

Executive summary

The Tiger Task Force report begins by placing itself in context (see: *The assessment*, p 1-20). There is an immediate context to this report: the widely reported and discussed event of the disappearance of tigers in Sariska. There is also a larger context: the discourse and practice of tiger conservation in India.

In terms of the immediate context, the Sariska debacle, the Task Force investigated the affair. The report presents the conclusions (see: *The Sariska shock*, p 14-20). The protection system there has completely collapsed. While officials were busy misreporting the record of tiger numbers, poachers roamed about and cleaned the reserve out. A powerful mining lobby, keen to carry out mining operations in the reserve fringe, is thrilled. Local politicians now want the protected area denotified: “What is there to protect?” they ask. Villagers here regard the tiger, and the park administration, as their common enemy no 1: they live sandwiched between the two, and are bitter about their desperately wretched existence and continued harassment. The park management talks about relocation, but has done little. In the meantime, even the one village that had been moved out has come back into the reserve. There is unease all around. In this situation, protection cannot and does not work.

In terms of the larger context (see: *Conserving the tiger*, p 2-13), the report finds important, but forgotten, moments in the recent history of official conservation planning. The report of the 1972 task force headed by Karan Singh, *Project Tiger: a planning proposal for preservation of tiger* (*Panthera tigris tigris*) in India, inaugurated the tiger conservation programme in India (and official conservation as well). It is a remarkable blueprint. It gave the programme a promising start.

If “people versus parks” — and its inevitable corollary, “people versus tigers” — is one contentious point of the debate around conservation in India today, the report finds extremely sensitive deliberations upon this issue in the past. It is obvious that some, among those that have given direction to official conservation policy, were horribly aware that in India, forests are not unpopulated tracts of wilderness. The 1983 *Eliciting public support for wildlife conservation — report of the task force*, by a committee headed by Madhavrao Scindia, focuses on the dependence of rural people on forests: “In their precarious existence, enforcement of restriction in

wildlife reserves triggers antagonism”. This report wanted development programmes and funds for villages located in the periphery of conservation zones. It calls these zones “islands of conservation”. “If the land surrounding such effort continues to deteriorate in productivity affecting the availability of resources for communities, these islands are bound to succumb one day to the community’s demands”.

In the 1990s, a furious storm breaks, reminiscent of today. The tiger is in deep trouble. Project Tiger, India’s flagship conservation programme, is in deep trouble. Conservation itself is in deep trouble. This was an opportunity to change directions. But what emerges is: One, the conservation regime re-dedicates itself to a command-and-control mode of wildlife preservation. Two, it becomes no longer necessary to refer to or think of “people” while speaking of or planning for conservation.

The Sariska debacle is irrevocably because of this direction we chose.

3 unavoidable variables

It is incumbent upon the Tiger Task Force to look to the future. The Task Force realises that, so far as conservation policy and practice are concerned, any such blueprint must be predicated upon three unavoidable variables (see: *A paradigm change*, p 21-26). As the report puts it, “The protection of the tiger is inseparable from the protection of the forests it roams in. But the protection of these forests is itself inseparable from the fortunes of people who, in India, inhabit forest areas”. There is the tiger. There is the forest. There are the people, living inside these forests and on the fringes of these forests.

All readers of this executive summary are encouraged to look at the map on page 23. It shows three layers: the 150 poorest districts of India; the fact that these are also constitutionally designated Schedule v areas (areas primarily inhabited by tribals); and the fact that these are prime “tiger districts”. Consider also the tables on page 26 *Forest cover and tribal districts*, and *Net change in forest cover in the country since 2001...*. The fact is that communities — not necessarily tribals, but equally impoverished — live in and around those areas the official conservation apparatus protects for the sake of the tiger. Equally, forests in these areas are under

greater strain: fiat forbids use of the forest, but people persist in doing so, often out of sheer need. Enter the tiger, single males no fiat can tie down, trying to wander from forest to forest, but unable to do so because the forests are shrinking and forest corridors brim with disaffected villages arbitrarily resettled out of the forest.

