

Conservation of Wildlife

Aneesh Chadha*

Conservation of Wildlife in India is quite challenging. The pace of development has picked up in last two to three decades and this has led to fragmentation and deterioration in quality of wildlife habitats across the country. Illegal trade in wildlife parts and trophies has become more and more organised and poaching has emerged as the most serious challenge for the wildlife managers. Even survival of flagship species like tiger and elephant is under threat. There is need for strengthening of legal framework, enforcement infrastructure, balancing the impact of development on our natural heritage and making people living around the Protected Areas stakeholders in conservation. Urgent steps are required to be taken without any loss of time to safeguard our natural heritage for posterity.

Keywords: Fragmentation of habitats ; Illegal trade; legal framework; enforcement.

INTRODUCTION

India is a mega-biodiversity country with diverse bio-geological regions. The habitats range from snow-clad mountains, deserts, semi and wet evergreen forests and rich oceanographic flora and fauna. With the requirements of development the biodiversity in the country has been significantly impacted. Fragmentation of habitats has adversely affected our wildlife and a number of flag-ship species are endangered and face a threat to their survival. Tiger, elephant, great Indian Bustard, Rhinoceros olive ridley turtles, crocodiles, dolphins, etc., are some of the animals facing extreme threats to their survival. India has been in the forefront of global efforts towards conservation of wildlife. Former Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi led the world in Environment Summit in Stockholm with age old Indian ethics that man should use the natural resources as much as he gives back to the mother earth. This was followed by first national legislation - The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Project Tiger was launched to arrest the decline in Tiger populations across the country. A number of management interventions were made, protection efforts were strengthened and more funds were made available for conservation of wildlife. This was followed by creation of over 500 Wildlife Sanctuaries and National Parks in the country across different habitats in the country. The Forest Conservation Act was passed by the Parliament in 1980 to check rampant destruction of forests for

development projects. Since then, the conservation efforts have taken roots in the country. Creation of a separate Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1980s changed the paradigm and focused efforts towards conservation in general and species specific action plan for conservation started taking roots. Creation of Wildlife Institute of India at Dehradun provided a strong scientific temper to the conservation efforts and helped in capacity building of the field personnel in use of best practices in management and conservation of wildlife in the country. In last two decades National Tiger Conservation Authority has been created by an act of Parliament. National Wildlife Crime Control Bureau is one of the steps towards checking rampant trade in wildlife. Project elephant has been a successful initiative in conservation of this mega species that faces serious challenges after the pace of development has enhanced in last three decades. But our wildlife heritage cannot be conserved with efforts of the Government but all the stakeholders need to do their bit towards this national cause so that our future generations would get to see the magnificent glory of our rich biodiversity.

OBJECTIVES

1. To study the present legal framework for protection of wildlife in the country.
2. Identify the major threats to the conservation of wildlife.
3. Suggest immediate steps and management interventions required to be made to ensure long term survival of the wildlife and our natural heritage.

* Research Associate Indigram Labs Foundation(ILF)



