



# Local Communities and Wildlife Conservation in India

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**Abstract:** *Protection, conservation and management of wildlife and its habitat is important for preserving ecological and environmental balance. India has a rich heritage of wildlife and a long history and tradition of conservation. Wildlife conservation in India faces significant challenges due to habitat loss, poaching, and climate change. However, local communities play a critical role in preserving wildlife through traditional knowledge, sustainable practices, and active participation in conservation initiatives. The relationship between human beings and other forms of life is one of the most significant aspects of life on our planet. Human beings have a unique role to play on the planet which cannot be equaled by any other species. In this paper, the author discusses the role of local communities in the protection of wildlife and also examines the legal frameworks that empower local communities, highlights successful stories, and explores the socio-economic benefits of community-based conservation efforts. In this paper, the author also discussed the various communities known for the protection of wildlife.*

**Key Words:** *Challenges, Conservation, local communities, Wildlife Protection.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is an interrelationship between all forms of life and the disturbance in one give rise to an imbalance in the others. If species of plants or animals become endangered, they signify a degradation in the environment which may threaten man's existence. Plants and animals are integral to the world's living resources. They form various food chains and cycles that serve as essential life support systems for their survival, as well as for the survival of humanity. But the progress of man that has been beneficial for the human race has made wildlife suffer. Activities like hunting, industrialisation, increasing human population, clearing of forests, etc have vastly reduced the natural habitats of wildlife. Due to these activities, many species are endangered and nearly extinct.

The continuous destruction and disappearance of wildlife have been a cause of great concern. Areas that were once teeming with wildlife have become devoid of it. The current trend of deaths and the killing of wild

animals is a cause of concern for both governments as well as citizens. According to the report 'Wildlife Poaching and Illegal Trade in India: 2020' by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) there were 522 reports of wildlife poaching and trade in India in the year 2020.<sup>1</sup> According to a Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) committee report, ninety-two (92) Asiatic lions have died in Gujarat's Asiatic Lion Landscape since January 2020.<sup>2</sup> The pregnant elephant in Kerala's Palakkad district died on June 3, 2020, which caused outrage across the country and a few days after this incident dead bodies of male and female elephants were found with the tusks of male elephants removed in Odisha.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous similar matters which are increasing day by day. To protect and conserve wildlife in India the Government has enacted many legislations like the Wild Life (Protection) Act, of 1972, The Biodiversity Act, of 2002, and many more. However, the attention of authorities and people all across the country is needed for the conservation and protection of wildlife in India.

The benefits of wildlife conservation are not easy to explain to many segments of society. The potential values of genetic resources, scientific understanding and ecological reference centres are difficult to grasp. Conservation cannot successfully be imposed on people, there must be a degree of acceptance if conservation is to work.<sup>4</sup> According to all modern theories, any protection policy without collaboration with the local people is unjust to them is an infringement of their fundamental rights, and also unprofitable for the conservation of wildlife. What is required is the evolution of a process through which the local communities and wildlife conservation could work together with peace and harmony.<sup>5</sup> Historically, indigenous and local populations have coexisted with wildlife, often employing traditional knowledge and practices that promote ecological balance. However, conventional conservation approaches frequently marginalize these communities, leading to conflicts and ineffective conservation outcomes.

The community-based conservation approach recognizes the important role that local communities play in biodiversity conservation. By directly empowering local people in conservation and conflict management, as well as indirectly supporting efforts to improve their quality of life, community-based initiatives aim to alleviate the disproportionate burden of conservation costs that local communities often bear. This, in turn, seeks to gain their support for conservation efforts. These initiatives help communities manage their natural resources and biodiversity through self-governance. The involvement of local communities in biodiversity conservation is increasingly emphasized in policies and environmental discussions.<sup>6</sup> Several communities of forest dwellers have been living in harmony with wildlife. They have self-imposed restrictions on forest use aimed at

<sup>1</sup> KC. Deepika, Despite pandemic and lockdowns, illegal hunting and trade in wildlife continued across India, shows report, February 26, 2022, The Hindu, available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/despite-pandemic-and-lockdowns-illegal-hunting-and-trade-in-wildlife-continued-across-india-shows-report/article65068674.ece#> (Last visited on May 9, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Ishan Kukreti, "92 lions already dead in Gir this year, report flags: Union govt was aware of high mortality even as PM Modi played up rise in count", *Down to Earth*, 12 June 2020, available at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-and-biodiversity/92-lions-already-dead-in-gir-this-year-report-flags-71721> (Last visited on May 9, 2024)

