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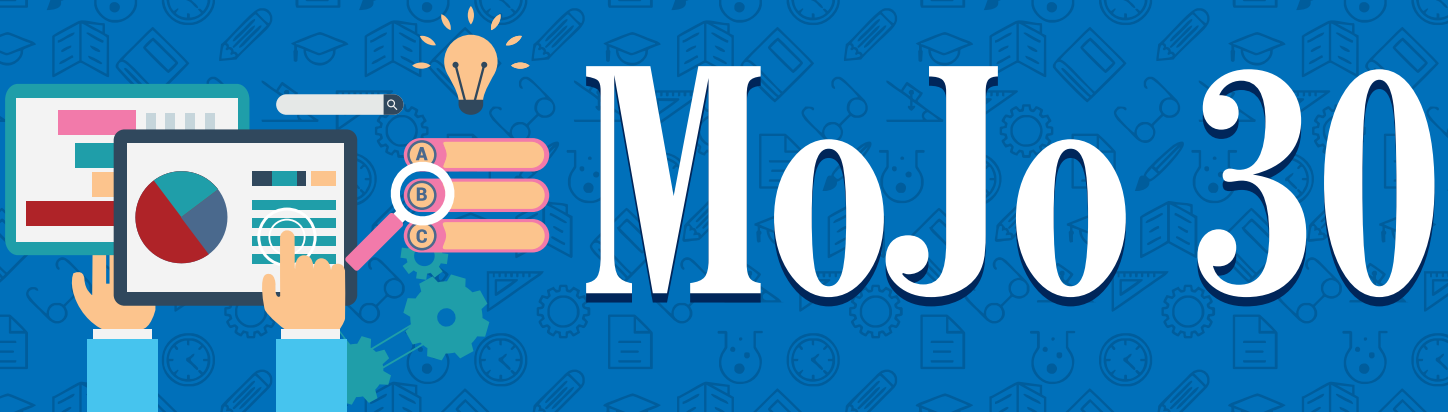
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DILUTING THE EIA PROCESS SPELLS A PATH OF NO RETURN

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

On July 12, [Fridays for Future India](#) (FFF), a collective of young environmental campaigners, received a notice from the Delhi police that accused it of committing offences under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Its alleged crime: “sending too many emails” to the Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Prakash Javadekar, with subjects tagged “EIA 2020”. Over the last few weeks, the FFF has organised a sustained protest against a proposed new notification, which aims to replace the existing model of conducting environmental impact assessments (EIA) in India. The notice the group received claimed that the campaign’s details published on its website contained “objectionable contents” and constituted “unlawful activities or terrorists act[s]” which were “dangerous for the peace, tranquillity and sovereignty of India”.

Even though the notice was eventually withdrawn, after the police cited a “clerical” error, that the country’s anti-terror law can be invoked with such facile ease is a shuddering thought. But equally this must also make us wonder what it is about the FFF’s campaign that drew such ire out of the government. Is the new draft EIA policy so critical to the state’s programme that even the slightest acts of dissent are to be quashed with maximum force?

Also read | [New environment impact norm cuts time for public hearing](#)

The wreckages of COVID-19, one would have thought, would have given the government a chance to reassess what its goals towards climate justice ought to be. After all, the pandemic has had a searing effect on how we lead our lives. It has altered our relationships not only with each other but also with the environment. During this time, the decades of pitiful investment in public health and education have clearly been brought to the fore, as has the fragility of our basic infrastructure.

But the responses to the crisis seem to mirror the failures of the past: the more that goes wrong, the more we want to do the same things again, as though all that we desire is a return to a pre-pandemic status quo. What we do not seem to understand is that the supposed normality that we are craving does not mean that there are no fresh disasters ahead. And those disasters, as every sign demonstrates, are likely to be all the more catastrophic unless we contend with the deplorable neglect that we have shown towards the environment. It is time we recognised, as Bill McKibben wrote in *The New Yorker*, that “normal is the enemy”.

Yet, the proposed new EIA policy symbolises a rush to restore society to where it was before COVID-19 halted its motor of progress. The draft notification takes an already inadequate system and seeks to infuse into it a culture of disregard. It is almost as though, to the state, the global climate emergency is operating in a parallel universe of its own.

Editorial | [In reverse gear: on draft EIA notification](#)

Around the world, legislative interventions mandating EIAs began to burgeon in the late 1960s. The basic credo of these measures was to ensure that the state had at its possession a disinterested analysis of any development project and the potential impact that it might have on the environment. It took India, though, until 1994 before it notified its first set of assessment norms, under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. This policy mandated that projects beyond a certain size from certain sectors — such as mining, thermal power plants, ports, airports and

atomic energy — secure an environmental clearance as a precondition to their commencement. But the notification, subject as it was to regular amendments, proved a failure.

