

# MINIMISING HUMAN DISTURBANCE CRUCIAL TO PROTECT BEARS OUTSIDE WILDLIFE RESERVES: STUDY

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The study found that sloth bears avoided areas with high forest fragmentation. | Photo Credit: Kalyan Varma

A new study has found that maintaining forest cover and preventing fragmentation of habitats while minimising human disturbance is crucial for long-term conservation of bears outside protected wildlife reserves across India.

Scientists from Bengaluru-based Centre for Wildlife Studies, the National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS)-Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR), and the University of Florida studied sloth bears in a forest corridor of Madhya Pradesh. They have published their findings in their latest scientific paper titled 'Safe space in the woods: Mechanistic spatial models for predicting risks of human–bear conflicts in India' in the journal *Biotropica*.

The corridor connecting Kanha and Pench Tiger Reserves is among the most important landscapes in India, supporting several threatened species of wildlife and over 350,000 people.

In the recent study, researchers conducted indirect sign surveys (documenting pugmarks and faeces) to understand where sloth bears are found and why. They combined these results with information on bear attacks on people, gathered through interview surveys of local communities.

Mahi Puri, lead author of the study, said that the Kanha-Pench landscape has been a high conservation priority landscape for over two decades, especially for the conservation of tigers. "However, the landscape is also home to several other threatened species, including sloth bears, that frequently come into conflict with people. Their conservation requires active management by taking into account human safety," Dr. Puri said.

Dr. Puri added that their study found that sloth bears avoided areas with high forest fragmentation. "Bear attacks on people were more likely to happen in areas with denser forests, rough terrains and locations with high bear presence. By simultaneously gathering data on bear ecology, their interactions with people and forest resource extraction patterns, we were able to identify locations with the highest risk of human injury or death due to bear attacks," she said.

Arjun Srivathsa, Krithi K. Karanth, Imran Patel and N. Samba Kumar (Centre for Wildlife Studies) are the other authors of the study.

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