<sup>3</sup> Ashis Senapati, "Odisha forest department comes under fire by locals, activists; locals allege neglect", *Down to Earth*, 15 June 2020, available at: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-and-biodiversity/elephants-found-dead-in-odisha-s-keonjhar-with-tusks-removed-activists-allege-poaching-71758> (Last visited on May 9, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Himani, "Sustainable Wildlife Protection: Why Does it Matter Today?" 43 *Civil and Military Law Journal* 54 (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Mona Purohit, *Wildlife Laws and its Impact on Tribes*, XV (Deep and Deep Publications PVT. LTD. New Delhi, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> Charudutt Mishra, *The Partners Principles for Community-Based Conservation*, 17 (Snow Leopard Trust, 2016).

maintaining the green cover. They also have self-imposed restrictions on hunting or causing any other harm to wild animals. There is much to learn from them regarding the way of peaceful coexistence with wildlife.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. NEED FOR COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION

The management of protected areas worldwide has been formalised and standardized in terms of governance, categorization, and administration to quite a significant extent. The situation with community-based conservation whether in protected areas or otherwise is different. Despite academic foundations being available—especially of self-governance of natural resources there are no clear-cut frameworks or universally accepted guidelines for conserving the communities. Because community-based conservation encompasses a diversity of scales, Institutions, and perspectives, it is considered a complex system problem, and therefore pluralism in approach is both to be expected and valued. Recognition that there may be multiple pathways to achieving the same goal is an important aspect of working with communities. But this is perhaps not the only reason why we lack universal guidelines for community-based conservation.

A key motivation for community-based initiatives is the understanding that in a democratic system, conservation efforts are less effective and difficult to sustain without the support of local communities. Personal values, dilemmas, and empathy often drive conservationists towards community-based conservation. This indicates a significant influence of individual interests, values, and worldviews of practitioners on the approaches and interventions used in community-based conservation efforts. As conservation practitioners working with communities, we gain knowledge through our experiences, including both trials and mistakes. Although that is important, it does not lessen the need for practical guidelines or frameworks for community-based conservation, as well as resources to consult and learn from the experiences of others. To adopt, adapt, or at the very least, consider the best practices of others is essential to avoid repeating past mistakes. While pluralism in community-based approaches is highly valued, the lack of effort to consolidate learning and experiences in community engagement remains a significant limitation in conservation thinking and practices.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 WHY DO LOCAL COMMUNITIES PARTICIPATE IN CONSERVATION PROJECTS?

Despite the economic, social, cultural, and political differences between the three sites, the active involvement of the local community in conservation efforts remained a consistent factor. Each conservation initiative was tailored to its specific context, with varying degrees of community participation at different stages and activities. Local communities engaged for various reasons, including material benefits, providing labour, or attending consultative workshops. The extent of interaction between local communities and external organizations, such as NGOs and government agencies, varied across the three sites. However, we found three common, yet, critical factors that drove participation by the community. They were: (1) trigger, (2) negotiation and (3) sustenance factors. Trigger factors-initiated community participation by creating a crisis narrative concerning the loss of biodiversity and human-wildlife conflict, aided by external factors such as NGOs, media,

<sup>7</sup> Bharat Dogra, Protection of Wildlife Working With People, Not Against Them, Economic and Political Weekly, 1997.

<sup>8</sup> *Supra* note 6 at 19.



and the forest department. Negotiation factors arose from the daily interactions between the local community and external factors. These factors included effective entry-stage activities conducted by external factors, such as workshops, awareness meetings, and trials of conflict mitigation technologies. Additionally, the development of income opportunities for locals, including tourism and various farm and non-farm livelihoods, played a significant role. Mediation efforts by community members, such as teachers, socio-political representatives, and field assistants, also contributed to the process. Furthermore, intra-community dynamics, including ethnic, gender, and income differences, influenced negotiations. Sustenance factors affected the long-term participation of the community. The outcomes included both tangible and intangible results, such as reduced conflict and increased income or social status within the community. Additionally, the welfare of residents was addressed through enhanced physical, financial, and social safety and security. Availability of funds from international or national donors also played a crucial role. It is essential to give appropriate attention to the 'soft' issues, such as participation, social processes, and capacity development, alongside allocating resources for 'hard' aspects, like technical interventions. To effectively understand various interest groups and develop engaging tactics for interaction, stakeholder mapping is essential. While we should commend individuals' motivation and commitment, we must also be cautious to prevent these individuals from becoming regional centres of power for the elite. Regular feedback sessions should be conducted to facilitate learning between the community and project supporters. This will enable both groups to make informed decisions about their activities and engagement. Additionally, securing long-term funding is necessary until the community becomes self-mobilized and independent, as these programs typically rely on external funding.<sup>9</sup>