In 2006, a new EIA programme was conceived, ironically on the back of corporate pressure. There was a belief that the 1994 system hindered speedy growth. The new draft attempted to decentralise the process. It increased the number of projects that required an environmental clearance, but also created appraisal committees at the level of both the Centre and States, the recommendations of which were made a qualification for a sanctioning. What is more, the programme also mandated that pollution control boards hold a public hearing to glean the concerns of those living around the site of a project.

But, in practice, the 2006 notification also proved regressive. The course remained mired in opacity. The final EIA report, for example, was not made available to the public; the procedure for securing clearances for certain kinds of projects was accelerated; and there was little scope available for independent judicial review. When clearances were challenged, the courts treated the views of the assessment authorities as sacrosanct. In the process, EIAs, far from serving as a bulwark for environmental justice, came to be regarded as a mere inconvenience, as a bureaucratic exercise that promoters of a project had to simply navigate through.

Also read | [Draft Environment Impact Assessment \(EIA\) Notification ignores health and welfare aspect of the people: Jairam Ramesh](#)

Now, as we find ourselves amidst not just a pandemic but also a global climate emergency, it is hard not to despair at the nature of changes that we need to make, to not merely our laws and regulations, but also to how we lead our lives. Yet, the government is on a warpath to further weaken an already fragile system. As many campaigners have highlighted, the new draft is riddled with problems. It enables a sweeping clearance apparatus to a number of critical projects that previously required an EIA of special rigour; where some industries require expert appraisal under the existing 2006 notification, they will, under the new notification, be subject to less demanding processes. These include aerial ropeways, metallurgical industries, and a raft of irrigation projects, among others.

What is more, the new proposal does nothing to strengthen the expert appraisal committees on which so much responsibility is reposed, leaving the body rudderless. It also does away with the need for public consultation for a slew of different sectors, negating perhaps a redeeming feature of the 2006 notification. But, most egregiously, the proposal opens up a window for securing post-facto clearances. That is, companies which have commenced a project without a valid certificate will be allowed to regularise their operations by paying a fine. If there is a singular logic to the EIA process, it is that an environmental clearance is a prerequisite to the launching of a project. But here the government wants to reverse that fundamental tenet.

Also read | [Ramesh's criticism of EIA notification unfounded, says Javadekar](#)

There is no doubt that a mere strengthening of the existing EIA norms will not by itself be sufficient. We need a renewed vision for the country; one that sees the protection of the environment as not merely a value unto itself but as something even more foundational to our democracy. To that end, we must begin to imagine a future where, as the American law professor, Jedediah S. Purdy, argues, our ecological and egalitarian projects can fuse together.

For this to happen, though, we have to see ourselves as not distinct from the environment that we live in, but as an intrinsic part of it. Under such a model, our economic solutions will have to necessarily subsume a commitment to our natural surroundings. To achieve this broader vision we will need deeper thinking, greater political initiative, and a leap of faith.

But, in the meantime, to allow the government to weaken the EIA process has the potential to make things irredeemable. And here, Wendell Berry's words are worth recalling: "Whether we and our politicians know it or not, nature is party to all our deals and decisions," and it "has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do."

Suhrith Parthasarathy is an advocate practising at the Madras High Court

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WATCH

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

There are approximately 25,000 polar bears left in the wild today. But climate change is starving them into extinction

According to [research published in the Nature Climate Change journal](#), polar bears could all but disappear within the span of a human lifetime.

Researchers analysed 12 of 13 subpopulations and found that the species could be decimated within 80 years by the galloping pace of change in the Arctic, which is warming twice as fast as the planet as a whole.

In some regions they are already caught in a vicious downward spiral, with shrinking sea-ice cutting short the time bears have for hunting seals.

Their dwindling bodyweight undermines their chances of surviving Arctic winters without food, scientists said.

Even if humanity were able to cap global warming at 2.4 degrees Celcius it would probably only delay the polar bears' collapse.

The threat is not rising temperatures per se but the top-of-the-food-chain predators' inability to adapt to a rapidly shifting environment.

Half of Earth's land-based megafauna are classified as threatened with extinction, but only polar bears are endangered primarily by climate change.

But according to the authors of the report, that status may not be unique for long, and should be seen as a sign of how climate will impact other animals in the coming decades.

