these lions was planned, but blind to the larger picture, the forest departments of Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat are busy fighting egoistic wars behind a political smokescreen. As a result, a second home for the lions remains a distant dream. Not just species but some natural wonderlands are also fast disappearing, victims of neglect, ignorance and incompetence. The Bharatpur bird sanctuary was once a thriving wetland; now this world heritage site is almost a desert.

UNLESS IMMEDIATE corrective measures are taken, the present crisis may deepen to a point of no recovery in many places. The need of the hour is radical change in forest management institutions. We urgently need a reliable source of information on the status of populations and the protected areas. We have failed to create a system that supports and protects independent research. The success and indeed occurrence of research projects is entirely dependent on individual officers' whims. In most cases, true information never sees the light of day because a young researcher's career is dependent on the goodwill and support of the manager. Given this, rarely can a researcher bring the real facts out in the open without facing serious retribution.

The other crying need is to create a new professional cadre of wildlife managers with a completely new mandate, but this has been on the backburner for years. A new system is required—one that is accountable, professional, open, transparent, dynamic and inclusive; that is not autocratic, archaic and closed.

Now is the time to act. Our economy is growing rapidly and the pressure from development activities on our natural resources is higher than ever before. We need an organisation which can keep pace with development and ensure the ecological security of India along with its economic well being.



Illustration: Neelakash Kshetrimayum

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