

Community Participation: An Effective way for Wild-life Conservation in National Parks and Wild-life Sanctuaries in India

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Abstract:

Wild-life protection and conservation is very much required as many species are on the verge of extinction due to increased human activities. The legal provisions and the institutional framework are already there for the sake but it also requires public involvement. In recent times, community participation in this process is could be very effective in long run. Some research studies have also revealed that the participation of the local people have proved better in terms of wild-life conservation and management in some protected areas like National Parks and Wild-life Sanctuaries. Local communities are already getting benefits from the activities like wild-life tourism, we need to enhance their share. Strategies for involving local community are required in such a way that the local people are reaping the benefits of conservation in sustainable manner. Improving local people's mindset and attitude towards wild-life conservation is a key to success.

Key Words: *community participation, wild-life conservation, protected areas, wild-life tourism, benefits to local people.*

Introduction:

A uniform Legislation on wild-life was brought in by Wild-life Protection Act, 1972 with the establishment of Protected Areas (PA) like National Parks and Wild-life Sanctuaries in India. The main aim of this Act is to provide protection for wild animals, birds and plants and for matters connected therewith or ancillary or incidental thereto and also to ensure to ecological and environmental security of the country.

The establishment of these PAs has shown positive signs towards biodiversity protection and conservation in India. It has helped in preserving and maintaining the large mammal species like tigers, elephants, rhinos, etc. That has ultimately helped in enhancing another important activity and that is wildlife tourism in India. Indian wildlife tourism has appeared on international map. But at the same time protected areas has affected the livelihood of local communities. Many tribal and local communities are dependent on forest for their livelihood. Legislation of protected areas puts restriction over the use of forest resources for the local communities. Also some villages are relocated outside the PAs but the villagers are not provided with the alternative means of livelihood. That creates a sense of revolt and non-cooperation with the authorities in the minds of villagers.

Hence, it is need of the day to win the faith and confidence of the local communities living within and adjacent the protected areas. In addition to existing legal and institutional framework, we need to evolve a strategy which will include the local people as the stakeholders in the entire process of wildlife conservation and management. This can certainly be achieved by providing them the economic benefits derived in the process of conservation. Wild-life tourism is one such major activity in which more local people should be involved as their source of employment and also the economic benefits should be shared between them.

Methodology:

The current paper used the secondary data available on the topic. Government documents, reports, drafts and the research work done by other researchers were studied. The author's assumptions and findings based on the literature review are put forth in this paper.

Wild-life Conservation in India:

The formation of Wildlife Board and subsequently the enactment of Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, laid foundation for wildlife conservation in modern India. Protected areas are established in the form of National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries aiming for the effective conservation of biodiversity. These protected areas when governed and managed properly can provide solutions to ecological and conservational problems and serve as integral component of sustainable development. As stated in National Forest Policy, "For the conservation of total biological diversity, the network of national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, biosphere reserves and other PAs should be strengthened and extended adequately".

Different National Wildlife Action Plans (NWAP) were adopted by the government time to time. The first such NWAP was adopted in the year 1983, which says, wildlife conservation cannot be restricted only to National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries. Areas outside these protected areas are often vital ecological corridors and must be protected. That certainly means the villages and communities inside and outside these PAs comes into picture when we are considering wildlife conservation.

Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (Wildlife Division), Government of India has now drafted the third NWAP for the period 2017-2031. According to this currently there are 726 PAs in the country as against 400 PAs in the second NWAP (2002-2016). This includes 103 National Parks and 531 Wildlife Sanctuaries as major PAs, as per WII, National Wildlife database. The other PAs are Conservation reserves and Community reserves, the proportion of which is very small compared to National parks and Wildlife reserves. In addition to this PA network, the managed forests under the State Forest Departments are also contributing towards wildlife conservation. So, currently India has about 20% of total geographical area under effective wildlife conservation.

Community Participation in Wild-life Conservation:

Forests have been homes for many tribal communities since ages. These communities are totally dependent on forest for their livelihood and cultural sustenance. They derive fuel, fodder, honey, fish, medicinal plants and herbs and number of other forest products. Also they carry out farming and livestock rearing. Community participation in wildlife conservation can be achieved if the local people's rights and the revenue sharing are properly taken care by the government. This can certainly be done by providing them the alternative employment or livelihood which will reduce their dependence on forest biomass. Also the benefits achieved by conservation process and through tourism activities should be shared with the local communities.

Establishment of PAs in the country has put the legal restriction over the use of forest resources. Not only that, in many cases, communities have been shifted out of the park, which were their homes for generations. That is deprivation of their rights. Coupled with this, man-animal conflicts like, animal attacks, crop raiding, cattle lifting, etc. has made conflict between these locals and the

PAs managers more severe.

Eco-development programs already undertaken by the government should have a fine balance between ecological and social aspects of that area. These eco-development programs should be aiming to create more livelihood opportunities for local communities and reducing their dependency on PAs.