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'Our ancestors have been protecting the forest and nature over the ages. Now onus on us to be the front runners in combating the climate crisis', says Archana Soreng

Entomologists raise hopes of fruit growers troubled by the woolly whitefly

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THE HINDU EXPLAINS

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The story so far: The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) has published the [draft Environment Impact Assessment \(EIA\) Notification 2020](#), with the intention of replacing the existing [EIA Notification, 2006](#) under the [Environment \(Protection\) Act, 1986](#). The government wants to incorporate modifications made to the regulations through amendments in the interim period. An EIA makes a scientific estimate of the likely impacts of a project, such as a mine, irrigation dam, industrial unit or waste treatment plant. There is also a provision for public consultation in the rules, including a public hearing at which the local community and interested persons can give opinions and raise objections, based on the draft EIA report prepared by experts for the project.

Among the major departures from existing regulations is the removal of several activities from the purview of public consultation. A list of projects has been included under Category B2, expressly exempted from the requirement of an EIA (Clause 13, sub cl. 11).

Also read | [New environment impact norm cuts time for public hearing](#)

The projects under this category include offshore and onshore oil, gas and shale exploration, hydroelectric projects up to 25 MW, irrigation projects between 2,000 and 10,000 hectares of command area, small and medium mineral beneficiation units, small foundries involving furnace units, some categories of re-rolling mills, small and medium cement plants, small clinker grinding units, acids other than phosphoric or ammonia, sulphuric acid, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in dye and dye intermediates, bulk drugs, synthetic rubbers, medium-sized paint units, all inland waterway projects, expansion or widening of highways between 25 km and 100 km with defined parameters, aerial ropeways in ecologically sensitive areas, and specified building construction and area development projects.

The projects in this list are, under existing norms, identified on the basis of screening by Expert Appraisal Committees, rather than being exempted through listing in the Schedule. Also, coal and non-coal mineral prospecting and solar photovoltaic projects do not need prior environmental clearance or permission in the new scheme.

There is apprehension that the exemption from EIA and public consultation for listed B2 category activity and expansion and modernisation projects will seriously affect the environment, since these will be carried out without oversight. Combined with a new provision for post-facto environmental clearance (of projects executed without prior clearance), this would further weaken protections. Moreover, the notice period for public hearing has been cut from 30 days to 20 days. This will make it difficult to study the draft EIA report, more so when it is not widely available or provided in the regional language.

Also read | [Ramesh-led House panel to discuss draft Environment Impact Assessment](#)

Similarly, for project modernisation and expansion, the norms in Notification 2020 are liberal, with only those involving more than 25% increase requiring EIA, and over 50% attracting public consultation.

Under the proposed changes, project proponents need to submit only one annual report on compliance with conditions, compared to the existing two. The move is seen as retrograde, because the CAG found in 2016 that the deficiency in semi-annual compliance reporting was

between 43% and 78%, while failure to comply with conditions ranged from 5% to 57%. Non-compliance was encountered particularly in river valley and hydroelectric power projects and thermal power projects. After the gas leak at LG Polymers in Visakhapatnam on May 7, the Environment Ministry told the National Green Tribunal that the unit lacked environment clearance, exposing the low effectiveness of rules.

Editorial | [In reverse gear: on draft EIA notification](#)

The MoEF&CC cites its own order of March 14, 2017 enabling appraisal of projects involving violations — where construction had begun or expansion or modernisation was carried out without clearance — and an order of the Jharkhand High Court asking for consideration of a case on merits, independent of penal action for violation, to introduce a beneficial scheme for violators.

The EIA Notification 2020 excludes reporting by the public of violations and non-compliance. Instead, the government will take cognisance of reports only from the violator-promoter, government authority, Appraisal Committee or Regulatory Authority. Such projects can then be approved with conditions, including remediation of ecological damage, which, again, will be assessed and reported by the violator (and not an unconnected agency), although Central Pollution Control Board guidelines must be used.

Comment | [Diluting the EIA process spells a path of no return](#)

EIA rules must meet the requirements of the precautionary principle of avoiding harm, and intergenerational equity. The European Union, as an evolving example, has modified its processes in accordance with the Aarhus Convention, 1998, which stipulates that environmental rights and human rights are linked, the present generation owes an obligation to future generations, sustainable development can be achieved only through the involvement of all stakeholders, government accountability and environmental protection are connected, and interactions between the public and public authorities must take place in a democratic context. The EU Directive on EIA includes climate change and biodiversity concerns.

The rules in India, including EIA 2006, it can be argued, privileged the interests of the project proponent by whittling down public consultations, accepting flawed and faulty EIA reports resulting from external influences, and ignoring the non-renewable nature of resources. Notification 2020 deepens the impact of that paradigm.