The Tiger Task Force has tried then to unravel the knot conservation policy and practice has today tied itself in.

The way ahead

With this aim in mind, the report moves into the heart of the matter. The Tiger Task Force resolves the problem into 11 distinct, but connected, aspects (see: *The way ahead*, p 27-143).

Just reform

Sariska was an eye-opener to the Task Force. It witnessed there absolute institutional collapse. So it is that this segment of the report begins by looking into institutional reform (see: *The institutional agenda*, p 28-35). Following the 42nd amendment to the Constitution in 1976, the subject of 'forests' and 'wildlife' shifted from the State list to the Concurrent list. As the report puts it, "the Centre acquired overriding powers to ensure protection and preservation of forests and wildlife". By the 1990s, this arrangement began to function more in the breach. Project Tiger suffered. Without direct stake in protecting wildlife and forests, states treated these as matters to be administered. State politicians found protecting huge swathes of land expensive, even inimical to growth. The Centre had a direct stake, but was too distant from ground realities to be effective.

How should this state of affairs improve? The report weighs two options. One, centralise further (see: p 29-30). Two, rely on a participatory philosophy of institution-building. The report endorses the latter option. Improve Centre-state collaboration, says the report, strengthening institutions at the Centre that oversee tiger protection, and improving state capacities. The report says local communities must be involved in protecting the tiger; relevant institutions, therefore, must be put in place.

Among a series of recommendations (see: p 30-35) the report makes with respect to overhauling or transforming institutions of wildlife protection, it says that the Union ministry of environment and forests must be re-organised into two separate departments: that of environment and that of forests. The Project Tiger directorate must be given the legal status of an authority, to facilitate its work and provide it autonomy.

Must protect

But even as institutional reform is undertaken, it is clear that more needs to be done to improve the protection for the tiger immediately (see: *The protection agenda*, p: 36-50). After visits to reserves and detailed research, it is the assessment of the Task Force that Sariska is certainly not representative of what is happening in every reserve in the country. But it is also clear that a Sariska-type situation haunts every reserve, where protection is happening, today, against all odds.

The question then is: what can be done to improve protection? The usual answer is: more guns, more guards and more money. This approach, the report finds, solves nothing. Sariska, in fact, has spent more money per tiger and per sq km than almost all reserves in India. It has more personnel per sq km and more protection camps per sq km, than most reserves. Still it failed (see the graphs: *Allocation of funds to tiger reserves from inception to 2004-2005*, and *Average yearly allocation of funds to tiger reserves from inception to 2004-2005*, p 37; see especially What we can learn from Sariska, p 46).

The report delves into all aspects of protection (see: *Funds and protection*, p 37-39; *Personnel and protection*, p 39-42; *the vacant staff position*, p 42-43; *the age of the staff*, p 43-44; and *infrastructure*: p 45) to suggest each reserve must devise strategies to better protect the tiger. This is especially true of a) reserves in northeast India, vast and inaccessible except to local communities, and b) naxalite-dominated reserves.

And less crime

It isn't enough to merely spruce up the reserve management. Conservation in India today possesses an extremely watered-down mechanism to crack down on wildlife crime. A market exists today for tiger skin and tiger parts; as tigers decline elsewhere in south and southeast Asia, the danger for the tiger in India becomes more palpable. Inter-governmental cooperation on protecting endangered species has driven the market underground, making it difficult to detect and so break; also, the world is failing in its attempts to control the illicit trade: as late as 2004, shops in New York exhibited herbal medicines claiming to be made of tiger parts (see: *The illegal trade agenda*, p 51-55).

A weak enforcement mechanism thus spells disaster. The report takes up this question in depth (see: *Domestic enforcement agenda*, p 56-62). After showing in great detail exactly how weak the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 is in terms of enforcement (see: p 58-59), the report demands the Act's criminal provisions be amended, and wants a

Wildlife Crime Bureau to be set up immediately. Perhaps, then, India can look after her tigers.

