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Interview with Dr. H.S. Pabla, PCCF (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden, Madhya Pradesh



Last Wilderness met with Dr. HS Pabla in Bhopal, where he put forth his views on the state of wildlife conservation in India, as it stands today.

What is India's stand on conservation?

India is very committed to conservation. We're doing quite a lot to ensure that our natural ecosystems, forests and wildlife survive so that we may pass on as good an ecosystem to younger generations as possible. No two opinions about that.

In India, what is conservation's biggest support? Which sector can best mobilize support for conservation?

We're all in it. You can't depend on one sector alone. First of all, people who have to live with wild animals are the ones that will have to bear any disadvantages that may be conferred by them. Secondly, society in general should be ready to invest resources into it-the decision makers, financial institutions, intellectuals etc. You can't depend only on government policies or NGOs. Everybody must pool in his or her strengths. Only then we will be able to save our wildlife.

How would you explain to the common man, what it takes to save wildlife? Or what conservation really means?

I'd categorise the common man into 'urban' and 'rural'. Urban people have the emotions and sentiments. They think everything needs to be preserved. But it is the man on the ground that understands what conservation actually entails. Conservation is not money. Conservation is not men. Conservation is actually making sacrifices. People living in and around forests are now making these sacrifices. So we have to understand the logistics of conservation, in terms of what it means to these people, the kind of suffering it imposes on them and how those sufferings can be mitigated or compensated by society from our side.

So in this context, how would you explain this to the urban populace?

Conservation goes beyond giving speeches on radio or television, saying that the tiger should survive. It depends on how we interact with natural ecosystems. The earth is divided between human beings and other species. The problem lies in the increase in human population and prosperity, which has led to an increase in our demand for natural resources. So, ultimately we have taken away land and forests, which are the domains of other species. Whether we make big cities, or create infrastructure in the form of roads, dams, railways, industries, all that land has to be snatched from wild animals. Even to switch on a bulb anywhere, some trees have to be felled! To produce food or electricity through coal-fired power plants or through hydro-power,

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trees have to be cut, areas/habitats have to be snatched away from wild animals. Only then you meet these needs.

How can we strike a balance between India's economic growth and saving forests?

We have to understand that we may not totally eliminate the problem but our journey towards that balance has to continue. Having said that, I think there are two ways of looking at it. First of all, whatever developments are deemed inevitable by human needs should be carried out with sensitivity towards conservation. All projects should investigate what kind of environmental impact they are going to have and how those impacts are going to be mitigated.

Secondly, I think the government has to enforce regulations that disallow future developments, which will overtly harm the environment. In the process, we may all have to sacrifice certain comforts. While we can't cut down the human population, we can certainly regulate the resources we all consume. But it has to be at all levels-at individual, at society and at the government level as well.

What are the threats faced by wildlife in India?

Human beings form the one single threat.

Everything permeates out of that?

We are too many in number and as I said, we're becoming rather prosperous quite fast. So our need for snatching habitats from wildlife is growing. This leads to the other clichés like loss and degradation of wildlife habitats and actual poaching, all of which are direct causes. The indirect causes are far more numerous because whatever we do ultimately affects life on this earth.

How do you think these threats can be dealt with? In terms of the law?

Wildlife and forests are items of mass consumption. By their very nature, those animals are in competition with us; we are in competition with them. Therefore, the law will not be enough. We have to come up with solutions that cater to the needs of people, who traditionally and culturally have been dependant on these animals. So long as there were no laws, they were able to get whatever they wanted from the forest. But when we thought that law was the solution to stop the depletion of natural resources, their traditional occupations became illegal! Earlier we called it hunting, now we call it poaching.

If wild animals are to survive, they must be made an asset. Our law and policy mindset should probably look at the African way of preserving natural resources through sustainable utilization by developing systems in which we continue to have stakes in conservation. Not in abstract terms of ecological balance but through direct gains for the people. Maybe it should be done as a business entity where people invest in conservation or own wild animals. For this, our law and policy and mindsets have to take a total U-turn. We have to find a way wherein people start seeing the benefits of having wildlife...

And these are tangible benefits?

Absolutely! Thoughts of clean air and water and ecological balance make sense to urban people, not to the rural people, who are actually more important. If they don't want wild animals, you can do whatever you want, it's not going to make any difference.

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Human beings are powerful and resourceful; whatever comes in their way can be easily destroyed. So we should ensure that wildlife is viewed as an asset where people see the benefits of having more tigers and chital in terms of development and jobs.