### **3. LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION THROUGH COMMUNITY IN INDIA**

India has a deep-rooted tradition of local communities' connection with wildlife. Wildlife conservation and management have been practised in India for centuries. Ancient texts contain numerous references that celebrate wildlife. In Vedic literature, there are many stories depicting the relationships between wildlife and monks living in their forest ashrams. Tulsi has long been regarded as a sacred and religious herb, along with many other plant species used for medicinal purposes. The reverence for forests may have emerged when people began to feel that society was suffocating nature. For individuals in the Banaprastha and Sanyas stages of life, the forest symbolises a path to abandoning the constraints of civilization and discovering one's true self. Hindu Dharma often links various animals with specific Gods and Goddesses, such as the python with God Vishnu, the snake with God Shiva, the lion with Devi Durga, and the swan with Goddess Saraswati. This tradition of associating animals with deities has been an effective way to protect wildlife. Ancient Indian civilizations recognized the importance of animals, valuing their role and ensuring their conservation. As a result, animals were revered, safeguarded, nurtured, and cherished in ancient India. In India, each God and Goddess is associated with a specific animal, which is revered and honoured just like the deity. The deep love, worship, and respect

<sup>9</sup> Sayan Banerjee, "Local Communities and Wildlife Conservation: Stories from Northeast India" available at <https://www.econe.in/post/local-communities-and-wildlife-conservation-stories-from-northeast-india>. (Last Visited on May 25, 2024).

that humans have for the animal kingdom is evident in numerous ancient texts, paintings, and artworks. Sacred Indian scriptures, such as the Mahabharata, Gita, and Ramayana, teach humanity the importance of showing compassion and empathy towards all living beings. A lot of communities in various parts of India still hold the same level of respect and protection for wildlife.

Numerous wild animal skeletons and remains were found, including the wild cheetah, rabbit, fox, large elephants, and the Indian one-horned rhinoceros. A significant number of animal remains were also uncovered in the Indus Valley during the Mohenjo-Daro civilization. Later, the Mughals showed a distinct concern for environmental conservation, with a deep appreciation for beautiful gardens and vast orchards surrounding their palaces, which contributed to the growth of green ecosystems rich in biodiversity. Akbar's religious philosophy, rooted in the principles of liberty, demonstrated his deep commitment to the conservation of birds. Some evidence was found regarding efforts to reduce the slaughter of animals, to nearly eliminate unnecessary killings of wildlife.<sup>10</sup>

After independence, the subject of forests and wildlife was transferred from the State List to the Concurrent List and the Wildlife (Protection) Act came into effect in 1972. This landmark legislation serves as the cornerstone of wildlife conservation in India. The overall objectives for involving people in wildlife conservation were expanded with the inclusion of two additional categories of protected areas: Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves. Conservation Reserves are designated as buffer zones to facilitate wildlife movement, where the land is owned exclusively by the government, but limited activities by local people are permitted. In contrast, Community Reserves are areas where the land is owned by local communities, and this ownership will remain with them permanently, without the government acquiring it. These reserves are designed to ensure proper protection of flora and fauna, enhance wildlife protection beyond the traditional protected area network, and actively engage local communities in conservation efforts.<sup>11</sup>

The community protects wildlife through the establishment of Protected Areas as Community Reserves. According to the Act, a Community Reserve is an area declared by the state government where the community or an individual has volunteered to conserve wildlife and its habitat, declare any private or community land not comprised within a National Park, Sanctuary or Conservation Reserve, as a Community Reserve for protecting fauna, flora and traditional or cultural conservation values and practices.<sup>12</sup> The Community Reserve Management Committee will be responsible for conserving, maintaining, and managing the Community Reserve.<sup>13</sup>

The Biological Diversity Act of 2002 focuses on regulating how foreign individuals, institutions, or companies can access genetic resources and the knowledge related to them. It ensures that the benefits of using these resources are shared fairly with the country and its people. To protect local communities and support

<sup>10</sup> Shradha Kalra, Asha Punia, *et.al.* (eds.), "Wildlife Conservation Through Local Community Engagement in India", 44 *UPJZ* 15-16 (2023).

<sup>11</sup> D. Rajasekar, J.Yogalakshmi and Jitendra Sharma, "Community Based Conservation for Protection of Avifauna Diversity at Keshopur, Punjab, India's First Community Reserve", *XV World Forestry Congress*, Seol, (2022).

