

**Interview with Rajeev Bhartihari [RB], Director, Corbett National Park [CNP]  
Taken by Krishnendu Bose [KB]**

KB: Corbett National Park must be doing something special that it's different. ... You must be doing something different.

RB: CNP is different. It's different because of its location, its assets, because of this contiguity of rich forests along most of its boundaries. Most important is the tradition, morale and the attitude of the staff. You take that out and CNP wouldn't be CNP. The effort from the staff that this is CNP and that it needs to be maintained, that it's a prized heritage of the country – that is one. Secondly, because of its tourism and the friends of CNP. The rich, large, varied, influential as well as ordinary people who love Corbett, and who want to see it improve – they apply a kind of a force, a pressure on the management. Even the slightest laxity is noticed and the slightest effort is appreciated. There'd be very few places which invoke such a response from the public. Thirdly, CNP has been changing. The management attitude has not been static. It has been responding to the changing times. ...the sustained effort in pushing the conservation agenda in this region...has been there for 150 years... The first layer of conservation began when Ramsay introduced some of the forest protection laws and these laws preceded any laws within the country. That is why Nainital is today one of the greenest hill stations in India. On this layer Corbett and Champion built a layer of sensibility towards wildlife and so a small national park was created in 1936, overcoming a lot of opposition. Many people were not willing to have limited restrictions on hunting. Then it's very interesting that when the Kalagarh dam was made and there was a threat of the loss of one of the richest habitats, then this support and sacrifice from the national government to increase the area of the park to 520.84 sq km was a very dramatic and major decision. In '87 Sonanadi Wildlife Sanctuary was created on the western side to protect the rainy season habitat of the wild elephants, and finally in '97 the process of relocation began when three villages were relocated and [relocation of] the fourth is in its final stages. When you look at the history of not just CNP, but of conservation in this region, you find that it's not something that emerged in a year or a month or a decade. That direction has been there for over a century. It is that direction which pushes on the conservation agenda.

KB: Rajiv, you are being unfair to yourself. ... What you're trying to attribute to CNP is just history but there is a vision. I have been seeing this place for the last 10 years. ... I've made films here. You've been the Deputy Director here, now you're the Director. You've taken away your contribution to the growth of CNP. You are being unfair to yourself.

RB: As far as the vision is concerned, I mentioned... What is the goal and what is the vision? The vision is that there should be better relations between the park, the wildlife and the people. That is a new thing. That is something which is a part of recent history. The approach earlier was to exclude, eliminate and take away, which is not possible anymore. The new dimension that has been added is the one of building bridges. Of accommodation and coexistence.

KB: Would you like to elaborate? I've been filming the last 2–3 days and watching people. I went there and talked to the communities. There are partnerships between the private sector and village communities, and certainly there was a sense of belonging to the larger conservation issue, to the CNP, which I could sense. How have you managed to network between these two diversely opposite groups and bring them into this whole network of tiger conservation?

RB: Awareness and benefits. These benefits are not only economic benefits but also in terms of infrastructure development and in terms of skills, supplementary livelihood. In terms of sheer identity. Because the message that one has always got from the public is that they are aware of CNP and its renown and its significance. What they want is that the park should share a bit of that with them also. That's what we have started to do and that's what makes a difference. Here we're talking not only in terms of engagement with village communities but also with the townships, with the private sector, with the NGOs and a whole range of stakeholders. You must understand that when 10 years ago, participatory programmers began in India, they were in a very nascent stage. The skills for participation and facilitation, they were not very well understood, leave alone applied. The planning processes were extremely sketchy. There was limited or cosmetic funding and support. They were seen more as experiments for some activities in limited areas rather than being the part and parcel of the whole management of the reserve. But having said that, I must say that we still need to go a long way, and there is a lot to be covered.

KB: The greatest thing which I see has happened here is the partnership between people and the forest. Where did you get this from? Did your training as a forest officer help you? Because you don't come across this too often – that forest officers interacting with people successfully.

