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History of Conservation in India

Conservation in India found its roots when the killing of animals were strictly prohibited in and around the Ashramas (hermitages) allotted to Brahmanas. Around the third century BC, the founder of the Mauryan empire—Chandragupta Maurya, appointed a Kupyadhyaksha or Forest Department Head. This officer was in charge of implementing the Game Laws laid down in the manuscript known as the Arhtashastra written by Kautilya, the then Prime Minister of the Mauryan Empire. This in effect became the first official administrative document to spell out wildlife conservation measures.

Chandragupta's grandson Ashoka, besides implementing the written laws on wildlife conservation in letter, went one step further and implemented it in spirit too. He is known to have done much for the promulgation of Buddhism during his reign, ahimsa and the non violence against all beings, animals included, is well known. His penchant for wildlife also extended to art and aesthetics, evident from examples such as the Lion Capital of Ashoka pillar in the present day Uttar Pradesh, where four lions with their back to each other can be found atop the pillar.

Unfortunately, the streak of good fortune that wildlife had enjoyed until then did not persist through the centuries. Fast forward a couple of centuries to the Mughal dynasty. When the founder of the Mughal empire, Babur, was at the helm, records indicate that rhinoceros were found spread across the Gogra River and across Peshawar. Wild elephants were found in abundance in the Karrah region, the present day Allahabad district. The

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number of wildlife were not to grow exponentially. Emperor Akbar, his grandson, was an avid game hunter. He introduced a special kind of hunting known as the ‘Gamargha Hunt’. The hunt would involve hundreds of beaters with drums being sent out over a large distance to literally drive all the wild animals of the region into a circle. Once rounded up, the King and noblemen would then move around the periphery of this circle and hunt the animals with guns, spears and arrows. Akbar bred tigers and leopards for hunting purposes in specific menageries in Fatehpur and Agra.

Akbar’s son and heir, Jahangir, enforced strict laws prohibiting the hunting of wild animals as a sport, and prior official sanction was required—granted only to professionals—to shoot man-eating animals. Hunting leopards aka cheetahs, which were nearly driven to extinction during the reign of Akbar, were successfully bred in captivity by Jahangir. However, royal hunting by the ruling family did not cease. In his memoirs, Jahangir has noted that over 36 years he hunted a total 17,167 big and small game.

Around the time of his death in 1627, just when the East India Company began gaining their foothold in India, wildlife started loosing theirs. The imperialists disregarded all provincial laws set aside to protect wildlife in India. *Shikars* were organized to denote chivalry, bravery, and a certain status symbol among the British.

Some Maharajas and Nawabs maintained an entire corp of shikaris mainly comprised of local tribal’s with an intricate knowledge of the jungle and its inhabitants. A Mir-Shikari or expert hunter would often head this group. An invitation by the provincial ruler to hunt game within their district was seen



as a bonhomous gesture towards the colonists. This misplaced camaraderie between the colonist and the princes resulted in irreversible damage to India's wildlife.

It was then that several animals were pushed towards their last existing refuge examples of which are the sole surviving Asiatic lions population in Gujarat and the one horned rhinoceros in North-East India. It was under these circumstances that India's first National Park, the Hailey National Park (Jim Corbett National Park) was founded in 1936, in no small measure due to the efforts of hunter turned conservationist and naturalist-Jim Corbett.

Post-independence, the first genuine need to protect wildlife in India was realized. In 1952, the Indian Wildlife Board was constituted to centralize all the rules and regulations pertinent to wildlife conservation in India, which until then deferred from state to state. In 1956, this Board passed a landmark decree that accorded all existing Game Parks the status of a Sanctuary or a National Park.

The 1960's expose by Rakesh Sankhla and Razia for the Indian Express detailed the appalling abyss that wildlife conservation had sunk to when they exposed the trade in several hundred skins of endangered species. The need for wildlife conservation now made the shift from the government and policy makers to the general public at large.

The 1970's bought with it two landmark events that were to influence wildlife conservation in India for decades to come. The first was the

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introduction of the stringent Wildlife Protection Act in 1972 and the second being Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, doing everything within her power to protect wildlife in India.

Project Tiger, the largest wildlife conservation project of its time, was initiated in 1973 under her watch.

In the 1980's, the Chipko Andolan movement by the Bishnois gained worldwide recognition for its simplicity and non-violent approach. What the Bishnois did was to surround their trees, literally hugging them, in order to protect them from anyone who came to fell them. Until today, they are involved in actively protecting blackbucks and other wildlife found in their region.

The last two decades since the 1990's have witnessed the application of technology and science to conservation on a large scale. Wildlife forensics, telemetry, remote sensing techniques and geographic information systems were all integrated into the practice of wildlife conservation in India.

Conservation has evolved from an informal practice providing arbitrary protection to wildlife to its present avatar as a practiced art and science. If ever the need to evolve and expand it beyond its present realms was of prime necessity-then the time is now.

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