

GLOBAL PROBLEM, LOCAL SOLUTIONS: ON BIODIVERSITY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

The Dongria Kondh tribe of Niyamgiri Hills are among the best conservationists in the world. Known for the spirited defence of their forested habitat against short-sighted industrialisation, they have through millennia evolved a lifestyle that is in perfect harmony with nature. Across India, there are scores of indigenous people who have managed to lead meaningful lives without wanton destruction of natural ecosystems.

These tribes, along with marginalised communities living on the fringes of forests and millions of smallholder farmers, are the best hope that India has to preserve biodiversity and ensure food security. At a time when nature faces the threat of another mass extinction of species, their importance cannot be emphasised enough because they offer us solutions to avert an imminent meltdown.

The first global assessment of biodiversity by a UN-backed panel, which released its report in May, held humans squarely responsible for the looming mass extinction of species. Without radical efforts towards conservation, the rate of species extinction will only gather momentum. The red flag comes close on the heels of a February report by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). A loss in biodiversity simply means that plants and animals are more vulnerable to pests and diseases, and it puts food security and nutrition at risk, the FAO said.

Although biodiversity loss is a global problem, it can be countered only with local solutions. There's no one-size-fits-all approach. A solution that has succeeded in a temperate, wealthy nation may not be suitable for a country like India. Our tropical homeland is rich in biodiversity, but the imperatives of relentless economic growth, urbanisation, deforestation and overpopulation place it at risk more than many other places.

Nothing can be achieved without the active participation of communities that live close to nature — farmers and forest dwellers. It is now obvious that intensive agriculture, exploitative forestry and overfishing are the main threats to biodiversity in India and the world. In their prognosis, UN agencies are unanimous that the best way to correct the present course is to heed the accumulated wisdom of indigenous peoples, fishers and farmers.

The situation with our forests is even more dire. Instead of evicting forest dwellers from their homes, we should be encouraging them to conserve and nurture their habitats. Pressure from industrialisation does not care too much about conservation and biodiversity. The same holds true for the overexploitation of our rivers and seas.

For solutions one has to just look at the growing movement of zero-budget natural farming in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, or the community-driven forest conservation initiatives in Odisha and the Northeast, to realise that there is hope for the natural ecosystem, if only we act on the advice of local communities.

There is no silver bullet to solve the problem of crop and biodiversity loss at the national level. The natural farming movement in Andhra Pradesh may not be suitable for, say, Punjab. Fortunately, India's farmers and tribes are nothing if not innovative and they do have local solutions.

Loss of biodiversity and the threat of species extinction along with the alarming changes wrought by global warming are the primary concerns of our times. Our best bet for survival depends on how well we address these issues. We can do that only if we put people at the centre of our actions. If we continue to ride roughshod over the people who are essential to revitalising nature, we do so only at our peril.

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