<sup>12</sup> Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, sec. 36C.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*, sec.36D.

research by Indian citizens, the Act allows traditional healers and other individuals in India free access to biological resources for non-commercial purposes. The Biological Diversity Act provides for the setting up of biodiversity funds at national, state and local levels. Benefits will be given directly to individuals or groups of individuals only in cases where biological resources or associated knowledge are accessed directly through them. The time frame and quantum of benefits to be shared shall be decided on a case-to-case based on mutually agreed terms between the applicant, authority, local bodies, and other relevant stakeholders, including local and indigenous communities.<sup>14</sup>

Wildlife cannot be protected without safeguarding the livelihood of local communities. The forest dwellers to be involved as equal partners and their knowledge system should be respected and local communities in the only way to safeguard India's forest wealth as well as wildlife. Community participation through legislative empowerment of rural institutions has the utmost importance because these institutions have been bestowed with enormous power in the decision-making process and at the same time involve the grassroots people in a democratic and participative governance system. Many local communities have been agitating regarding sustainable wildlife management and opposites to animal rights for their existence. The efforts to conserve wildlife have gradually begin to shift away from law enforcement and use restriction towards more participatory approach. Community participation through the community's engagement with its wildlife conservation projects to prevailing initiatives of self-help groups and social action groups. Furthermore, the role of NGOs is important at grassroots organisations for the improvement of wildlife protection through the involvement and enabling people to work by themselves. To attain the policy objectives of Wildlife Management with community participation the different communities in the form of wildlife protection committees, and eco-development committees help in protecting wildlife by involving local communities in the management. Planning and monitoring system for maintenance, conservation, and enhancement of biodiversity.<sup>15</sup>

Wildlife conservation in India was initiated through the administration of protected areas under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and Indian Forest Act, 1927. However, today, local communities are being included in Indian conservation governance and community-centric conservation in India has taken up various forms. Conservation through Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMC) and Eco-Development Committees (EDC) provide a co-management model where the state and the community collaborate to set policies and manage natural resources. The Indian state has further devolved its power and authority to various institutions such as Gram Sabhas, and Panchayati Raj Institutions for governing natural resource management. Lastly, autonomous community efforts in Scheduled areas of India have developed Community-Conserved Areas (CCA) where the governance is worked through customary laws, rather than the mainstream laws. Here, local communities enjoy the rights and privileges of using natural resources which are curtailed in the other

<sup>14</sup> K. Venkataraman, "Access and Benefit Sharing and the Biological Diversity Act of India: A Progress Report", 10 *Asian Biotechnology and Development Review*, (2008).

<sup>15</sup> *Supra* note 4 at 55.

conservation models. With the presence of such different models, it is interesting to explore how local communities participate in these conservation models.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. COMMUNITY INITIATIVES FOR CONSERVATION IN INDIA

The Bishnoi community is one of the great examples of wildlife conservation in India. Bishnoi records are overflowing with incidents of supreme sacrifices for the protection of trees, birds, and beasts. Their guru has told them to love and respect life in all its manifestations- trees, birds and beasts- and they obey the commandment with unflagging faith and fervour, even at the cost of their lives.<sup>17</sup> Custom and faith provide a proactive shield for hundreds of gazelles and antelopes around Bishnoi village.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, forests and the communities that dwell within them have a symbiotic relationship. The Forest Dwelling Scheduled Tribes (FDST) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) recognize the importance of forests and wildlife. Community-based Forest protection, conservation, regeneration, and management have become an integral part of life for these communities, with secure tenure providing them with usage and access rights. In Odisha, the process of community-driven forest protection and management began to take shape in the early twentieth century. These initiatives emerged as a response to environmental degradation and the ongoing decline in livelihood opportunities derived from the forests. The primarily agrarian community, facing shortages of small timber and bamboo for agricultural tasks and declining yields due to land degradation, turned to forest protection as a solution. Some early examples of this initiative were seen in the then undivided Sambalpur and Koraput districts, which served as models for others. The success of these efforts was widely recognized and replicated across many parts of Odisha. This movement spread to nearly all districts with forest patches, gradually evolving into a mass movement. However, it gained significant momentum during the 1980s and 1990s, which saw the establishment of numerous Community Initiated Forest Management (CFM) groups. Community institutions emerged at both village and cluster levels to protect and manage forests. An inclusive approach to resource management brought together all villages dependent on a specific forest area, forming participatory and democratic bodies to oversee its care. Today, in many areas, people have embraced this as a way of life rather than just an activity.<sup>19</sup>

The conservation scenario in India today is highly complex. On the one hand, local communities and their livestock are undoubtedly putting excessive pressure in several areas and their traditional institutions of management have broken down their knowledge considerably eroded. There is also severe opposition to official conservation programmes, including mass movements against some protected areas. Vested interests have often taken advantage of this discontent. On the other hand, there are also numerous examples where communities have fought destructive forces to save these resources such as Sariska National Park where the communities achieved what authorities couldn't to save the area from reckless mining and Nagarhole National Park where

<sup>16</sup> *Supra* note 9.

