Debating Conservation as if Reality Matters

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MADHUSUDAN AND SHANKAR Raman provide a cogent overview of the main issues in the ongoing academic debate between proponents of two conflicting paradigms that concern conservation efforts in India: 'preservation' versus 'sustainable use' of biodiversity. Because I tend to agree with the authors on many of these issues (Karanth 1998, 2000), these do not bear repetition in a brief response. Therefore, I restrict myself to points on which I hold somewhat different views.

The authors' portrayal of India's nature reserves as 'cauldrons' of conflict with a 'bleak' future is somewhat misleading. India as a whole has always been a 'cauldron' of conflict—between classes, castes, communities and religions for a variety of social and political reasons. Often such conflicts extend to issues of control and use of natural resources including land, water, fisheries, pastures, forest products, and, over a tiny fraction of less than 1 per cent of the land, to a few effectively protected nature reserves. Such conflicts are not new, and have occurred over centuries, and will go on regardless of academic debates over conservation paradigm shifts. I would argue that given the severe mismatch between the size of India's natural resource base and the huge number of claimant's for its use, the levels of conflict around our protected areas is relatively low, compared to any other country with comparable ecological and social challenges. Undoubtedly, a major underlying reason is the traditional tolerance of Indian people (Saberwal et al. 2001). Characterising these nature reserves as seething cauldrons of conflict (in contrast to an otherwise peaceful landscape of social tranquillity?) is like describing travels on the Indian railway as a life-threatening experience, because of probable risks of derailments, riots or robberies that occasionally occur.

The authors pose the issue of 'use' versus 'preservation' as a real-world contest between a hitherto dominant preservationist agenda pushed by a socially powerful combine of naturalists and officials, which is now being challenged by 'local communities' strengthened through new alliances with advocacy groups. I disagree with this view, and submit that ever since Indian independence, the overwhelming social pressure (manifested through elected politicians of all colours, party manifestos, developmental policies, etc.) has been almost entirely for intensified 'use'

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rather than for 'preservation' of nature. The diversion of approximately 50 million ha wooded land for agriculture, the unrestricted access given to local people to unsustainably hunt animals and to collect fuel wood, small timber, leafy biomass and other products even in Reserved Forests (except for the government's sole right to unsustainably log valuable timber), are all clear examples of the predominance and vigorous implementation of a biological resource use-oriented paradigm in the five decades since independence. During the same period, large chunks of nature held in the custody of local institutions like *Panchayats*, have also simply disappeared under the plough (Shyamsunder and Parameswarappa 1987). The demands of new advocacy groups now allying with 'local people', in any specific context, are the same ones traditionally pursued by local politicians for decades. Given this background, the passing of a few restrictive conservation laws over the course of one decade (1972–82) in an attempt to curtail user-oriented policies over a small fraction of the landscape cannot be characterised as the 'dominant' mode of conservation in post-colonial India.

We must note that such preservationist restrictions have been *effectively implemented* over less than 1 per cent of India's land, and have fallen out of favour steadily since the late 1980s as a result of the following factors: the eclipse of the single party political dominance under a committed 'preservationist' like Indira Gandhi, the erosion of mission-focus, competence and integrity in the Forest Department, and, by the ascendance of new conservation ideologies that fail to distinguish between 'conservation' and 'development' (Robinson 1993), or for that matter, between 'animal welfare' and 'wildlife conservation' (Karanth 2000).

The capability and infrastructure to protect nature that existed in the early 1980s now stands reduced by half. Even more importantly, Indian foresters have abandoned their traditional thankless role of being enforcers of protective laws, and whole-heartedly embraced the paradigm of 'conservation through sustainable use and community participation'. They appear to have done so in return for the less stressful lifestyles, bigger budgets, consultancies and foreign assignments offered to the adherents of the new prescriptions. The evidence for this is visible everywhere in the form of millions of dollars of funding available for 'community-based conservation projects' promoted by the World Bank–Global Environmental Facility (GEF) combine, other multilateral agencies and even privately funded non-government organisations (NGOs) (Karanth 1998, 2000). Seen feeding together peacefully from this deep trough of 'eco-development' are the alleged antagonists in the article: foresters, naturalists, and, of course philosophers, social scientists and activists of various hues.

Therefore, the overall premise of the article that preservation has been, and continues to be, the dominant conservation paradigm in India is questionable. The authors are mistaking a mere quibble among academics, for real social forces in the real world. They are mistaking David for Goliath.

Although the scope of the article covers all 'biodiversity', the choice between the two contrasting paradigms becomes really critical when we deal with certain

ecologically fragile groups of animals, such as large carnivores like the tiger, mega-herbivores like the elephant and species adapted to special ecological niches like lion-tailed macaques or great hornbills. The reasons are many: biological traits such as size, diet and habitat specificity among these animals; tendency for conflict through behaviours such as crop-raiding or predation on livestock and human beings; and, the human attraction for their meat and high value for body parts. I would argue that, with all its attendant problems, preservationism has been the only approach that has actually worked for saving surviving populations of such animals (Karanth et al. 1999; Karanth 2002; Karanth and Madhusudan 2002; Madhusudan and Karanth 2000, 2002).

While the authors' contentions that preservation has its own problems (like every other human endeavour), and that it works better under charismatic leaders (as does everything else, including community-based resource use) are true, I submit that preservation has worked relatively better as a system in the Indian social context. One need only remember the period from the 1950s and the 1970s when the situation for wildlife conservation appeared so totally hopeless, and contrast that with the post-1970 period, when across the country habitats and wildlife communities of extinction-prone animals recovered in protected areas, even where charismatic leaders were absent. On the other hand, there are no substantial examples of such wildlife recoveries under the alternative model of sustainable use, either with or without charismatic leaders. While the preservationist's case for ecologically fragile species can be supported by concrete examples in India (Karanth et al. 1999; Karanth 2002), the support for the alternative model is largely speculative.

I believe that to be successful, 'conservation projects' should aim to meet ecological needs of target species, and their results should therefore be measurable in biological terms. In contrast, 'development projects' have human welfare as their core goal, and must use relevant social parameters to measure success, rather than insist as a matter of faith that they too, somehow, 'save biodiversity'.

In summary, I would argue that solutions to India's conservation problems are more likely to emerge from local actions in specific contexts that are guided by sound science (both biological and social), rather than from abstract debates over the relative superiority of two contrasting conservation models. I believe that pragmatic collaborations between protagonists of human welfare and wildlife conservation are possible in specific ecological and social contexts. Non-academic collaborators from both sides of the divide are beginning to demonstrate such solutions (Karanth et al. 1999; Karanth 2000). These conservation experiments tend to succeed where participants prefer robust commonsense solutions that keep humans and animals separated at the scale of protected areas, while simultaneously achieving tangible improvements in human welfare at larger landscape scales. In this real world context, Robinson's (1993) framework of 'sustainable landscapes' appears to be a more useful conservation template for action than the currently dominant paradigm of sustainable use of biodiversity everywhere.

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