

## Mercenary conservation: on private forests

Karnataka recently drafted Private Conservancy Rules in a bid to increase forest area through private land. Under the rules, anyone who has a minimum of 100 acres of land bordering a national park can convert it to a “Wildlife Private Conservancy”. Of this land, 5% can be used to construct buildings for ecotourism; the rest has to be kept for flora and fauna. The move has received criticism, with activists and retired forest officers concerned that this could lead to illegal activities in private spaces.

Though policies are different in India and South Africa, there has been much talk about how we are going down the Africa way with this new approach. In South Africa, agricultural land can be converted into wildlife reserves. The government specifies how much land is required for each animal, purchases are then made, and wildlife is introduced.

Some game reserves allow hunting, which is legal. Hunting rights for specific animals are auctioned regularly. The highest bidder may gun down the animal and carry its head as a “trophy”. Each species has a minimum bid with the Big Five — namely, the cape buffalo, rhino, elephant, leopard and lion — being the most expensive. The locals wholeheartedly support hunting as it brings in foreign exchange and thus motivates the management to run the game reserve better, in turn leading to more hunting bids.

Private reserve owners treat wildlife in any way they deem fit. In one game reserve, an elephant recently went rogue and broke the fence. It was shot down and the carcass was left rotting inside the reserve for months. In another instance, a red hartebeest with a tumour was shot down and thrown to lions. On inspection, the “tumour” was found to be a deposit of grass that happened probably due to a redirection of food through a cavity or hole. A veterinarian could have easily solved this, but that was not to be.

Though these wildlife spaces are massive, they are private and hence fenced. This constantly challenges and changes the natural behaviour of wildlife. Some reserves have two sections: one with lions and one without. However, predators ensure survival of the fittest, and as a corollary, their absence leads to overgrazing and excess population. There is also a territorial issue: in enclosed spaces, an alpha cannot be established easily as the non-alphas are unable to find new ground. This leads to more infighting and behavioural disturbances. Also, the rules for poaching are still in the grey. Rhinos are regularly poached for their horns. Reserves urge people not to geo-tag their location, for example on social media, in fear of poachers noticing.

Even though South African game reserves claim to respect wildlife, it is a business for them as their animals are bred and gunned down for money. If money weren't a motivating factor, the spaces would have continued being agricultural lands.

*The writer works on conservation issues in India*

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