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PRESERVING THE WILDLIFE ECOSYSTEM

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

Aug 04, 2020-Tuesday

-°C

Humidity

-

Wind

-

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Camera-traps used in the last tiger census (2018) captured the presence of more free-ranging domestic dogs than tigers in 17 tiger reserves, according to a report in *The Indian Express*. There is also a substantial presence of both dogs and livestock in at least 30 tiger reserves, the report added. The presence of feral and abandoned dogs and livestock in forests, say experts, could lead to the transmission of diseases to wild animals. These stray animals also compete with wild animals for resources, affecting their foraging patterns. The National Tiger Conservation Authority has said that livestock and dogs are found in fringe areas of forests close to villages.

While the camera-trap capture has provided real-time evidence now, this problem has been growing for years. India has about five million stray cattle, thanks to rural distress and fodder shortage (both make livestock maintenance expensive), lack of the adequate number of shelters, increase in peri-urban dairies, and a ban on cattle slaughter in many states. The feral dog population is 60 million because of the breakdown of the animal birth control (ABC) programme, increasing cases of abandonment of dogs, and the lack of adequate waste management and requisite number of shelters. A 2018 research by ATREE found that free-ranging dogs attacked 80 species of wildlife between 2015 and 2016, mostly mammals.

The problem of stray animals is not just in forests, but also in Indian cities. Instead of endless debates on whether it's right to feed dogs or not, citizens must demand answers on the operational record of the Animal Welfare Board of India, why governments have reduced funding and support to the ABC programme and failed to untangle the problem of multiplicity of authorities and build shelters.

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AIR POLLUTION HELPS COVID TRANSMISSION, FINDS STUDY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Air pollution indirectly influences the transmission of COVID-19 and the improvement in air quality during the lockdown may have reduced the chances of infection, a study has found.

This finding was part of a research paper titled 'Potential link between compromised air quality and transmission of the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in affected areas' published in *Environmental Research* journal by M.G. Manoj, M.K. Satheesh Kumar, K.T. Valsaraj, C. Sivan and Soumya K. Vijayan. They belong to the Advanced Centre for Atmospheric Radar Research, Cochin University of Science and Technology, Ernakulam; The Department of Atomic and Molecular Physics, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal, Karnataka; Cain Department of Chemical Engineering, Louisiana State University, Los Angeles, U.S.; and College of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Government Medical College, Kannur, respectively.

Areas under focus

The study focussed on the infection rate induced by air quality in central Kerala and other global COVID hotspots, including China, Italy and the U.S.

It claims that one of the potential modes of transmission of COVID-19 is through ambient air by droplets which carry the viruses. This means that changes in the environment will affect the transmission of the infection.

Air pollution is one of the elements that can change the environment. So it can be said that air pollution can indirectly influence the transmission.

The dust particles exposed to humid environment have been contaminated with a water film on it. There is a possibility of the mix of saliva droplets and the dust coated with the water film becoming more airborne and spreading the infection.

The hypothesis would help design protocols for the prevention of future pandemics, they added.

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BALANCING PRIORITIES: THE HINDU EDITORIAL ON DEVELOPMENT AND ENVIRONMENT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Forecasts of 'good' or 'normal' monsoons are often beguiling and belie the ominous. This year, the annual [floods that upend the Brahmaputra Valley](#) have been followed by intense spells along the [Konkan coast](#) and [Mumbai](#), and now [Kerala](#), which until the end of last month recorded a slight deficit. The [landslip in Idukki](#), that has so far claimed 43 lives and rendered several homeless, follows from a continuing spell of heavy rains in Kerala. Most districts have received three or four times more rain than what is normal. Last year too, neighbouring Wayanad saw multiple hamlets wiped out and the year before, the devastating floods in the State forced a debate on the need for new models of development. Landslips, or landslides, in the Western Ghats have a history. Following the [2018 floods](#), data from the Geological Survey of India showed that Kerala had experienced 67 major landslide events and several minor ones from 1961-2013. As part of a National Landslide Susceptibility Mapping (NLSM) programme, the agency mapped several States in the Western Ghats, North-eastern States, Jammu and Kashmir and Uttarakhand to assess how vulnerable their districts were. Nearly 13,000 square kilometres were mapped until 2018 and 6,000 were to be covered in 2019-20 in Kerala, according to the programme website. Nearly 13 of the State's 14 districts were prone to landslides and what made Kerala particularly vulnerable was the high population density — over 800 per square kilometre — compared to other States that also faced high landslide risk.

