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From the ringside

**How to save the tiger**

Netting poachers of wildlife is proving to be a daunting challenge. No day goes by without discouraging stories of vanishing tigers in Sariska, Ranthambhore, Betla and other game reserves. Equally depressing are stories about poisoning of endangered species and a flourishing nexus between forest officials and unscrupulous traders with an intricate network. One silver lining is the Prime Minister's recent initiative in convening, after long dormancy, a meeting of the Wildlife Board of which he is the chairman. There are also reports about the interest shown by the PMO, both on investigation and arresting the decline of our endangered species. The earlier experience of the Principal Secretary to Prime Minister in the Ministry of Environment & Forests as well as the experience in the PMO of the present incumbent in that Ministry should help in devising appropriate strategies.

Over the years, successive Ministers of Environment & Forests have devoted excessive attention in investing the Ministry with the worst vestiges of the "Licence Permit Raj". Obstructionist rent-seeking methods of the Ministry prior to according environmental clearances, is a sordid story. Any senior project official or industrialist has a tale of woe. The end objective may not have much to do with environmental preservation but more with the petty patronage that delayed permissions can inflict on project time and cost overruns. Apportioning their time between negotiating international agreements on sustainable development like Kyoto Protocol, emission trading or according project approvals leaves little time for the welfare of vanishing tigers! Initiatives like the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) or projects designed to protect tigers either do not have the resources or the clout to implement their mandate. State Governments replicate all this in worse forms.

So what should we do based on best international practice? During my recent visit to South Africa, for a meeting on migration, I spent a few days at the Londolozi Private Game Sanctuary which is adjacent to the Kruger National Park. It was quite an experience to say the least. Apart from the comfort and the organisation of the lodge itself, we tracked a leopard, which, after the previous night's rain, was re-marking its territory. The leopard, thereafter, spotted a cheetah in a shallow bush that had probably been killed by a lion a few hours earlier. To protect it from easy feasting by hyenas or vultures, it dragged it deep in the woods as if to give a more decent farewell. Even among the big cat family there was compassion for the dead. We were able to capture the entire sequence on our video camera. How is South Africa able to preserve its wildlife in its natural habitat? The following elements could be of some use to us.

- First, a harmony of interest among all stakeholders. The villagers have a vested interest in preserving the wildlife because it is their presence which attracts visitors to sustain a chain of activity from airport, rangers, maintenance of lodges, supply of food and service chain to name a few. It is the principal source of their

employment. Most rangers who accompany visitors in open jeeps are local villagers who have undergone training. The private leaseholders of game parks derive their profit from preservation of wildlife species because information about any marked decline travels fast and they lose clientele in competition to other private sanctuaries. The Government realises rent from long-term leases and the expenditure incurred by visiting tourists have multiplier revenue benefits. In essence, the “social compact” between all stakeholders becomes the best guarantee for preserving the diverse species.

- Second, the ecological balance is carefully maintained and excess of any species which would endanger either flora or sustenance of other species is managed by transporting them to other game reserves where their numbers may have dwindled. This balance is practiced in multiple ways. One small example is the use of search-lights during night safaris; it is used to light the pathways and never focussed on the eyes of the impalas or gazelles since the resultant blinding for an hour may make them easy prey while the lights are kept away from the eyes of the cats lest immobilising them for an equivalent time may deny them their night’s food!
- Third, while animals can freely move from one adjacent game sanctuary to another, the territory meant for cultivation and use of villagers is carefully defined. The perimeter of the game sanctuary is fenced with light voltage electricity adequate to deter movement outside the Reserve but not harsh enough to result in electrocuting animals. The villagers engaged in cultivation can pursue their agricultural activity in the earmarked territory, unhindered by the animals even while the adjacent Reserves enable employment and augment income.

In the Indian context, apart from national parks and sanctuaries, a new requirement for conservation reserves and community reserves which reconciles livelihood security with wildlife protection needs enforcement. So does the stipulation for creative zoning with inviolate core, conservation buffer, community buffer and multiple use area.

It is said that India is over-legislated and under-governed. Nowhere else is it more true than in the area of wildlife preservation. The National Forest Policy and Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 with other supporting regulations are well-crafted but poorly enforced. The first National Wildlife Action Plan adopted in 1983 lays down a comprehensive framework of action in multiple areas with preservation of eco-systems and firm deadlines for completing action. It would be worthwhile to find out the progress made in the implementation of this comprehensive plan. Within the integrity of the Act, it would be worthwhile to examine:

- (i) Modalities for creating a social compact of interest between all stakeholders who have an interest in preservation of our wildlife;
- (ii) Incentive structure for private sector through long-term leases of game parks which would create competition in attracting visitors and improving the quality of overall infrastructure;
- (iii) Encouragement of ecological balance between competing species based on best international examples.

Promotion of eco-tourism is big business in South Africa, South America and other

parts of the world. It promotes tourism, brings income to rural communities and allows content to public-private partnership. While the government can provide basic infrastructure and remains responsible for overall enforcement, the partnership formalises the shared property rights of people engaged in the continued preservation of the endangered species.

Conservation of India's rich bio-diversity is directly linked with conservation of eco-systems which requires concerted action. It would also help if the Ministry of Environment & Forests devotes a fraction of their time away from granting licenses and permission to measures for the betterment of our voiceless endangered species. This is also one area where innovative public-private partnership could bring multiplier benefits to all stakeholders. The tiger can pay its own way.

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