

Environmentalists can't save the tiger

Don't copy western models of conservation. The lord of the jungle can be saved if commerce is harnessed to his cause

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Tigers may be vanishing from Sariska, and other Indian forests, but ironically, dead tigers are proving to be more valuable than live ones. There are calls for more stringent action to implement the ban on trade in tiger parts. What is ignored is a fundamental lesson of economics. When trade is outlawed, only outlaws trade.

Environmentalists have repeated their warnings about the fate of endangered species. Project Tiger was launched over three decades ago in the hope of protecting this majestic animal. Three decades later, it is quite clear that while technical expertise has increased, budgets have expanded, conferences have proliferated, NGOs have raised hundreds of millions of US dollars merchandising tiger conservation, almost every one, except the tiger, has prospered. The crisis in Sariska should be a wake up call to rethink on this whole strategy towards conservation. The entire conservation theology imported from the Western environmentalists over the past four decades, has been to focus on stopping the supply. So hunting has been banned, cutting of forests has been banned and sanctuaries have been created where even entry of lesser mortals have been banned. Such an approach has contributed to two developments. One the trade in endangered species has become extremely profitable. Secondly, the local population who live close to the wildlife has become completely alienated. The contradiction is obvious - preaching the value of tigers and virtue of conservation to the people who wallow in poverty. As any basic economic text book shows, restricting supply only raises its price. While law abiding people might accept the restrictions, higher

product prices, as we all know, make it more profitable for the outlaws to enter the arena. So a dead tiger becomes more valuable than a live one. And smugglers have a field day.

It is time to permit the creation of tiger parks to breed tigers. This step will unite conservation with commerce. Tigers, being part of the cat family, breed very easily, even in captivity. The Zoo Authority of India routinely advises zoos in India not to breed big cats like tigers, leopards and even lions. Because while breeding them is simple, maintaining the big cats in captivity is quite expensive. Creating tiger farms would dramatically change the future, for the tiger, as well as for the people who actually live near tiger habitats. One, the pressure on wild tigers will go down, attracting ever more tourists to visit sanctuaries to see this majestic animal in all its splendour, and in its natural setting. Two, this will lower the price of dead tigers, and reduce the incentive for smugglers to kill wild tigers.

Three, scientists and wildlife managers will have an opportunity to improve their breeding, management and rehabilitation programmes to introduce tigers from the farms to the wilderness. Four, since tiger farms have to be located closer to natural habitats, local populations will find a very lucrative employment opportunity. While harnessing local knowledge will greatly facilitate the management of wildlife parks. Five, integrating local populations with the economics of environment, will change the incentive structure. Villagers, who are often lured by smugglers to kill a wild tiger for a few hundred rupees, will now defend their new environmental assets, because a live tiger will be more profitable to them than a dead one. The alienation that forest dwellers have towards wildlife will dissolve. Six, formal trade and marketing channels will develop for both consumptive and non-consumptive use of tiger, and tiger products. Consequently, investment will be forthcoming to find better technologies and management practices. Seven, national and international brands will develop facilitating value addition and improving productivity. Eight, price of tigers in the black market will collapse, but tigers will become abundant. Tiger farmers, like any other livestock farmers, will worry about falling prices, and therefore have the incentive to find innovative products for new products.

There are countless examples of species that made a comeback on the shoulders of commerce. Crocodile farms in United States, Australia, South Africa, have flourished, contributing to commerce, while facilitating conservation. Ostrich farming has become big business in many parts of the world. South Africa earns substantial revenues from trophy hunters who love to visit a well stocked park. But the mandarins in India, egged on by environmentalists, have stopped the Madras Crocodile Bank from

becoming a big player, and empower the irula tribal communities who know how to manage the crocodiles. They have stopped the proposed ostrich farm in Bangalore. If we really want to wipe our crocodile tears over the loss of tigers in Sariska, it is the commercial potential of commerce that we should harness by privatising wildlife, and freeing up trade. Conservation will be a product of commerce, and future of tigers will be secure.

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