The objective of the NLSM maps is to help State and district authorities incorporate the risk of landslides into zoning laws. However, just as in the case of earthquake zonation maps, or for that matter, any exercise to scientifically ascertain the risk from natural hazards to a region, these laws are barely implemented in the right spirit. And this is not unique to Kerala. The details might vary but it is now beyond contestation that India is living in a new climate normal. Frequent high intensity bursts of rain will co-exist along with long dry spells. It has emerged from studies of Kerala's topography that quarrying and the unscientific cutting of slopes into hills aggravates the risk of soil erosion. Operationalising the State's disaster management apparatus and allocating funds for preparedness are key policy responses, but Kerala also must double down on enforcing regulations and observing zoning laws as well as ensuring that slopes carved into hilly terrain have adequate provisions for draining water. A lack of compliance with such principles is often a key reason why natural hazards end up causing a significant number of avoidable casualties. There is a cost to pursuing development goals without paying attention to environmental constraints.

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THE IMPORTANCE OF FLOOD FORECASTING - EDITORIALS - HINDUSTAN TIMES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Disaster and disaster management

Aug 12, 2020-Wednesday

-°C

Humidity

-

Wind

-

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On Monday, Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a meeting with chief ministers and ministers of Kerala, Karnataka, Assam, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra to review the flood situation in these states. During the meeting, PM emphasised the need for better coordination between central and state agencies to have a permanent system for forecasting floods and the extensive use of innovative technologies to improve the forecast and warning system. Mr Modi's recommendations are significant because every year floods upend lives and livelihoods and destroy critical infrastructure and biodiversity. They also put enormous stress on finances.

While the government's Central Water Commission (CWC) has modernised its flood management system over the years, there are still massive gaps that need to be filled to make it a much more responsive system. Two types of measures are taken for flood protection: Structural (embankments, dams, reservoirs, and natural detention basins), and non-structural (flood forecasting and warning, floodplain zoning).

There are several problems with both. On the structural side, the management of reservoirs and dams, maintenance of embankments and data collection on a river's silt-bearing capacity have to be improved. On the non-structural side, data on river flow and discharge must be enhanced; the installation and maintenance of technical equipment such as gauges have to be expedited. Also critical is how the information on floods is given to the public; it has to be timely, useful (location) and in a non-technical language. Finally, an independent evaluation of the flood forecasting system must be put in place to identify the gaps in the system, and ensure that CWC performs its role better than it is doing now.

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HOW THE TIGER CAN REGAIN ITS STRIPES

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

On International Tiger Day, July 29, authorities proudly declared that India should “celebrate” the increase in tigers from about 2,000 in 1970 to [about 3,000 now](#). This is an annual growth rate lower than 1% after 50 years of incredible, sometimes heroic, efforts. Clearly, India has done better than other tiger range countries, but at what cost and what efficiency needs deeper scrutiny.

On the same day, a functionary of the Delhi-based Global Tiger Forum admonished us not to aspire, ever, to have more than 3,500 wild tigers. In a country with such an expansive land base, a robust economic foundation, and a rapidly urbanising educated population cheering for the tiger, this dismal projection cannot be our vision. Even a back-of-the-envelope calculation can show that India has the potential to hold 10,000 to 15,000 wild tigers. What is lacking is a pragmatic plan to get to that goal.

In contrast to the above dismal scenario, I can report what I witnessed in the Malenad landscape of about 25,000 sq km in Karnataka. Field observations over 50 years and research suggest that there were only around 70 tigers in this landscape in the early 1970s. I had feared they would all be gone soon. The substantial increase of tigers that followed, against all odds, was due to the work of dedicated foresters and conservationists under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. There are now about 400 wild tigers in Malenad. My own estimates, based on long-term research, show that the Malenad forests can potentially harbour about 1,300 cats. Clearly my experience is at odds with the current bureaucratic projections.

Two legal instruments that enabled tiger recoveries in India were the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, which reinforced Project Tiger. The political leadership and field efforts behind this recovery had to overcome very difficult social challenges: slow growth of the economy, excessive reliance on forest exploitation for livelihoods and government revenues, dire poverty, and protein dependency on wild meat that drove massive local hunting. These challenges were overcome and tiger recoveries occurred, but only sporadically in a few reserves.

Around 2000, things began to change. There was a decline in political commitment to conservation and the gradual transition of the field-oriented Forest Department to one whose primary aspiration was to be like the multitasking Indian Administrative Service. This was followed by unnecessary and massive borrowings from the Global Environment Facility-World Bank combine to create new models for tiger recovery. Some of us conservationists, including Valmik Thapar and the late Sanjoy Debroy, wrote to the World Bank to abandon the proposed eco-development model, but to no avail.

