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THE CONSERVATION OF NATURAL FORESTS AND THEIR INDIGENOUS
WILDLIFE IN THE HILL DISTRICTS OF HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

Predictions now abound to suggest that India's remaining
stocks of forest are threatened with almost complete destruction by
the end of this century. Great hardship for the human population
and widespread extinctions among the indigenous wild flora and
fauna are inevitable consequences of these predictions being
realized. This paper focuses on Himachal Pradesh, and on Kulu
District in particular, to explore issues related to the
conservation of surviving natural ecosystems.

We review both historical and contemporary data on the
status of forests and wildlife in Himachal Pradesh and describe
the process of evaluation used in the selection of Inner Seraj as
a potential Biosphere Reserve and National Park. We outline a
management regime for this area that would allow the maintenance
of existing natural ecosystems without excessive disruption of
the local economy. Local education and the active involvement of
the National Park's residents in conservation schemes are seen as
two vital constituents of any long-term plan for the preservation
of the remarkable biota still to be found in this area..

The recipe we suggest is of precisely the kind envisaged by
the UNESCO 'Man and Biosphere (MAB)' Programme, embodying the
idea that man should harvest natural resources for maximum
sustainable yield and ecosystem stability.

INTRODUCTION

Human influences on the biosphere have advanced to the stage at which there is practically no part of the globe where biological communities continue to exist without direct or indirect interference from man. The highest mountains, clad in acid snow, are often adorned with the refuse deposited by intrepid climbers: the abyssal depths are the receptacle for our most deadly toxic wastes. For good or ill, our activities are collectively the major influence on the biosphere.

Until recently the world's renewable resources appeared to be inexhaustible. It is only in this century that the accelerating attrition of natural ecosystems and the extinction of plant and animal species has reached a level sufficient to elicit widespread concern (Myers 1979; Allen 1980; Eckholm 1982). The resulting conservation movement seeks, in part, to protect remaining natural areas and to reduce the rate of species extinction. Conservation is sometimes considered a narrow-minded viewpoint, standing in the way of the aims of 'development', but we, in contrast, see it as a hybrid philosophy drawing support from a variety of sources. In the developed world conservation causes tend to be associated with human health and amenity (e.g. clean up the river; save the oak tree), and draw support largely from urban elites. In these relatively affluent countries good economic arguments can be advanced for conservation based on the recreational value of wildlife: Canadians, for instance, spend about \$200 per year per head on activities related to wildlife (Filion et al. 1983).

In the third world the same issues are forced into an uneasy alliance with movements dedicated to the preservation of rural lifestyles. In India these include the entire hunting and gathering tradition of many tribal peoples throughout the sub-continent. In addition, the universal rural demands for fuel-wood, animal fodder and construction timber have placed local agricultural communities at odds with commercial timber interests. But only recently has the resulting conflict assumed a conservation dimension: some agriculturalists now understand their own dependence on the stability of adjacent natural ecosystems (Ashish 1979,1980).

The ultimate aim of development in India, and elsewhere in the third world, seems to be to raise material standards towards those of Europe and North America. Thus, if development proceeds as expected, the same level of interest in wildlife, and other aspects of natural ecosystems, that we see now in the west should emerge eventually in India. The problem for India lies in maintaining sufficient natural reserves of the native flora and fauna during the present period of environmental crisis caused by her burgeoning human population.

Prior to the advent of agriculture most of India was probably forested (Puri 1965; Whyte 1968). Hence most remaining areas of natural vegetation consist of forest. Estimates of the rate of felling in these reserves over the past decade in India suggest that, if harvesting continues unchecked, there will be virtually no primary forest remaining by the end of the present century (Eckholm 1979; Baig 1980; Centre for Science & Environment 1982). Simply to supply the immediate fodder and fuel-wood requirements