RB: Like any other forest officer, I wanted to see people out of the park. I think when I became Deputy Director that was my approach, and then I had the opportunity through the LEAF programme to go to Costa Rica to see ecotourism, to see how communities were participating. That was a turning point. Though I got involved in ecotourism much later but my attitudes and values started changing. When people attack ecotourism, they forget that ecotourism is not an end, it's only a means, a tool, a strategy, for conservation and community development. You succeed to do ecotourism only to the extent that you demonstrate that biodiversity has benefited or communities have gained. It's interesting that the government of Uttaranchal should have thought of setting up a Centre for Ecotourism and Sustainable Livelihoods close to CNP to take advantage of some of the community based tourism projects which had developed on the outskirts of the national park. This centre is one of [the first of] its kinds giving training to villagers throughout Uttaranchal and to other parts of Himalayas and even to foreigners. Now people are seeing how it is possible to not just tolerate...wildlife but also to take benefits out of it.

KB: That's 30 years after PT [Project Tiger] was launched that they're finally waking up to communities and participatory methodology.

RB: Even if that was factually correct, I'd say that while there was a lot of talk about the need to involve communities, the need to provide interpretation, the delivery of methods, techniques and materials, it did not follow. Once you have it in your hands, you feel enabled and you feel that you can apply it and produce results.

KB: You've served the IFS for many years being in CNP and outside it. You'll agree with me that there is a tiger crisis, maybe a larger conservation crisis, happening in the Indian forests. What do you think is the reason?

RB: Demand. I find it shocking that with so much global and national effort, we are still unable to control the demand, nor the movement of the parts, and only when we are able to check the demand and intercept the movement, will the problem be addressed.

KB: Do you think that is the only reason, the only problem? Isn't it also the vision of the forest officers, the management and the political system, which possibly looks at the forest in a different light altogether?

RB: You may not like to hear this from me, but that's my personal feeling. I am amazed sometimes at the resilience and the consistent effort that is being made by the larger polity towards conservation.

KB: Why do you say that? Give me an example.

RB: I'll try and give you a past example and a present example. Serving in CNP I used to find it amazing that CNP which at that time was a part of UP, which was one of the most densely populated areas of the world – and at that time for successive govts to make that additional effort to set aside land resources for CNP is amazing because the political pressure was completely otherwise. In the present case also, the sensitivity which the political leaders of the country have taken up this issue of the tiger decline and responded with personal intervention as well as legal intervention – it shows that there are very few places in the world where this kind of support exists.

KB: The scare is that all depends on individuals. That's my personal scare. It was Indira Gandhi – then it was the Gandhi family as far as the politicians are concerned. It's you in Corbett. I've always been hearing that they were waiting for you to come as Director. Now they are scared what will happen to this place after you go. Why is it dependent on individuals? Why have we failed to have a vision, an institution?

RB: It's true that a lot of what happens, a lot of this drama owes its roots to individuals. But it works! It's for you to find out why it is like that.

KB: Works only when individuals are there. Indira Gandhi went off and the forests and wildlife and tigers are in shambles. You have to look at not just the immediate or the contextual or isolated, but you have to look at the overall direction also and the direction has been steady. I can say this with conviction that whether it is otters, tigers, elephants – I've seen an increase in the limited 12 years I've had with the CNP. My guess will be that the increase in these 15 years has been far larger and greater than was in the previous decades. Easily Corbett, Kanha and a few parks are successful PT examples. Are you happy or are you scared for the future?