Perhaps India can look after her tigers better by being imaginative in this sphere (see: *Innovative protection agenda*, p 63-69). Poachers rely upon extremely skilled local communities of hunters, who know the forest better than the backs of their hands. Poachers can; money can buy anything, especially extremely poor people. But what if the hunter turns protector? The report records such an initiative in Cambodia. In India, too, such a turnaround is possible: research shows that the Lisu of Changlang district in Arunachal Pradesh could become the best protectors of the Namdapha tiger reserve there (see: p 65-67). Periyar tiger reserve in Kerala proves it can be done (see: p 67-68). Couldn't innovations like this be replicated, where possible, elsewhere in the country?

For this to happen, at least one bridge has to be built: between the conservation bureaucracy and wildlife researchers. The Task Force finds the current disconnect between the two extremely disturbing (see: *The research agenda*, p 80-87). Indeed, it finds weak correlation between the practice of conservation and the knowledge produced on and about it. The report points to the pug-mark method of counting tigers as the best example of this practice becoming unscientific over time, and agrees this method needs to be replaced (see: *The science agenda*, pp 70-79). It reviews the methodology that is being suggested as an alternative and finds it will work better in estimating tigers and their habitat. It wants this method to be tried out urgently.

An outlook that believes conservation means fencing forests off by fiat is too narrow. Many tigers live outside tiger reserves. Thus conservation needs to focus on the larger landscape. It must also be an inclusive effort: the wildlife biologist or community ecologist is equally crucial to it. The Sariska debacle went unnoticed also because information on tiger numbers there was fudged. The Task Force urges for openness and for independent audits that can build and break the 'reputations' of state leaders in managing their tiger populations.

Out in the open

The simplest way to protect the tiger is to render inviolate the space it roams in, catching prey. In India, this means keeping all people out of forests declared as protected areas (as reserves, or sanctuaries, or national parks). As people live in reserves, they need to be 'relocated' so that the space is made 'inviolate' and undisturbed. Conservationists demand it. But what is the situation on the ground?

For the first time, data has been collected on the

number of villages — families and people — that live inside India's tiger reserves. The Task Force places it in the public domain (see: *The relocation agenda*, p 88-98; specifically, see: p 89-91).

The data is not complete — there is no proper assessment of the total number of settlements in tiger reserves. But what does exist proves a) relocation is a logistical nightmare and b) it has a cost that is unaccounted for.

The first is borne out by the fact that in the last 30 years, only 80 villages and 2,904 families have been relocated from different tiger reserves in the country. Readers of this summary could consult the table on p 91 *Costs of relocation*. The Task force has estimated that, roughly, there are 1,500 villages — or 65,000 families, or 325,000 people (@ five per family) — inside the core and buffer zones of tiger reserves. At the current rate of compensation the government gives to families it seeks to relocate (Rs 1 lakh), it would cost Rs 665 crore to relocate all families from tiger reserves. If the rate of compensation is enhanced — say, to Rs 2.5 lakh — it would require Rs 1,663 crore to re-settle all.

There's more. Usually, forest land is used to re-settle families (no agency has the gumption, or political will, to provide revenue land). Today, if a state government were to use forest land and re-settle people, it would have to pay the Centre what is called the NPV, or net present value of the forest it would divert for the purpose of re-settlement. The NPV amount has been fixed at Rs 5.8 to Rs 9 lakh per hectare (depending on the category of forest diverted). Therefore, to re-settle all families from tiger reserves, the government will require Rs 9,645 crore.

This stalemate has to be broken. The Task Force suggests a way ahead. It asks for a scientific assessment of the villages that need to be relocated and it asks for a time-bound programme for this to happen. It asks caution but it also demands speed. The situation today is untenable for the people who live inside. The unwritten policy is that they will be relocated. As a result, no development reaches them, for then they wouldn't want to leave. But relocation does not happen. People become, and remain, trespassers in their own land.

They came back

In Sariska, villagers of Kraska village were offered land by the forest department in a village outside the reserve's core area. They relinquished their land-ownership certificates and shifted to that village, only to face the wrath of its residents. Selling off the new land they had got at low prices, the villagers went back into the core. Now they live in an atmosphere that is war-like: harassed, forcibly

evicted again, they live impoverished and lives.