Figure 1 : Some Endangered Species of India – Source: WWF India

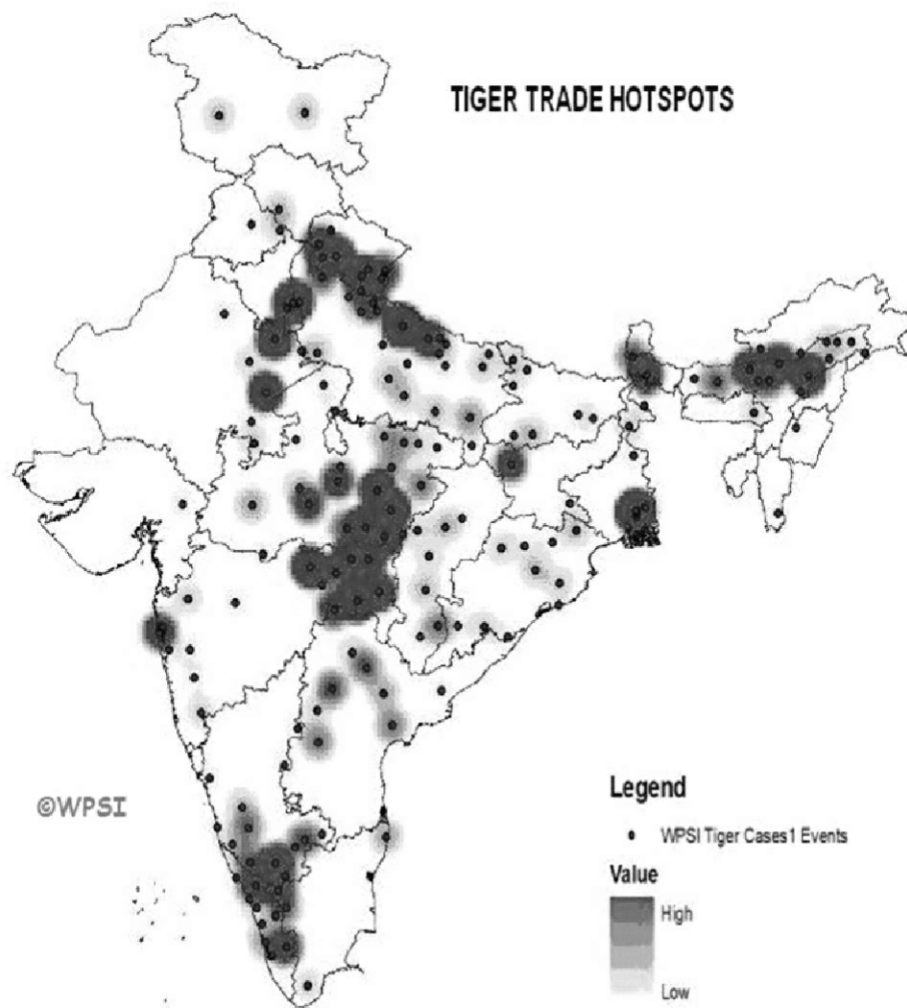


Figure 2 : Locations showing trade in tiger parts in India , Source: WPSI

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THREATS TO WILDLIFE:-

Wildlife in India and the world faces some of the threats that are common and are inter-linked. This makes it imperative to assess the threats and initiate concerted efforts to save our rich natural heritage. International efforts in this regard international instruments like the Convention on International Trade in endangered species of Fauna and Flora (CITES). Besides this three more such arrangements

for endangered species like whales, marine turtles, etc. Organisations like Interpol also spearhead the coordinated international efforts towards checking trade in wildlife articles. Major threats to wildlife conservation in India are listed below:-

1. **Habitat Degradation** - Continuous degradation of wildlife habitats across the country on account of increasing biotic interference and unplanned development projects has seriously affected the long term

survival of wildlife. Due to decline in quality of the forest habitats, the animals often move out in search of food and water and get killed. The degradation of habitat of wildlife has taken place over a period of time. This is affecting the ecological security – by way of failure to replenish the water system, provide food for wild animals, etc. The quality of forest is going down because of over exploitation for ridge fire, powers, building materials and raw material for industries. Diversion of the forest for agriculture is also affecting the quality of the forest. As a result of increase in biotic pressure, the quality of forests and their capacity to rejuvenate the eco system and support wild animals is constantly going down. This is affecting the long term survival of wild life population in the country.

2. Fragmentation of Habitats – There has been extensive fragmentation of habitats on account of development projects like construction of dams, canals, railway lines fast expanding highways, urbanisation, etc. These permanent barriers often divide the contiguous habitats and isolate the populations and their gene pool. Incidents of elephant deaths and tiger kills on account of train hits and kills by speeding vehicles are quite common. This has accentuated the man-animal conflict and wildlife has started straying into human enclaves and causing extensive damage to life and property in many parts of the country. The forests in most parts of the countries are becoming ‘Islands’ surrounded by human enclaves. These islands are under heavy stress because the surrounding lands cannot meet

basic needs of the people and for meeting their livelihood needs the biotic pressure is shifting to all these islands. The increasing cycle of poverty around the forests exerts more pressure on remaining bastions of wilderness.

In case of wild life species like tigers, elephants, lions etc., the human population has started over lapping the habitats. The co-existence of human and wildlife is threatened and inviolate areas are required to be maintained to ensure conservation of flagship species of wildlife. The areas adjoining to the core areas must be regenerated so that people are not fully dependent on the wildlife areas to meet their day to day requirements. The development projects must incorporate the mitigation measures for the wildlife at the planning stage itself so that the impact of the projects is mitigated and the continuity of the habitat is maintained. There is need to have a balance between the development and the conservation efforts.

