

Protect the great and small

As the Centre gathers inputs from the States on proposed amendments to the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Act's clunky Schedule lists, which do not seem to grasp the immensity of the country's biodiversity, have been largely ignored in consultations.

Over the years, the Wildlife Act has expanded the number of species given varying degrees of protection under its six Schedules: 184 animals in 1972 to over 909 entries of taxa of vertebrates, invertebrates and plants now. What has remained unchanged is the power of inclusion and exclusion, which lies with the Centre. The Schedule lists are critical as they determine anti-poaching regulations and even habitat protection, in part because diverting forest lands is difficult in areas where better-protected species are found.

Ignoring, for now, the taxonomists' nightmare of misspelt species names and seemingly random nomenclature employed, the lists continue to keep out scientific research that can match species to appropriate protection. Inconsistencies abound: Crimson rose, a colourful butterfly that is widely found in south India, remains as protected as the tiger, while the poorly understood, near-threatened striped hyena is in Schedule III along with "least concern" species of wild pig or barking deer. A majority of the 659 species of Indian endangered fish do not find mention; only an estimated quarter of the butterfly species have been represented; and 128 species of bats, including fruit bats, are considered vermin despite their significant role as pollinators.

Even if the errors are addressed, do we need a pan-India list? What is endemic may not be rare, what is widespread elsewhere may be locally endangered, and what is endangered in one area may be a pest elsewhere. Shouldn't States have the final say in what is important for protection within their myriad landscapes? Take, for instance, the dilemma of ecologists in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, where the British introduced deer and elephants over a century ago. The two protected species (Schedules III and I, respectively) have caused large-scale degradation of native vegetation and threaten other native animals and plants. Duly ranked in conservation value, local habitat loss, cultural significance, population decline, and constantly updated through local research, a multi-parameter list would be a far greater reflection of India's biodiversity than a single Central legislation can ever hope to be.

The process of inclusion can spawn environment movements around species hitherto under the shadows of the great mammals. This may be the fastest way to protect the critically endangered amboli toad, which is unlisted currently, or even get the Indian flying fox, considered an extension of the divine in southern villages, out of the vermin list.

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