

Conserving biodiversity

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BIODIVERSITY conservation has become an international slogan, especially after the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity, in Rio, in mid-1992. However, the well-established apathy of most governments towards nature and natural resources, and the machinations of various commercial and industrial interest groups proved to be major obstacles in achieving it. Another significant obstacle is the inability, even the unwillingness, to control opulent and wasteful lifestyles of the national and global riff-raff. The consequent economic inequities prevalent globally and nationally are yet another major impediment to the rational and sensitive use of nature's bounty.

A relatively new obstacle to the conservation of biodiversity is the growing antagonism towards wildlife protected areas (national parks and sanctuaries) from those who see such protected areas as flash-points of the conflict between the interests of 'tigers and trees', on the one hand, and of tribals and poor rural communities on the other. Such persons argue that biodiversity conservation, especially through wildlife protected areas, is against the interest of the local people, whose needs must take precedence.

Since such arguments have substantial justification, especially considering the manner in which wildlife protected areas have been set up and managed in the past, they not only move the progressive elements within governments, but also many 'environmentalists'. What is, however, far less justified is the conclusion that is being increasingly drawn from them: that national parks and sanctuaries

must be denotified or at least opened up to the requirements of local communities.

What is being overlooked by those making such a demand is that the conflict is not really between wildlife and people, but between one class of people and another. It is not the protection of wildlife that is causing the impoverishment of the people, but the protection of the interests of a few rich people. When people and their livestock are sought to be kept out of sanctuaries or forests, a hue and cry is raised to allow them in on humanitarian grounds, even illegally. However, in the region surrounding almost all such protected areas there are huge tracts of agricultural lands owned by rich landlords, in violation of land ceiling laws. But there is no corresponding cry to distribute these surplus lands to the poor people, even though that would be legal.

Wherever there is an ostensible conflict between the needs of the local people and the requirements of wildlife management, the ire of many social activists turns on the managers of the wildlife protected areas, on the concept of wildlife protection and on conservation in general. Whereas there is much that is wrong with the way wildlife is sought to be conserved in India or, indeed, often with the way in which wildlife managers approach the task, the answer does not lie in abandoning the whole effort.

As things stand, even if all the national parks and sanctuaries were denotified today and made available to the people, it would not even marginally solve the problems of hunger, poverty or injustice. In fact, after a few years, the world would be even

