

Protecting India's parks amidst a sea of people

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Background to wildlife management in India

- India's human population is four times that of the U.S., but in an area one-third of the size of the U.S..
- The Indian economy is growing at 6% per annum, raising peoples' incomes and aspirations.
- More than 60% of the population are poor, living in rural areas, and rely on agriculture and animal husbandry for their livelihoods.
- More than 60% use wood/biomass for energy and shelter.
- "Natural" forests cover 10% of the country's land area, and "Parks" only 3%. "Effective Protection" covers only about 1%.

India has a strong history of wildlife conservation, although with some very different phases. The core ones were:

- late 19th Century: Forest areas decreasing due to conversion to agriculture;
- 1900-1950's: Direct wildlife destruction, due to bounty and sport hunting;
- 1950s-1960s: An emphasis on wildlife "conservation", although with limited success;
- 1970-1990: A strong emphasis on wildlife "preservation", which a much higher degree of success;
- 1990-Present: The strong focus on wildlife protection has been diluted, due to mission drift and loss of wildlife protection as the core goal, especially for protected areas.

India's parks: preventing collapse from the inside

Rapid steps are needed to arrest the process of mission drift, and ensure that India's parks once again succeed in protecting wildlife. This necessitates a rational application of funds and of personnel. In addition, science-driven monitoring is needed, both for the biological parameters and also the level of threat.

Law enforcement is imperative; given the extremely high ratio of people to protected area size, local people have no incentive to protect the parks for their own benefits. Strong conservation leadership is required, and the non-material, non-economic values of parks should be emphasized.