This tiger walked 3,020 kms to find a home

This mission drift in tiger protection overlapped with the upsurge of emancipatory political movements for the release of wildlife habitats for cultivation and exploitation by loosely defined “forest-dwellers”. This populist movement led to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which has turned into an open-ended process of forest conversion even within wildlife reserves. Impacts on tiger habitats have been severe.

At the end of the 20th century, accompanying these broader social changes, personnel changes too played a part in weakening tiger conservation. When Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee

promoted his capable and enterprising Environment Minister Suresh Prabhu, the portfolio landed in the lap of garden-variety politicians of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. When one of the most capable leaders of Project Tiger, P.K. Sen, retired, he was replaced by a bureaucrat who managed to game the system to stay on for an unprecedented 13 years.

The [tiger extinction in Sariska Reserve](#) caused a public outcry in 2005, leading to the appointment of a Tiger Task Force (TTF) by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Unfortunately, the TTF turned out to be unequal to the task. Its politically correct ideologies and muddled science resulted in a report that created a tiger management model that benefited the forest bureaucracy more than it did the tigers.

Crouching tiger, hidden data

Based on TTF recommendations, the United Progressive Alliance government began investing heavily, but not very intelligently, in tiger conservation. Excessive funding of a few reserves while neglecting large areas with greater recovery potential became the norm. Progress on voluntary village relocation schemes from within reserves slowed down (except in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, where major initiatives funded by these States greatly helped tiger recoveries). Tiger reserve managers were soon attracted to the massively funded eco-development activities originally formulated by the World Bank. In reality, they needlessly replicated the rural development work already being done by several other agencies and NGOs.

Another feature of this emergent government monopoly over tiger management was the lack of data transparency and rigorous, independent tiger monitoring.

The tiger was fully bound in red tape. One had hoped when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) took over in 2014 and began to wind down bureaucracies in favour of new initiatives and enterprise, that the red tape strangling the tiger would also be unwound. But there was no such luck: within two weeks of the NDA assuming power, the same national and international bureaucratic apparatuses that ran the show after 2005 performed a trapeze act and clasped the hands of the new masters.

Therefore, the show goes on: One prime example is the aforementioned Global Tiger Forum, an international bureaucracy snugly entrenched in Delhi. It has done so in defiance of its own original charter and attempts by multilateral aid institutions to pry it loose and park it in Southeast Asia. Another case in point is the [National Tiger Conservation Authority](#). It has bloated in size, swallowing up schemes totally unrelated to tigers, such as the [recovery of snow leopards](#) and [translocation of African cheetahs](#) to India.

India needs to get out of this tiger circus. The role of the forest bureaucracy should be once again restricted to wildlife law enforcement. Merging Project Tiger with other Central schemes for wildlife conservation would be a good first step. Government monopoly over domains of tiger conservation such as tiger research, monitoring, nature education, tourism and possibly even conflict mitigation should be erased. The vast reservoir of talent and energy in society should be drawn in to engage with these diverse domains, by involving private enterprises, local communities, NGOs and scientific institutions.

India's tiger conservation needs a reboot to match the scale of the country's aspirations in other domains — a new vision that encompasses the talents and aspirations of a growing number of citizens who want to save tigers without turning the clock back on material progress.

K. Ullas Karanth is Director, Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru. Views are personal

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MYTH OF THE PRISTINE FOREST

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has driven migrant workers back to their villages, including many situated inside or on the fringes of forested areas, including sanctuaries and national parks. Even as they seek to remake livelihoods there, a new battle has emerged between the forest department (FD) and these local communities. It pertains to the declaration of a Critical Wildlife Habitat (CWH), which a PIL in the Bombay High Court seeks to get the department to urgently notify.

CWH is a provision under the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (FRA). The Act primarily focuses on recognising the historically-denied rights of forest-dwellers to use and manage forests. The CWH provision, however, is an attempt to assuage concerns of wildlife conservationists. It allows for the possibility that, in protected areas (PAs) — wildlife sanctuaries and national parks — these rights could be attenuated, and, if absolutely necessary, forest-dwellers could be relocated in the interest of wildlife conservation.

Is the relocation of forest-dwellers always needed for conserving wildlife? Some hardline conservationists and foresters believe that wildlife needs absolutely “inviolable” areas — those devoid of humans and human activities. Many others believe human-wildlife co-existence is generally possible and must be promoted if we are to have “socially just conservation”.

