

## Sariska

The disappearance of tigers from the Sariska Reserve exemplifies everything that could have gone wrong with established conservation practice in India - exclusionary conservation policy, bureaucratic management of protected areas, outdated scientific methodology that is used for tiger population estimation and an improper relocation exercise. It thus becomes important to interrogate the shortcomings of each of these factors. While it is true that most of the tigers were lost to poaching, it is important to see how each of these factors created the circumstances within which such excesses could take place. And after this debacle, how have the Park management / policy makers rethought their attitude towards each of these issues? Has it simply led to a cover-up, a blame game or has it led to a process of introspection and a radical re-look at the existing system?

(The facts in Sariska are well-documented in the Tiger Task Force report –  
-management breakdown at managerial level / staff capability  
-collapse of internal systems – recording of animal sightings/ patrolling/ no supervision of forest guards/ no maintenance of surveillance roads  
-faulty tiger census methods  
-poaching  
-hostility between park and people  
-breakdown of traditional relationships between locals-forest)

(1) despite having one of the highest fund allocations in the country – Rs 22 crore since 1978 ; almost one crore per tiger (assuming 22 tigers) – other reserves average 23.70 lakh per tiger / above the national average - availability of funds, staff and equipment. Where has all the money gone?

(2) although one cannot deny that core area populations exert pressure on their surrounding habitats, one must question the automatic linkage that hard-line conservationists make between depletion of tiger habitat and increase of biotic pressures (#) by local populations, which often provides justification for the guns and guards approach – the irony is obvious....despite having one of the highest ratios of guards to land, most tigers in Sariska fell victim to poaching.

(it is possible that locals may have been a part of the poaching network; it may also be important to explore why locals become a part of poaching networks....this is just speculation, but in some cases, it might be a reflection of the conditions created by alienating them from their economic bases – this also reflects the importance of involving locals in conservation efforts, of working in tandem with local Forest Departments; if the FD does not provide economic incentives or win the confidence of local communities, they become soft targets for poachers.)

(#) there is no empirical data which suggests that the presence of human settlements is directly linked with the depletion of forest cover. This is coupled with the fact that Park officials in Sariska have no reliable estimates of livestock numbers or the extent of usage/damage done by human settlements in the Park.

A study conducted by the Forest Survey of India for Project Tiger (assessment of forest land):

674 sq km (77%) of total 881sq km Sariska – forest cover / 44% of this cover dense or moderately dense forest and the rest-open or scrubland. The Survey which assessed the change in forest cover between 1997-2002 found little or no change. There is, therefore, a need for a realistic assessment of resources and resource usage in a particular area so that regulations can be made in accordance with usage rather than a blanket ban which ultimately exerts a more negative influence. *(However, one must not take these figures at face-value: most Forest Survey of India assessments of “forest cover” rely on GIS mapping, which might often reveal an overall increase in forest cover, but may not take into account the real condition of the “ground” habitat. Therefore, the technique of conducting this survey must be taken into account if one is to use this as an argument)*

What of the view of some conservationists, who advocate partial, regulated interference so that the biodiversity of an area regenerates itself naturally?

Core area degradation has been documented by Ghazala Shahabuddin who says that almost 40% of Core I in Sariska is severely degraded. (Study?)

Also – AJT Johnsingh, Wildlife Institute of India

- nature of resources, habitat, resource usage, human settlements and their impact on habitat, the kind/extent of degradation  
(how does it directly impact on the tiger habitat? maybe in terms of reduction of prey density; tigers moving to human density areas therefore exacerbating the man-animal conflict)
- what has created these pressures on the core area? Scientific estimation of pressures on core area / Grazing pressures from livestock, demands for fuel wood, MFP etc but is there a realization that this has arisen out of the non-availability of alternative grazing land and therefore directly impinges on the livelihood base of locals? How is this issue going to be addressed?  
(#) Coupled with an ineffective rehabilitation policy which has made many resettled villages return to their original habitats.
- what is envisaged for the restoration of this habitat from an ecological point of view?

- core areas can be considered as inviolate spaces and relocation made mandatory only for villages which fall in these core areas – how can the interests of people residing in core areas be safeguarded? Can they be made to play a more active part in the protection process? (as the TTF report suggests, people from these areas should be given preferential recruitment in forest protection services for their respective areas)
- external pressures on conservation areas, marble mining etc which continue despite SC ban (Ghazala Shahabuddin)...is getting people out/ relocation the only answer to saving the tiger habitat?

#### # the relocation problem

- Failure of relocation policy as exemplified by Kraska – those from Kraska who returned to their original villages / no involvement or consent of local people / livelihood insecurity – besides non-provision of basic facilities, poor quality of land where people are expected to make a shift from livestock-rearing to agriculture / ambiguity over land ownership, conflict with neighbouring host villagers in relocated areas over resources, given poor quality land for agriculture, confusion over forest-revenue village status, groundwater deficiency
- The financial & social viability of relocation / relocation from core areas, critical tiger habitats, conservation priority areas – how can this process be made more consultative/participatory, more consensus-driven rather than policy-based? ( One can learn from the Bhadra example)

*(Relocation history in India - Last 30 years only 80 villages have been relocated from 28 reserves / ESTIMATE - another 1500 villages ...250 within core areas of reserves / total expenditure 660 crore without accounting for land costs / taking into account land costs, the total cost of relocation estimated at 11,000 crores.)*

- examine the nature of future relocations from the area – is there any change in the content and manner of relocation policy?

*(post-Sariska crisis – Ghazala Shahabuddin, Ravi Kumar, Manish Shrivastav (CSD) have written about how the same practices are being followed in resettling 129 families from Bhagani and Kanakwari (phase I of relocation from core area ) : while 271 ha is required according to the norm of 2.1 ha/family, the proposed site at Badhod Rund is only about 222 ha. / community lands not taken into account / relocation is seen only in monetary terms / 53 beneficiary families under the norm of above 18 years as a separate household not taken into account / no provision of drinking water and irrigation facilities – already a dry area where groundwater levels*

*have already fallen to below 400 ft because of water-intensive agriculture pattern in area / part of the land rocky & unsuitable for agriculture / majority population in these villages – Gujjar...neighbouring village Kakwa in proposed resettlement area Jat - dominated...traditional rivalry between Gujjar-Jat communities which is bound to manifest itself in conflicts over available resources in the area)*

within an already polarized landscape between the FD and the local communities because of (a) policy and the way it has been practiced in the past leading to mistrust, quite evident in the way relocation has been executed in the past (b) the non-recognition of livelihood concerns which has caused these groups to exert pressure on habitat (legally or illegally), if policy continues to come into practice in the same way, and no lessons have been learnt from the failures of the past, it will only lead to further conflict.