3. Wildlife Trade– Wildlife trade is one of the most serious challenges faced towards wildlife conservation. Despite the laws becoming stringent and improvement in protection efforts, poachers and traders are using latest technology in killing the animals and trading their body parts. On global scale, this trade comes next to narcotics, human trafficking and counterfeit products. It is valued over US\$ 20 billion per year. In last decade, over 150000 seizures were reported worldwide and 26% took place in India. Over exploitation of endangered fishes in wild; collection of birds for



Figure 3 : Threatened animals - Snow leopard and Great Indian Pied Hornbill, Source: National Wildlife Action Plan

sport and food; exploitation of mammals for food, antlers, tusks, skins; trade in amphibians, reptiles, etc. is prevalent in many parts of the country. The trade in wildlife parts has become more and more organised and many gangs are operating in many countries and pose a serious challenge to the conservation and enforcement agencies all over the world.

4. **Poaching** - Poaching for meat and wildlife trophies is one of the most serious threats to the wildlife in the country. Despite stringent laws and protection measures enforced by the enforcement agencies, poachers find it lucrative to indulge in killing of animals and trade in their



Figure 4 : Global Wildlife Trade, Source: IUCN Report

parts. The number of flagship species like tiger had declined to around 1500 in 2012 and with stringent measures taken by the wildlife authorities, the number has revived to around 2700. Asian Cheetah is already extinct from the sub-continent. Elephants face tremendous challenges to survive and the tusks are being lost to poachers' gun at a very fast pace. Unless poaching is brought under control, both herbivores and carnivores would continue to be threatened alongwith the entire related food chain. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) is an important international agreement that regulates the trade in wildlife. Concerted international efforts are required to be made to check this trade all over the world so that demand for wildlife parts decreases and poaching is reduced as a chain reaction. The National legislations and their enforcement should be strengthened so that there is strong deterrent for poachers and the traders. The strengthening of enforcement mechanisms and increase in coordination among forest enforcement agencies is extremely essential to check the menace of poaching.



Figure 5: Elephant death by train accident, Picture by Sanjeev Kumar Chadha



Figure 6: Elephant Death by electrocution, Picture by Sanjeev Kumar Chadha



Figure 7: Tiger Cubs in Ranthambore Tiger Reserve , Picture by Sanjeev Kumar Chadha

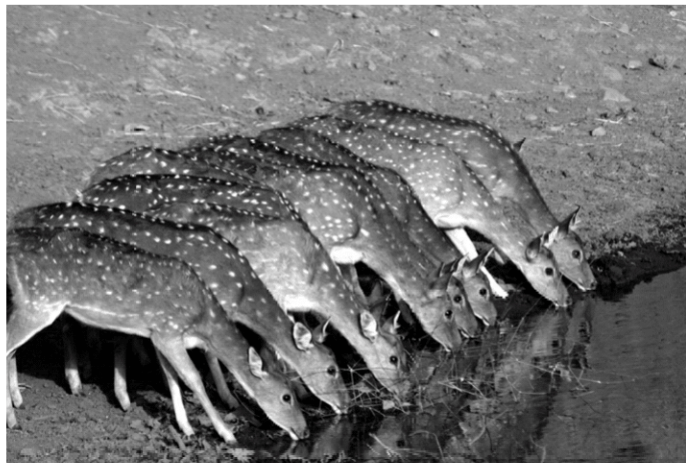


Figure 8: Alert Chitals drinking water at water hole Picture by Sanjeev Kumar Chadha



Figure 9: Endangered Barasingha in Grasslands in Kanha National Park, BySanjeev Kumar Chadha

Interventions required for conservation –

- 1. Strengthening of Wildlife Protected Area Network** – The network of over 500 wildlife sanctuaries and National Parks should be strengthened so as to ensure viable populations of threatened and endangered species of wildlife. Only sustainable and balanced development projects should be allowed in these areas.
- 2. Strengthening of Enforcement** – Enforcement of laws and regulations governing the protected areas should be made stringent so as to make the areas inviolate and safe to ensure population growth of the animals. The Rangers and other staff engaged in such hard duties should also be adequately incentivised to keep their moral high.