A careful reading of the CWH provisions in the FRA shows that it is open to both possibilities, as long as they are arrived at through a rigorous and participatory process. It requires setting up a multi-disciplinary expert committee, including representatives from local communities. It also requires determining — using “scientific and objective criteria” and consultative processes — whether, and where in the PA, the exercise of forest rights will cause irreversible damage and threaten the existence of important wildlife species. It then requires determining whether co-existence is possible through a modified set of rights or management practices. Only if the multi-stakeholder expert committee agrees that co-existence or other reasonable options are not possible, should relocation be taken up, again with informed consent of the concerned gram sabhas. And obviously, for any such process to commence, the Act requires that all forest rights under the FRA must first be recognised.

Vanashakti, a Mumbai-based conservation NGO, filed a petition in the Mumbai High Court in 2014 demanding implementation of the CWH provisions. The Maharashtra FD, which generally subscribes to the hardline conservationist position, saw this as a great opportunity to complete its agenda of evicting forest-dwellers from PAs. It immediately notified expert committees for 54 of the 55 PAs in the state. Some of the committees even began holding hearings in potentially-affected villages. But thanks to an alert High Court and interventions from civil society groups, a series of illegalities were temporarily averted.

The first and biggest illegality is that the process of recognition of rights under the FRA is incomplete. The case of Melghat Wildlife Sanctuary, which has been pursued most vigorously by the FD, is quite revealing. A monitoring committee set up by the Tribal Development Department (TDD) — which included some of us — has found that many villages were resettled when they had rights claims pending, others had their claims illegally rejected or incompletely granted, and several had not even applied till this controversy erupted. More generally, the FD claims that in 25 of the 54 PAs, there is no human habitation and so they can be declared as CWHs immediately. However, our analysis shows that there are settlements in some of these 25 PAs, and of course people in villages adjacent to all the PAs are likely have customary rights, as we

found in Melghat. Overall, for 39 PAs whose boundaries we could map, we estimate that more than 1,000 villages (with a population of about 4 lakh) are located inside or adjacent to the PA. Of these, only 150 villages (about 15 per cent) have received community forest rights (CFRs). In spite of the court ordering rapid completion of the rights recognition process, there has been almost no progress on this front.

Second, the constitution of the expert committees is faulty. They do not contain expert social scientists familiar with the area. Wildlife enthusiasts are sometimes substituted for experts in life sciences. And in two cases, the committees have a member who has challenged the very constitutionality of the FRA, making a travesty of the idea of “objectivity” in the process.

Third, the criteria being used by the committees to determine the threat of “irreversible damage” to wildlife are quite extreme, and are not supported by any consensus even among ecologists. The FRA, in fact, begins by recognising that forest dwellers “are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem”. In that context, the CWH provision should not be seen as simply a tool for evicting forest-dwellers to create so-called “inviolable” spaces. It is an opportunity to rigorously and participatorily explore all avenues of co-existence.

Such co-existence is indeed possible. For instance, over the past 10 years, the number of tigers in BRT Tiger Reserve in Karnataka has steadily gone up even as the Soligas continue to live inside and gather non-timber forest products as per their CFR rights. In general, forest-dwellers harbour both the knowledge and the attitudes needed for conservation. Co-managing PAs is therefore the most effective and socially just long-term solution, and relocation should be seen as the absolutely last resort.

Lele is Distinguished Fellow and Joshi a Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Centre for Environment and Development, ATREE, Bengaluru. Upadhyay is Founder Member of KHOJ, Melghat

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ITANAGAR SELECTED FOR URBAN FOREST SCHEME

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Union Minister Prakash Javadekar. File photo

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (EFCC) has selected Arunachal Pradesh capital for implementation of the [‘Nagar Van’ or Urban Forest scheme](#).

The ‘Nagar Van’ is a scheme being launched by the Ministry that envisages creating forests in 200 urban cities across the country on public-private-partnership basis.

[Watch | World Environment Day 2020: Time for nature](#)

The Ministry would offer an initial grant of 2 crore for fencing, maintenance and administrative costs of the earmarked land to be developed.

Attending a meeting of the Ministry chaired by EFCC Minister Prakash Javadekar through video-conferencing on Monday, Pema Khandu, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, informed that as there are only two urban cities in the State Itanagar and Pasighat the State capital has been selected for implementation of the scheme this year.

Also read | [During lockdown, MoEFCC panels cleared or discussed 30 projects in biodiverse forests](#)

He said the state Environment and Forest Department has already earmarked the land measuring about 20 hectares for creation of an ‘Urban Forest, a communique from the CMO quoted Mr. Khandu as saying.

Mr. Khandu, who is also the Minister in-charge of Environment and Forest, informed Mr. Javadekar that the Ministry’s Nagar Van scheme would be dovetailed with the Smart City project so that the objective of the scheme is achieved in toto.