Wildlife tourism is another vital factor where community can be involved to maximum extent for the better results. Currently wildlife conservation policy does not see wildlife tourism in PAs as a source of revenue for local communities. Research studies reveal that more local people are positive about wildlife tourism and can support the activity if they get proper returns. They believe that a well conserved PA can attract more tourists and get more revenue. Hence in some cases it is found that people take active participation in tourism related activities and conservation of the area when they see direct economic benefits.

National Tourism Policy, 2002, stipulates that eco-tourism should help in eradicating poverty, creating new skills and employment, enhancing the status of women, preserving cultural heritage, encouraging tribal and local craft and overall growth of the region. But in fact, most of the benefits from eco-tourism are taken away by private tourism operators and resort owners. Currently, the employments like, forest guards, tourist guides, cab drivers, cooks, small restaurant owners, craft sellers, etc are provided by tourism. There is a great scope of involvement of JMFCs, Village Forests, Van Panchayats, local bodies, etc. in the entire process of tourism in PAs and other areas, so that the maximum benefits are taken by local communities which will certainly encourage them for the conservation of PAs.

Khonoma, Kohima (Nagaland): A Case Study

Khonoma village is located about 20 km from Kohima, state capital of Nagaland. The village, referred to as Khwunoria (named after a local plant, *Glouthera fragrantissima*), which is estimated to be 700 years old in this region. Khonoma is famous for its forests and agriculture, more particularly the terrace cultivation. The terrain of the village land is covered with hills, ranging from gentle slopes to steep and rugged hillside. The hills are having lush green and bio-diverse forestland, rich in various species of flora and fauna. A nationally endangered pheasant bird called Blyth's Trapogan is found here in abundance and declared bird of the state.

The wild bio-diversity of the region include, various species of trees, plants, medicinal herbs, wild fruits & vegetables, mushrooms, natural dyes, bamboos, etc. Also, has wide variety of reptiles, amphibians and large diversity of birds. Some large mammal species found here include, tigers, leopards, sloth bear, Himalayan black bear, etc.

Major Naga tribes like Angami has wildlife hunting as way of life. Huge number of birds including Trapogans and other animals were killed every year. Some eco-sensitive people of the village were much concerned about these killings, two of such notable names are Michael Megosiva Sophi and Tsilie Sakhrie. Michael Sophi was himself was a famous hunter of the village but turned into savior for wildlife. They along-with other like-minded people started a crusade to lay down their weapons and protect the wildlife instead. Later Tsilie became a member of the Village Council and intensified his voice against the hunting. After so much of agitation, finally villagers agreed upon the idea and the region was declared as Khonoma Natue Conservation and Trapogan Sanctuary (KNCTS). Hunting was banned not only in the Sanctuary but from entire village.

KNCTS Trust was set up further, to lay down the rules and regulations of sanctuary. Rules about

the penalty for violation and also maintenance and management of sanctuary were set. Village youth were appointed as warden for the sanctuary to monitor and to have periodical check of the sanctuary. All the office bearers of the Trust were villagers. Being new to the concept of sanctuary, the Trust decided to seek help from the government, NGOs and other institutions.

Government of India, recognized the efforts and the potential of the village to organize itself and declared it as a 'Green Village' and also extended the substantial green village funds through the tourism department of the State government. The funds are utilized to provide basic civic amenities and infrastructure to the villagers. The village has become a hot spot for eco-tourism, agro-tourism and wild-life tourism and earning revenue for the development of the region.

Recommendations:

- As mentioned in the Indian Forest Act, 1927, State governments are empowered to constitute Village Forests to be managed by village community.
- On similar lines, Social Forestry Programs outside the PAs should be more enhanced where most of fruit bearing plants and medicinal plants should be planted. That will certainly provide employment, livelihood and sustenance for the local villagers.
- Van Panchayat models introduced in the hill areas of Uttaranchal should be adopted in other areas of the country. Van Panchayats provide a strong legal mechanism to involve local communities in forest conservation.
- As issued by Government of India, an advisory to State governments, Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) should be set up nation-wide to involve local communities for the protection of forests.
- Relocation process needs to be reviewed critically. Communities relocated outside PAs should be provided with proper means of livelihood and sustenance. This will also ease the pressure on PAs regarding forest resource utilization.
- Nexus between local community and PA managers should be minimized by making the local communities stakeholders in the entire process of PAs conservation and extending them the monetary benefits.

Conclusion:

Wildlife conservation needs and priorities are changing with the passage of time. Gun and guard kind of policies are not going to work anymore. Legal and the institutional framework are not sufficient in modern times. Mere establishment of new and more Protected Areas is not the solution to wildlife protection. In addition to this, there is utmost need to have community participation in the entire process of wildlife conservation. Keeping in mind the rights of tribal local communities on their ancestral lands, livelihood and the cultural sustenance, the conservational strategies should be framed. Changing their mindset and attitude towards wildlife conservation is an essential component. This can be achieved by winning their faith and confidence through involving them as stakeholders in the process of conservation, in decision making and more importantly benefit sharing. A balanced integration of ecological, economic and social aspects can certainly lead to effective and sustainable wildlife conservation.

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