How successful has the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, been in protecting our forests and wildlife? Can it serve as an effective tool vis-à-vis active wildlife management?

I think so far it has been very successful. But now is the time to change. There are two ways of looking at it. We thought of this law in 1972, when there was a huge decline in the wilderness. It was suitable to have a consolidated, pan-India law. At that time, the law was not restrictive. It allowed sustainable utilization; defined the violations of the law and the penalties they would attract. Now, it only prescribes penalties. Allowing people to use or own wild animals is believed to be harmful. So society has no stakes in having more wildlife right now. Now animals mean problems- whether tigers, elephants or rhinos, they're going to kill you or destroy your crops and domestic animals.

Coming to the second point, in the '70s, we were able to dedicate areas purely for conservation. Most of the national parks and sanctuaries were notified then. But now our gains are fizzling out. Human numbers have grown and so wildlife is increasingly becoming a problem. We have a sanctuary about 40 km from here (Bhopal) from where tigers are spilling out into the city, which is a problem that has to be dealt with! So we have to have a law which helps us decide where human beings and wild animals can live together and where human beings have no business to be and vice versa. All those shades of grey should be covered and we should have a very diversified law.

What is the status of wildlife habitats in India? How well are we faring in terms of wildlife management?

About 4.6 % of our total land area is termed 'protected area' (PA) consisting of sanctuaries, national parks etc. But many of them are only on paper. There is no real protection there because of inadequate resources. However, in some high-profile areas like tiger reserves, wild animal populations have increased significantly in the last 30 years. But all species may not have benefitted from these improvements because the animals also interact with each other. Some eat others and some compete with others. So you have to have graded management interventions depending on the needs of different species. In our generalized conservation systems, the common species prosper and the rarer species suffer. In Madhya Pradesh, we have lost several species like gaur from Bandhavgarh, blackbuck from Kanha and tigers from Panna. However, we have tried to repair this damage. But we have lots of chital, sambar, nilgai and wild boar. We lost these species because park managers did not or could not intervene to prevent the extinction of these species locally. Now if a park manager has to touch a tiger, he needs half a dozen or more permissions right up to the Central Government to be able to do it. This permission may never come. If it does, it may take months or years, by which time he will already be in the dock. Depending on the needs of the species, the park management should have the authority to be allowed to do what they think is right; they should be allowed to make mistakes and learn from them.

As I said earlier, wildlife management is influenced by one single law that governs the entire country. This is not a great idea as we are applying the same methods to different situations. For example, some species are vermin in one state but rare in other states. Like blackbuck which is a crop pest in some parts of MP. We get hundreds of complaints every year but we cannot kill a blackbuck just to protect crops whereas we can kill a tiger if it kills a human being! India's a very diverse country. We need a diversity of approaches and flexibility in our legal

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systems and policies.

Would culling be a method of reducing the problem?

Culling happens when you have overpopulation. We need a Resource Management System based on 'sustainable utilization', which is a standard word all over. It involves producing and harvesting. Utilization is like your bank account. You have to have a system in which the resource continues to be intact and you keep using the surplus -in hunting terms, it used to be called 'exploitable surplus'. Utilization systems are not dependant on actual overpopulation. IUCN is a champion of it. They say sustainable utilization plays a strong role in conservation especially in situations where animals like wild boar, nilgai and blackbuck are a huge problem. I don't mean that these animals should be eaten; but maybe they can be harvested and sold.

How can the problem of habitat fragmentation be dealt with? In this regard, how plausible and effective are wildlife corridors?

It's a very fanciful idea, especially in a country like India, because of increasing human population and decreasing space. When corridors are created, people will have to be moved out, which will take a very long time and will also be very expensive. We have not been able to create PAs by moving people out so corridors are a long way off. Moreover, corridors are not meant for animals to travel long distances. The purpose is to enable animals at the ends of the corridor to inter-breed with those inside, so you have a high density in the former and low density in the latter. But since corridors are populated by human beings, any animals spilling out of PAs will not have a great chance of survival. Policing tigers at a tremendous cost in PAs so that they go out and get killed is not a great idea. If we want tigers to move from one park to another, let's pick them up and take them there. Safely. But in some cases, there's no alternative to corridors. Like elephants-you can't translocate them on a daily basis. Elephants need large areas to survive. The point is that it's not going to work for every animal. So we have to calibrate the idea of corridors.

Of late, there has been an increase in human-animal conflicts, even inside PAs. What are the reasons for this?