The Task Force visited Hindala village in Ranthambhore and witnessed the terrible poverty of these people living inside this prestigious national park. They have no water, no schools, no medical facilities. They are harassed if they graze their animals in the land outside their village. “The forest department says it is planning to relocate this village. The villagers told the Task Force that they were prepared to move, but also expressed concern that the villagers who had been relocated from Ranthambhore in the past were facing problems even more severe than theirs” (p 96). A damning indictment of conservation: people preferring to live illegal and wretched lives because official relocation is a promise that does not work.

Other examples

The report looks at other examples of relocation, and finds a pattern exists to the process (see: p 92-94; also see the example of village Pandharpauni/ Navegaon, p 100). Families are usually shifted to the fringe of protected areas. The land they are given is usually of poor quality. Although the land they get is first cleared of all vegetation, it is still categorised as ‘forest land’. The restrictions of the Forest Protection Act, 1980, apply here. So people live a constricted existence. Moreover, they are not allowed to use the resources of the protected forest they live next to.

Relocation was successfully done in the Bhadra tiger reserve in Karnataka. But it cost the state Rs 4.02 lakh per family. Is this then the cost we have to pay?

All this creates a situation where, as people become poorer, they also become desperate (see the example of Bandhavgarh, p 100; see also *Melghat’s conservation conundrum*, p 110, or *Pench: Illegal and threatening*, p 113) and hostile. Since the forest no longer sustains them, they no longer sustain the forest. As for the tiger, it finds itself roaming in a habitat that begins to disappear.

This is not to say

But even with all this learnt, this is not to say there must not exist inviolate spaces for the tiger. The report recommends that “there should be an urgent and realistic review of the number of villages that actually need to be relocated from the reserves. The decision must be based on the fact that the villages that need to be relocated are so made to do so because they are located in the critical habitats — tiger natal areas and conservation priority areas”. Urging “for speed and careful decision-making”, the Task Force “recommends a tight schedule of exactly one year to study settlements and list the ones to be relocated” (p 97).

Being exclusive

A 1989 report estimates three million people live inside the 600-odd protected areas that exist in India today. So, says the report: “If the way ahead is to come to a practical resolution on how to balance, and manage, the livelihood needs of people with the imperatives of conservation, it is important to understand the impact of human resource use on tiger reserve forests: is such use detrimental? What is the threshold beyond which such use begins to so severely degrade tiger habitat that the animal’s existence becomes truly endangered? What if such use is not detrimental?” (see: *The coexistence agenda*, p 99-116; specifically, *An experiment in sustainability*, p 102, with graph *The Soliga know sustainable harvesting*, p 103. These questions also affect the argument of *The fringe agenda*, p 116-131)

Accepting that “this terrain of competing needs is a complicated one”, the report examines why what it calls the “war of conservation” is so widespread in India. Seeking answers, it realises that “in many parts of the country, the rights of local people in forests remain unrecorded” (see, in this respect, the example of Buxa tiger reserve in West Bengal, p 101). Currently, many states are on a spree to prohibit tree- and bamboo felling, cutting grass, collecting minor forest produce within protected areas. The unintended result of this has been heightened tension between people and staff in various protected areas. “In this situation,” the report says, “it is important to examine what the rights are of people living within sanctuaries and national parks. Do they even have rights? What is prohibited? What does the law say on this issue?”

So follows a close examination of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (see: p 103-106). Till the 1991 amendment to the Act, a sanctuary could be notified without people’s rights being determined. This was a statutory defect, but the Act was implemented. In notified sanctuaries created 1973-1991, therefore, rights would not have been settled. The 1991 amendment, and then the 2003 amendment, attempted to mitigate this defect. The latter actually provides safeguards: till rights are settled, the state has to make alternative arrangements for fuel, fodder and minor forest produce for people living in areas declared as protected. But these amendments failed to solve problems: settlements did not take place; the enforcement regime was strengthened without safeguards. Says the report:

“There seems to now exist two procedural regimes, and institutions seem to pick one or the other, not tackling the inherited ambiguities caused by the original defect in the law:

- Rights are settled, the sanctuary is notified

and all prohibitions come into force;

- Rights are not settled, but the sanctuary or national park exists; so, all prohibitions come into force but none of the safeguards” (p106).