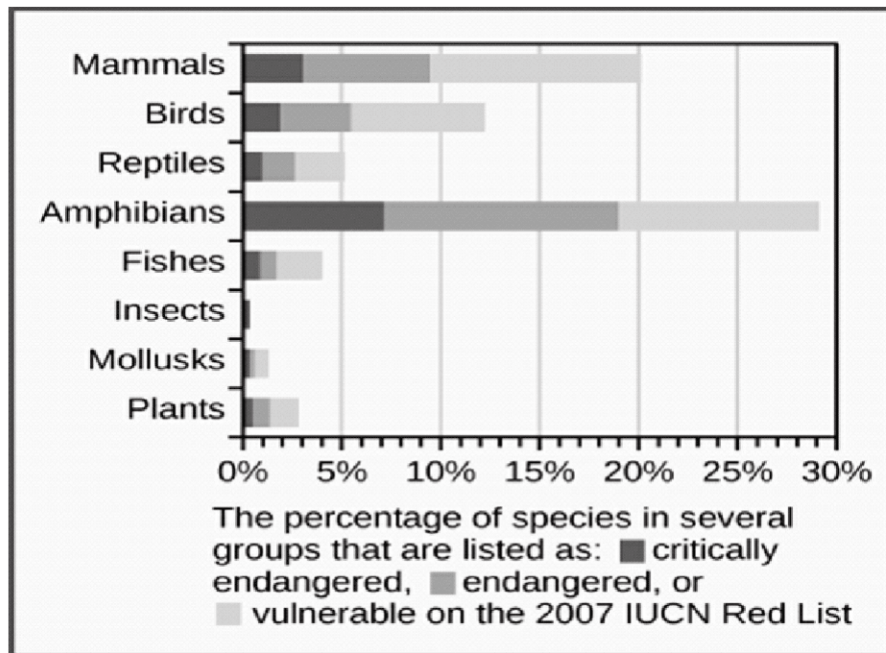


Figure 10: Status of vulnerable animals, Source: IUCN report

3. **Strong Legal Framework** - The existing laws and rules framed therein need to be strengthened to plug the loopholes and make the laws to act as deterrent for poachers and those who violate the act and rules. Prevention of crime with active coordination between the Park Management Authorities and the bodies like Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, Narcotics Bureau, CBI and State Police would be easier rather than working in isolation.
4. **Enhanced Budget Allocations** - It is seen that forests cover around 25% of the land mark of the country. The budget allocation for their management is proportionately low. The wildlife management is often not a priority. Adequate resources are required to be provided to the enforcement agencies to build modern infrastructure for crime prevention and management of the wildlife areas.
5. **Sustainable Development and checking of habitat fragmentation** - In last 4 to 5 decades, the pace of development in the country has enhanced and a number of development projects have come up in the form of fast moving highways, railway network, irrigation dams, etc. through the forest areas. This has enhanced conflict between wildlife and man and the casualties of animals have increased. The fragmentation of the habitat has also genetically isolated the population, thus endangering the long term survival of the wildlife. There is need for sustainable and balanced development and mitigation measures need to be incorporated in the projects right from inception.
6. **Special Conservation Efforts for Critically Endangered Species** - There are number of animals and plants which are critically threatened and need long term conservation strategy to ensure their survival on the planet. Focussed programme like Project Elephant, Project Tiger need to be initiated for such species.
7. **Promotion of Eco Tourism** - The balanced ecotourism activities should be initiated in and around the wildlife areas so as to involve the public at large and create more awareness among them for conservation of wildlife. This would also provide employment opportunities to the people who are living at the fringes of the forest areas and are important stake holders.
8. **Involvement of reputed NGOs and Conservation Societies** - The reputed NGOs like WWF, Wildlife Conservation Societies etc., are also required to be associated in the conservation efforts so that their expertise and resource are meaningfully utilised in the conservation efforts.

CONCLUSION

It is thus amply clear that for conservation of wildlife and their habitats, there is need for a concerted national action plan and strategy. Besides strengthening our legal framework and

enforcement mechanism, the development needs have to be calibrated in such a way so as to mitigate the impact of such projects on the habitats. Fragmentation of the left over habitats would jeopardize the survival of major flagship species and our future generations would hold us responsible if our natural heritage is not conserved for posterity.

REFERENCES

- Wildlife Action Plan: Ministry of Environment and Forests. Govt. of India.
- State of Worlds Forest Report 2017.
- TRAFFIC INDIA Reports.
- Illegal Wildlife Trade/Threats/WWF, 2017
<https://www.worldwildlife.org/threats/illegal-wildlife-trade>
- Precious Heritage: The Status of Biodiversity in the United States, Bruce A, Lynn S. Kutner and Jonathan S. Adams. , Oxford University Press, New York: 2000.
- Wildlife Institute of India report on Illegal Trade in Wildlife Parts. IUCN report (2017).