

GUARDIANS OF THE SANCTUARIES: HOW THREE WILDLIFE RESERVES IN THE SOUTH ARE BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN HUMANS AND WILDLIFE

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - Wildlife related issues

On December 2, it is going to be a month since Avni, the tigress who turned man-eater, was shot dead in Maharashtra's Yavatmal. But her death is still being debated on social media and elsewhere. The tigress was said to have killed 13 people over the last two years. The details of her death are murky; while animal rights activists were crushed, relieved locals celebrated with sweets and firecrackers. They could frequent the forest for grazing without fear now.

In September this year, Gir, a natural sanctuary of the Asiatic Lion, saw the death of 23 lions, some due to Canine Distemper Virus, said to spread from contact with feral dogs. Too many lions and inadequate prey within the forest are said to be primary reasons why they venture out for food.

Each of these incidents shocked people when first reported, but were soon forgotten. But they stay alive in the minds of Forest Department officials, who grapple with these issues 24x7. With them is vested the responsibility of being fair to three sets of stakeholders — wildlife, tribals living in the forest or its fringes, and tourists. Add to this potent mix forest fires and poachers, and every day is an accident waiting to happen or be averted.

Over the years, some sanctuaries have managed to put in place systems that work with two of these stakeholders to ensure the least disturbance to the third — wildlife, the stars of the forest. They speak about what it takes to bring in sustainability in conservation, the challenges and the satisfaction when they succeed.

PARAMBIKULAM

At a glance: Sprawled over 285 sq km, the Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary is nestled in the Nelliampathy-Anaimalai region of the Western Ghats. It has found a place in the list of the world's 34 biodiversity hotspots.

USP: Good sightings of deer, elephant, gaur, leopard and tiger.

Sustainable efforts: In 2007, Parambikulam set a standard of eco-tourism by banning entry of plastic into its pristine environment. Tribals were gainfully employed: they treated spring water and bottled it under the Parambi Dhara initiative, and were encouraged to play a symphony featuring traditional instruments. All of this was possible because Sanjayan Kumar (the warden then and currently Director of Sports and Youth Affairs, Kerala) believed that "we can't think about an oasis of conservation amidst a socio-economic desert".

These days, potable purified water is available at every popular location in Parambikulam. The sanctuary employs between 250 and 275 tribals, and provides them employment for 26 days of the month, at the rate of almost 500 a day. They are engaged as guides in safari vehicles, to help run the accommodation (Swiss tents, honeycomb complex, treetop houses and island hut), and as maintenance staff. They also handle the two bamboo rafts, which are hugely popular, says Madhusoodhanan PV, Deputy Director of the Parambikulam Tiger Conservation Foundation.

Maintenance: “Our capacity is 1,000 tourists a day, and we don’t allow more visitors. While we allow day trippers, we discourage them from drinking liquor. It has worked well so far,” says Madhusoodhanan. Tribals go through repeated training. For example, most of them are born with the innate observational ability that is ideal for watchers. “We tap into that, but top it up with new-age training.”

Future forward: “We have a model that works well and we would like to better it. No, I’m not speaking of increasing the tourist footfall, but we would like to enhance the overall experience,” he says.

NAGARHOLE

At a glance: Spread over 600 sq km, across the districts of Mysore and Kodagu in Karnataka, it was declared a National Park in 1983. It is a part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve.

USP: One of the last remaining protected habitats for the elephant and tiger.

Sustainable efforts: A whole lot has been done over the years, says Punati Sridhar, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Karnataka. The main focus is on protection and anti-poaching camps that cover the sanctuary.

Then, there is the thrust on developing the quality of the forest, focussing on soil and moisture conservation and grassland management to help support prey (chital, gaur, sambar and hogs) for the growing number of tigers and other carnivores. Tiger density — with one every 10 km — has reduced to one every 6.5 km, and 500 chital for a tiger is imperative for a healthy food chain. “We work with Jungle Lodges who take care of most of the safaris, and the discipline to be maintained inside,” adds Sridhar. Locals drive the sanctuary and are employed — they keep a lookout for forest fires, repair roads, desilt tanks. They are also provided skill upgradation on how to collect non-timber forest produce without destroying the source. For instance, how they need not cut entire branches to harvest fruit or extract honey with larvae inside.

Maintenance: Lantana camara, an invasive weed, is continuously being cleared and the view lines have been widened.

The process: Ideation and implementation are different. Volunteers act as a bridge between foresters and the people of the forest, convincing them of newer, more efficient spin-offs on traditional practices. “It’s a fine line we tread and we are an enforcement agency, so occasionally, when someone crosses the line, there is punitive action. But, overall, we work to bring about a sense of belonging,” says Sridhar.

Future forward: *Sridhar wants to ensure they remain a zero-forest fire reserve this year, too. “Our tiger population in 2014 was number one in the country; thanks to negligible poaching. We wish to stay that way, and also reduce man-animal conflicts, especially in the case of elephants, with rail barricades,” he says.*

KALAKAD MUNDANTHURAI

At a glance: KMTR, spread over Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts, is part of the inter-state Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) considers the core of KMTR as one of the five centres of biodiversity and endemism in India. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Before their merger, Kalakad was known for its Lion Tailed Macaque population and Mundanthurai for its tigers.

USP: It is a river sanctuary with 14 rivers, including Manimuthaaru, Thamirabarani, Kodumudiaaru and Mayilaaru, and 11 dams such as the Karaiyaar. It has rich plant biodiversity (400 sq km of contiguous wet evergreen forest) and endemic species, such as Kalakad gliding frog, Kani maranjandu (tree cab), and Puntius tambraparniei (fish). This region finds mention in Sangam literature, too.

Sustainable efforts: An eco-development programme initiated in 1996 took care of villages in the periphery and provided them alternative livelihood options. KMTR Field Director I Anwardeen said the microcredit scheme initiated by the Forest Department here is among the most successful. So far, 8.5 crore has been disbursed, and a wealth of about 85 crore created for 30,000 people in over 248 villages. Thanks to these programmes, the sanctuary is anthropological footprint-free, which means there is no poaching, no fire and no grazing.

The process: The programme worked on a system of reciprocal commitment. The sanctuary engaged with the locals; guided them out of poverty and sought their help in participatory conservation. Anwardeen says that threat in the form of poaching, illegal entry and firewood collection is almost zero in KMTR. The Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) has implemented a programme to decrease local villagers' dependency on the forests for fuel.

Future forward: The sanctuary has 80 leopards and a good population of sloth and dhol. "It is important for our tiger population to be linked to that of Periyar Tiger Reserve. Once that happens, this will be one contiguous tiger landscape," says Anwardeen about the ongoing project.

The islands, comprising only 0.25% of country's geographical area, has 11,009 species, according to a publication by the Zoological Survey of India

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