The law, as interpreted, provides that people living in and around a protected area can collect and remove forest produce for “bona fide needs” but there is no definition of what the phrase means. Moreover, the Act bars rights to property (in this respect see: p 107; see especially *Submission of the Madhya Pradesh government on section 20 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, barring accrual of rights* p 108).

In this way, the report clarifies what it means by a “war of conservation”. Now it can ask: is coexistence then possible? How? It recommends “inclusive protection be incorporated into conservation management urgently”, and urges park managers to be innovative. The fact is if people co-habit the tiger’s space then it is imperative that ways are found so that coexistence is harmonious. Anything else is not good for the tiger. Not good for conservation.

Become inclusive

A strategy of inclusive protection should be even more of the essence of future conservation in India because of the internecine conflicts — between people and park managers, or regarding resource use — breaking out on the park fringes (see: *The fringe agenda*, p 117-131). The report details the nature of the interaction between fringe villages and protected areas. Often, they place tremendous pressure on parks (see the example of Bandipur tiger reserve, p 118). Animals, in turn, damage crops (see: p 118), or kill livestock (see the case of Bhadra tiger reserve, p: 119). The table *Compensation paid by tiger reserves from inception till 2002*, in p 120, clearly shows this conflict drains the financial resources of tiger reserves. It also strains the people’s relationship to the forest.

The report then analyses attempts to solve this conflict. It examines the India Ecodevelopment Project — a Rs 288 crore attempt (incidentally this is more than what has been spent on official tiger conservation over 30 years), tested in 7 tiger reserves, to tackle the problem of the negative impact of people upon parks, and vice versa (see: p 120-127). “Where the decision-making was unilateral, at the

behest of the forest department”, says the report, “the attempt quickly failed. Where they were implemented in the right spirit, the schemes (of the project) did pick up the economic baselines of the villages” (see the examples of Nagarhole national park and Buxa tiger reserve, p: 124-125). The key weakness wasn’t in what the project did. It lay in how it did what it did. “The project created parallel institutions in the villages. It did not work with existing delivery mechanisms — the *panchayats* and line departments of programme delivery. Also, a traditionally antagonistic forest department had to rebuild its relationships with villagers. Where senior forest officers took the lead and spent time in the field, things were different.”

It isn’t as if solutions don’t exist. Increase the productivity of forests and pasturelands in the vicinity of a reserve, the report suggests. “If people live in a forest-dependent economy, then it is imperative to evolve policies for forest-development in these areas”. The Task Force also asks the government “to look at how joint forest management and community forestry in fringe forests can be integrated to work both for people as well as wildlife”. It also considers the strategy of monetising the ecosystem services of a forest, and involving local communities to protect forests in lieu of which service they get paid (see: *Ecological services agenda*, p: 141-143).

In the same vein, the report looks at how tourism, that has great potential in providing locals a way to prosperity, is doing exactly the opposite: hotels and resorts operate without any building code of environmental standards. They guzzle groundwater and require waste disposal by the ton. Moreover, they do not contribute to the local economy at all (see: *The tourism agenda*, p 132-140). The report provides successful examples of eco-tourism involving local communities (see: *Innovating in tourism by involving local communities*, p: 138), and recommends government encourage homestead tourism around reserves. Also, it asks that “hotels within a radius of five kilometres from the boundary of a reserve must contribute 30 per cent of their turnover to the reserve”.

The moot point in looking at so many solutions is a simple one. Ease the pressure on people; people respond sustainably. Ease the pressure on the forest; the forest will regenerate. The pressure on the tiger is bound to ease. This paradigm of ‘inclusive conservation’ will safeguard the tiger. Nothing else will. The agenda is within our reach.