

ECOLOGICALLY AND CULTURALLY RICH DESERTS, SWAMPS AND GRASSLANDS MUST NOT BE LABELLED 'WASTELANDS'

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

Camels in the Banni grasslands of Kutch | Photo Credit: [Vijay Soneji](#)

Speckled with flecks of dark green verging on grey, Kalo Dungar rises incongruously over the Great Rann of Kutch. The Black Hill towers over the glistening, patchy, white desert and rises like a lighthouse above a sea of sand and salt. The flatland extends as far as the eye can see along the border between India and Pakistan. Its overwhelming vastness and immense stillness belie the hyperactive and contentious borders of our collective imagination.

A little after sunset, bells chime at the Dattatreya temple atop Kalo Dungar, breaking the eerie silence of the hilltop surrounded by thorny scrub forests and the ubiquitous invasive mesquite (*Prosopis juliflora*) that the locals call *gando baval* (mad tree). The bells beckon wildlife to gather around a small cylindrical slab, a feeding spot of sorts. The temple priest heads down with a bucket of food and dumps it on the slab. As darkness descends, silhouettes of four-legged critters appear. Initially there's a hierarchy: the first to feed are golden jackals; then a trio of wild boars; next, two Indian crested porcupines amble in. The rather unusual assortment of mammals feeds, more or less amicably, before disappearing into the surrounding shrub forest. A rich diversity of wildlife on one rocky hillock.

Camel herds

The Maldharis of Kutch have traditionally been nomadic pastoralists, traversing the region as seasons change with the ebb and flow of the grasslands on which their cows and buffaloes, goats, sheep and camels graze. The communities, although distinct in cultures and husbandry, are united in their knowledge of native wildlife and vegetation. Their lives revolve around livestock. The Rabari community of camel herders has a saying: *maal che to mobo che*, which loosely translates as 'if one has animals, one has dignity'.

As I set up trail cameras to understand the distribution of mammals in the Banni grasslands in Kutch, I see the arid land morph into lush grassland after the monsoons, the life blood for pastoralists, their livestock, and for a rich diversity of wildlife. The bane of the otherwise enjoyable task of setting up camera traps is navigating the thorny maze of *Prosopis*, an invasive plant that has spread like wildfire through the region — the consequence of an attempt at 'greening' the desert and reshuffling the socio-ecological dynamics of the Banni. While it has spawned livelihoods and a parallel economy that runs on charcoal, it has also ruined the grasslands, impacting pastoralists and the fauna of the area.

Colonial misnomer

What we often forget is how unique deserts and grasslands are as habitats that support human communities, wildlife, and vegetation. Ill-informed attempts to modify these landscapes are the legacy of colonialism, when many such lands were considered wasteland because they did not generate revenue. Monocultures and plantations were considered productive while wetlands, deserts, and grasslands were not. This categorisation persists, and these landscapes are thus vanishing.

It's not just the Banni — as much as 17% of India is classified as wasteland, according to *Wastelands Atlas of India 2019*. This includes not just seasonal grasslands and deserts, but also riverine and coastal sandy areas, wetlands, mangroves (as areas affected by salinity or alkalinity), ravines, scrubland, glaciers, and areas under snow cover.

“The term ‘wasteland’, a colonial construct, obsesses with the monetary benefits that a piece of land may or may not provide,” says Abi Vanak, Senior Fellow and Convenor of the Centre for Biodiversity and Conservation, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment. “The classification ignores the social, cultural and historical links of the inhabitants, as well as the ecology and ecosystems of these places. The only true ‘wastelands’ on earth stem from human industrial activities that render land lifeless.” Areas deemed wastelands — grasslands, deserts, rocky outcrops and sand dunes — are actually “rich ecosystems teeming with unique biodiversity and human cultures finely attuned to the dynamics of such landscapes,” he says.

The *Wastelands Atlas* indicates that grasslands and waterbodies are under consideration for reclassification, although the exact process seems unclear. These landscapes are home to not just endangered megafauna but also plants and invertebrates, several of which we depend on. We see history repeating itself in initiatives such as the Compensatory Afforestation Programme and Management Authority and Green India Mission. Land for these ‘greening’ drives, which seek to compensate for land used for development activities, comes from those misclassified as ‘wastelands’.

Sky islands

About 11% of Gujarat is categorised as wastelands with large swathes of Kutch falling under this classification. On the other side of the country, the floodplains of the Ganga and Brahmaputra along the Terai arc are not only one of the most biodiverse parts of the subcontinent, supporting rare species such as the endangered greater one-horned rhinoceros that thrives in the tall elephant grass, but are also among the most densely populated parts of the country thanks to the fertile river plains. But parts of this region too are classified as wastelands. For instance, Assam has approximately 11% of its total area classified as such, while Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, renowned biodiversity hotspots, have 16% and 46%.

At the country's southern tip, the biodiversity hotspot that is the Western Ghats is home to the rare Shola grasslands of the sky islands; these natural grasslands are the last refuge for several endemic species of birds, amphibians, reptiles, and mammals, including the Nilgiri tahr, and unique flora such as the neelakurinji that blossoms every 12 years and gives the Nilgiris its name. Parts of this ecosystem too come under the umbrella term ‘wastelands’.

As do parts of the central Indian grasslands, the last refuge of the tiger. Over 12% of Madhya Pradesh, which has national parks such as Kanha, Pench, and Panna, is categorised as scrub forest, degraded pastures, etc. Large chunks of the Himalaya and its foothills, with their cold deserts and montane grasslands, the strongholds of the snow leopard, are similarly classified. As much as 79% of Jammu and Kashmir, 41% of Himachal Pradesh, and 23% of Uttarakhand, are considered wastelands.

The Asiatic cheetah that once roamed India's grasslands is already extinct, as is the pink-headed duck that once thrived in the Gangetic swamps. A grassland denizen, the great Indian bustard, once in the running for national bird status, is critically endangered today. If we scramble now, we might still be able to save it and other species from disappearing forever. The first step to ensure that these creatures and their habitats are not wiped out is to stop ill-informed initiatives that ignore the socio-ecological dimensions of development.

Many pastoralists are poets at heart. One of the best-known storytellers of the grasslands was Salim Node (called Mama by everyone), the wise *agyavan* (pastoralist leader) of Sargu village in Kutch, not far from the foothills of Kalo Dungar. Pastoralists from near and far would flock to him for advice, remedies, and treatments for their livestock.

One of the folktales Salim Mama narrated is an apt metaphor for the 'wastelands'. It was monsoon and a female baya weaver was sitting in her nest, ready to lay eggs. During a heavy downpour, a lion arrived for refuge under the tree. The protective bird rebuked the lion for choosing this spot of all others in the forest, and the lion left to find another tree. But immediately, a troop of monkeys landed on the very branch from which the weaverbird's nest was dangling. Salim Mama's tale ended there. He wanted us to know that these ecosystems are always shared spaces, always teeming with life.

The writer is an ecologist who moonlights as a science communicator.

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