Giving details of the action taken by the State government in implementation of various Central government schemes regarding environment and forest, the Chief Minister said that 100 schools across the State are being identified for the scheme ‘School Nursery.’

Also read | [World Environment Day 2020: how wildlife conservation organisations are finding unique ways to stay afloat this lockdown](#)

Under the scheme, students would grow their own trees in a chosen place within the school premises and care for it and at the end of the year, they would take the sapling and plant it on their own premises.

The Union Ministry plans to cover 1000 schools this year with a target of covering 5,000 schools by the year 2024 -25.

Mr. Khandu said that under the 20-point programme of the Union Ministry, the State had planted 6 lakh trees surpassing its target of 1 lakh saplings.

He assured that by the end of this year, 12 lakh saplings would be planted across the State.

The Chief Minister underscored the importance of getting onboard the Centres National Transit Pass System in context of Arunachal Pradesh, where stretches of forest land are owned by communities as well as individuals.

Also read | [World Environment Day: Amid mining, dam issues in Northeast, conservation group banks on 'rural futures'](#)

As the system (through a portal) ensures a seamless movement of forest produce across the country giving farmers economic right over their forest land, Mr. Khandu observed that in such a situation farmers will get motivated to plant trees of their choice increasing the forest cover of the State.

He directed the State officials to get on board the portal as soon as possible and create awareness amongst the farmers, the communique said.

The meeting was also attended by Union Minister of State for EFCC Babul Supriyo and Forest Ministers of 30 States and UTs, discussed in detail all the six schemes being launched by the Union Ministry.

Besides the Nagar Van, School Nursery, Plantation and National Transit Pass System, the Ministry is also implementing Water and Fodder Augmentation in Forest Land and Rejuvenation of 12 major rivers schemes in coordination with the States and Union Territories, the communique added.

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CARBON EMISSIONS IN INDIA TO COME DOWN BY 8% IN 2020 DUE TO LOCKDOWN: ENVIRONMENT MINISTRY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

Image used for representation purpose. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

Due to the [COVID-19](#) lockdown across India this year's carbon emissions are predicted to fall by around 8%, a senior official of the environment ministry has said.

During a virtual session organized by PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry on Wednesday on 'Paradigm Shift in Business Sustainability — Strategies to Meet the Challenges in the Post COVID-19 scenario', Sujit Kumar Bajpayee, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, said the pandemic has given an opportunity to jump start economies.

The pandemic has given a lot of challenges but it has given the opportunity to jump start the economies, rebuild societies through recovery plans and focus on climate change and environment conservation, he said.

Talking about the importance of environment and conservation of natural resources, he also insisted on the importance of bio-diversity. "We need to realize that our life and livelihood revolves around nature and the environment, he said.

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown across India, carbon emissions are predicted to fall by around 8% in 2020," Mr. Bajpayee said.

He pointed out that "nature" is an essential source of many medicines and industries like construction, agriculture, food and beverages are highly dependent on it.

Such industries require direct extractions of resources from the forest or rely on ecosystem services such as healthy soil, clean water, and a stable climate. Due to many reasons we are losing species and many have gone extinct, that has disrupted the eco-system," he said.

Mr. Bajpayee further said the impact of this pandemic is "so complex" that it will continue to be analyzed for years to come. He added that climate change and the pandemic are related to anthropogenic activities.

Due to the pandemic, many businesses need to change their models of sustainability and understand that we all need to take ownership of the future, he said.

Speaking at the session, D. K. Aggarwal, President, PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry deliberated upon the improvement in the quality of air and water which he described as the "silver lining of the pandemic".

We could see the goodness of nature due to the lockdown and, we can see that nature had taken its course of stabilizing the things, he said.

Talking about business sustainability, he said in today's times it's driven towards contribution to the environment and society.

The environment is pivotal, we owe our duty and responsibility towards it to ensure that we do not pollute or damage it. In these times, many companies are investing their fund in Environmental, Social, and Corporate Governance (ESG) companies. We need to give back to the planet, people, and profit to sustain the environment, he added.

J. P. Gupta, Chairman, Environment Committee, PHD Chamber of Commerce and Industry said environment is a key driving factor for running industries and there is a need to be considerate towards the environment for sustainability and growth.

Under the Paris Agreement, India had pledged to reduce the emissions intensity of GDP by 30-35% by 2030 and create an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent through additional forest cover by 2030.

Last month Union environment minister Prakash Javadekar had said that India has achieved reduction of 21% in emission intensity of its GDP between 2005 and 2014, thereby achieving its pre-2020 voluntary target.

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