RB: One does have causes of concern but the concern is not in the direction that you are saying. My concern is this obsession with peninsular parks because India has three kinds of protected parks – High Altitude, Peninsular and Marine. They have very different settings, problems and languages. I had a brief opportunity of working as Chief Conservator, Bhagirathi circle, which included Gangotri, which is the third largest

national park of India. Don't you think it was shocking that nobody knew that it was the third largest national park of India or that two-thirds of all foreign mountaineering expeditions come to Gangotri? Or that it's one of the greatest treks in the world, rich in biodiversity and landscapes, it's truly a global heritage. My scare is more about people trying to define a very limited agenda. The agenda is much larger. The effort that is required is required on [a] much larger scale. The issues are so different when you move from one protected area to another. High Altitude, talk about census, staff. In 2000 sq km, there were just three Guards and Foresters. Even today, after much greater interest, I'd doubt if the number has crossed 12. Sub-zero temp, harsh living conditions. Every day is full of risks and potential accidents. Such a huge tourist influx. 40,000 at Gaumukh, a glacier.

KB: For CNP, we've been discussing this – if CNP is a successful PT example, then the future may not necessarily be secure, because of external pressures. Would you like to talk about it?

RB: That is a concern. While the numbers are increasing, what is more crucial is to know what is happening on the periphery and the boundary. What is going to happen to these tigers because managing higher populations is a new challenge, because these animals are moving along with cattle and people and [there is] very close interaction. Each accident or attack is a potential major crisis for the park. For a tiger reserve like CNP, that is the challenge – of how to be able to manage populations and conflicts on its periphery and boundary.

KB: That's what you've done in terms of involving the people and the community. Would you like to talk about what is the bridge, the connection between saving the tiger and working with the community in a buffer like Chhoti Haldwani?

RB: We have only made a beginning in that direction and we need to scale up. We need to both scale up the effort and to ensure that the economic benefits also are... I mentioned earlier also this experience of women from Devipur and Bathi Teela living between tigers all their life. Every day, dreading the tiger when they go for cutting grass and collecting fuel wood and then suddenly getting an opportunity to see the tiger for the first time in their life. It's not about sermonising. It's not about telling the communities what they should be doing. It's about providing the communities an opportunity to see for themselves, what is conservation and what difference it makes. They are far more likely to believe you when they see that it produces benefits, which are received by them. The biggest problem to this conservation was this puritan approach – that it's such a lofty thing and therefore you need to do [it], and then to question or challenge or to ask anything about it was a sacrilege or unwanted. The conservationists have to come upfront and demonstrate how it is beneficial and ensure that the benefits are shared. These techniques that I have talked about, they are simple. They provide the wherewithal to do that. Without that learning, without that skill, no matter how good my intentions maybe, my results will still be feeble. You mentioned about training.

KB: Can you elaborate on this bridge between working in Chhoti Haldwani with the villagers and tiger protection?

RB: Chhoti Haldwani is a very unique village because of its heritage. It was owned by Jim Corbett. For visitors it's a bridge between Corbett, the park and Jim Corbett, the

person. The carriers of the heritage are the villagers and they own it. Now, through community based tourism they've begun to gain some benefits. Chhoti Haldwani is important because of its immense value in raising awareness about Jim Corbett, the person and about his effort in conservation. Not only conservation but for development. It is linked with the park because the park is named after him. I find it very interesting that in Choti Haldwani, in the Baur river, 80 years ago, Jim Corbett would've set up his jungle studio and managed to shoot seven tigers in a single frame, including a white tiger, and a British tourist coming three years ago, and still being able to take picture of a tiger along the Baur canal. People may say why is Chhoti Haldwani connected to Corbett Park and why we are making an effort, but the tiger is not only in the tiger reserve. There are tigers close to Chhoti Haldwani as they used to be when Jim Corbett was there.

KB: How does the tiger benefit? I could understand about the villagers in Chhoti Haldwani – the heritage. Probably economically also they are being benefited. How does the tiger and the park benefit out of this?

RB: The tiger never benefits directly. The tiger benefits indirectly, because conversion of land use, habitat destruction, fires, depletion of vegetation and the prey base inadvertently affect the tiger. With these kinds of approaches, serenity, ambience and small things also start getting attention and begin getting value. Ultimately the tiger has to benefit.