<sup>17</sup> M.S. Chandla, *The Bishnois Wildlife Protection An Article Of Faith*, 226 (Aurva Publication, Chandigarh, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History*, 121 (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> <https://rcdcindia.org/PbDocument/ecda2b3301d9b09-b82b-4821-8432-250702077fdeCommunity%20Forestry%20Management%20Initiative%20in%20Odisha%20by%20RCDC.pdf> (Last visited on June 3, 2024).



tribals and activists legally stalled a hotel which could have caused considerable disturbance. This indicates that many communities even today are not against conservation but rather against the models which are being followed to achieve it. From these several examples of communities reviewing their protection of ecosystems and species, including 2.5 million hectares of forest under self-initiated Forest Protection Committees or state-sponsored Joint Forest Management programme, one phenomenon is very clear the management of resources is much better in areas where people have a central role.<sup>20</sup>

But both within the country and worldwide it is therefore being realised that one major step towards the protection and conservation of wide diversity is recreating a stake for the local communities and reinstalling a sense of belonging towards their resources. Such a step is however not easy especially because of the extent of alienation of communities from their surroundings change in lifestyle and attitudes the ecological and cultural erosion caused by the current model of development and the loss of sense of responsibility and decision-making capacity amongst the majority of the population.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4.1 CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

- While legal frameworks exist to support community involvement, the effective implementation of these laws remains a challenge. Bureaucratic hurdles, lack of awareness, and inadequate training often hinder local participation. Strengthening institutional frameworks and enhancing capacity-building initiatives are essential for effective policy implementation.

- In most cases the communities residing in conservation areas belong to the lowest economic strata. Their wealth is the surrounding habitat on which their livelihood heavily depends. So, it is a challenge to convince some people of these areas.

- Conflicts over land rights can obstruct community participation in conservation efforts. Ensuring clear legal recognition of land rights and establishing conflict resolution mechanisms are critical for empowering communities. Collaborative governance structures that include community representatives can facilitate equitable decision-making.

### 5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

**1. Sustainable Livelihoods:** Community-led conservation initiatives create diverse employment opportunities, including eco-tourism, organic farming, and handicrafts. For instance, eco-tourism ventures developed by local communities in areas like Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh have not only generated income but also increased awareness of wildlife conservation among tourists.

<sup>20</sup> Neema Pathak and Ashish Kothari, "Sharing Benefits of Wildlife Conservation with Local Communities: Legal Implications", 33 *EPW* 2604 (1998).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



**2. Cultural Preservation:** Many local communities possess deep cultural ties to their natural environments. Involving them in conservation efforts helps preserve traditional practices and knowledge systems. This cultural connection enhances community resilience and fosters stewardship of natural resources.

**3. Conflict Mitigation:** Active community involvement in conservation can mitigate human-wildlife conflicts. By integrating local knowledge and addressing community concerns, conservation strategies become more effective. For example, compensation schemes and conflict resolution mechanisms can alleviate tensions between communities and wildlife, fostering a more harmonious coexistence.

## 6. SUGGESTIONS

- Active cooperation of the people and educated non-governmental organisations are essential ingredient for the effective protection of wildlife.
- To maximize community engagement, targeted capacity-building programs are necessary. Training local populations in sustainable resource management, conservation practices, and eco-tourism development can enhance their ability to participate effectively in conservation initiatives.
- Government should support their livelihood through various programmes. Government should make them stakeholders for the betterment of their future and protection of wildlife and government should increase local communities share of benefits associated with conservation.
- We should respect and regard the conservation efforts of the local communities.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Local communities are essential allies in the fight for wildlife conservation in India. By utilizing legal frameworks such as the Wildlife Protection Act and the Forest Rights Act, India can develop an inclusive conservation model that empowers local populations. Successful case studies showcase the potential of community-based conservation to enhance biodiversity protection while also promoting sustainable livelihoods. To fully realize this potential, future policies must prioritize inclusivity, capacity building, and the recognition of traditional knowledge. By fostering collaboration between communities and conservation authorities, India can achieve more effective and sustainable wildlife conservation outcomes, ensuring the protection of its rich biodiversity for generations to come.