KB: A larger question about the vision and the perspective of conservation in this country. This may be the last question. What's your personal view because we've seen predominantly in the last 30 years, after the PT was launched, exclusivity for animals, for forests, for biodiversity. Exclusivity without people – that was the perspective and the policy of the PT, not only the state but also the wildlifers. People whose voice we've heard for tiger protection in this country. Predominant, large, dominant voices have always talked about exclusivity. Do you see that there may be a gap or a problem with the perspective, because what you've been doing in Corbett is definitely inclusivity?

RB: I'd say that it's not that that problem was [not] there, it still exists, and to a large extent. But my own experiences would make me question whether this segmentation of even the core and the buffer is required. Clearly there is room for rethinking, and making even some of the core areas open.

KB: That's quite a radical thing to say – from a forest officer, I must say.

RB: When elephant poaching took place in Corbett and it hurt each and everybody who was attached to Corbett, all of these killings took place in the core zone. None was in the tourism zone. Regulated tourism and regulated movement of people does serve to provide a check and balance. Simply excluding areas from human presence doesn't mean that the area is protected. The other issue in this regard is that if you do say that a place is excluded, then it should be excluded by everybody. Not just by one category or by a second category. I like the idea of a non-motorised zone in the US, where if it's a non-motorised zone for the tourists, it's for the foresters also.

KB: You are saying that a larger rethinking should be done on the categories – on the way the Forest Department thinks and its vision and perspective?

RB: Maybe not. The reason is that our protected areas are like living in very different times. There is a certain sequence of growth of a protected area and you cannot compare a place like Corbett, which has been in existence for 70 years and which has got embedded in the regional landscape, with a protected area like Gangotri, which may have been just a paper park – and even the awareness about its existence, leave alone legal implications, is just beginning to appear on the horizon.

KB: What you are saying is that one size doesn't fit all. You need to have local understanding of PAs [protected areas]– the challenge, their values.

RB: I think they are very, very varied. It'd be very wrong to be passing general prescriptions or solutions for all areas. When I was Deputy Director here, one of the biggest charges against me used to be that you have a tunnel vision, which is a Corbett-centric vision and the world is not like Corbett. That's why I moved out and went to the WFI and because of my work in ecotourism, got to visit and be involved in many High Altitude areas. I think all that exposure has made a dramatic influence on my thinking. I am back to Corbett but my view is not the same. I think they are just like human beings. There is a growth phase, a childhood, adolescence, adulthood and you'll have an old age. Similarly PAs undergo stages of growth, and their settings are also varied, so you can't be prescribing one solution or strategy for all. The other thing that I'd say is that PAs aren't static. Even strategies which are working and successful at one point may need to be abandoned and you may need to reverse and go back. For example, there was a time when one had assumed that no major poaching would take place in Corbett and yet these tuskers were killed for ivory. Such incidents then act as a very big setback to the strategies for participation and other inclusive approaches and again then the scale tilts in the favour of exclusionist and more protection oriented [ones]. I'd say to conclude that safety lies in using a mix of strategies. Strategies relying on protection, strategies relying on habitat development, strategies involving participation and participation not only from the villagers, but from the research community, from the NGOs and from the private sector.

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KB: What do you think is the future of Corbett? It looks secure now. But what do you think about the future? Succinctly.

RB: The continued change in land use on the boundary. Replacement of agricultural land which in a way formed part of the habitat to more built areas and construction and vehicular movement and strengthening routes. Ultimately that is going to place very severe boundaries on the future growth of conservation in this region. It may actually also start causing setbacks. That is a point of concern. We regulate visitor behaviour. We have some regulation for visitor activities but literally no control over development. Even the worst visitor behaviour or activity doesn't cause as much lasting damage as uninhibited development.

KB: That you'd say is a major concern outside the national park which can come into the national park as well?

RB: There is no way that it can come into the park but even on the periphery it is a cause of concern because Kosi forms a very major water source for the animals within Corbett

and during summer months animals have to move out for drinking. Right now this development had been confined to less than 1/5 of the perimeter of the Corbett, but if it is going to spread all around the reserve and if this going to be the shape of the future, it is bound to have a deleterious effect on tiger population.

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