In general, the conflict is going down because animal numbers have gone down. From the data that I compiled, in 1996-97, about 4000 heads of cattle were killed by tigers and leopards. In 2005-06, the number reduced to 600-700 animals. Tigers haven't become vegetarians! Now, annual losses are about 1200 -1500. The situation is perhaps worsened because more livestock are probably coming into areas inhabited by tigers. In such a scenario, conflict is inevitable, especially in a country like India where human beings and wild animals, both of which have high densities, have to live together. But it can be minimized or compensated so that people don't feel as bad after suffering at the hands of wild animals, as they normally would.

How effective a tool is compensation to handle these?

I think it does make a difference. If we don't help people who suffer, they will take whatever steps they can to ensure that they don't have to bear those losses again. The government has to be rational and help them. If a proper system of compensation is in place, it brings in responsibility and accountability. For example, if a cow is killed, and the government knows who the owner is, the carcass will not be poisoned by the owner because otherwise he will be held up and won't get compensation. This system works both ways-our interaction with the sufferers increases and we are able to soften those attitudes. At the same time, compensation may be inadequate as the prices go up and the systems we create are prone to pilferage and



corruption. These are issues that must be tackled.

How?

To me, one fundamental change is required. Animals should be seen as assets. Consider vehicles-while we suffer occasionally from them, we don't abandon them. Likewise, in the case of animals, where there are losses, they should be balanced. If my job is dependant on the presence of animals around me, then I'll happily bear whatever losses are inevitable. Of course, active intervention such as preventing conflict, putting barriers between animals and human presence through fences and moving animals from problem areas into non-problem areas will be required.

Why are these interventions not being put into practice?

Only society can answer that question! I don't know why people don't understand. The problem is that conservation is supported by people whose jobs depend on it. My job depends on conservation so I'm worried! People in TV industry want subjects to discuss so they talk of conservation. People who make wildlife films and write books will be out of business. We were severely criticized when we lost tigers in Panna. Now people are still unhappy with us because we have tigers in Panna! They don't have anything to crib about and are looking for opportunities to make their presence felt. Those people that benefit from conservation, or don't lose anything from successful conservation are ones that support it. Whereas those who lose from conservation like the people on the ground hate tigers, elephants and leopards. Only when conservation is driven by pure economics, where people on the ground can benefit from wildlife, will it be able to garner their support.

Is fencing a viable option given the situation in today's PAs?

I think that without fencing, we will be frittering the gains of protection provided to animals in PAs and will be inviting conflict. Fencing is an agreed means of ensuring continued protection where people and wildlife have to live together. The only continent where conservation is successful, despite high human densities is Africa. Most national parks and game reserves over there are fenced and any animal that strays out is picked up and brought back. They know that if there are open boundaries, poachers can always get in and wild animals can always get out. Not only will wildlife be killed, but will also cause problems. In India initially, we thought conservation would be a set of PAs connected by corridors. PAs will be the 'natal territories', which will produce wild animals that will spill over into the surrounding areas and everywhere we will have wild animals. This has not happened. No areas outside PAs have wild animals. I think it will be a great idea if we can have sufficiently large PAs (that are) duly fenced, containing actively managed populations of various species of different ages and sexes. When the need arises, those animals may then be transferred from one PA to another, safely. Instead of having those animals travel from one place to another to get killed in the process. Outside these, we can have larger patches of land where human beings and animals will have to live with each other. There we have to have some kind of graded approach where people can suffer a little bit and benefit from wild animals in a limited way.

Can buffer zones play a role in today's context?

If you don't have fences, you have to have buffer zones. Calling an area a buffer zone is not going to be enough. It requires financial and human inputs, which we don't have. We will need much more money to manage buffer zones than we are spending on the PA itself. For example, the buffer zone in Kanha will have about 200 villages. These people will live in harmony with

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wild animals only if they don't suffer any losses from them. So we have to fence their croplands. They will have to be given alternate sources of livelihood so that they don't exploit forests. Their dairy practices must be improved to prevent overgrazing. It's a very complex process. No single department has the capability to make a difference. If we have buffer zones, where people can live with wild animals, suffer losses and be happy, it's a great idea. But will it work?

What is your view on private reserves in India? Do we have the resources in terms of capital and land?

There can be different versions of private participation in conservation; there's no need to borrow any model lock, stock and barrel. As I said, private game reserves will make sense only if we change our laws to use them as commodities on which people can depend. Since land will certainly be in short supply, people may have to form partnerships with the government-an MoU or law- wherein they'll have to manage government land to produce certain results. People can also buy private lands or non-productive areas, form cooperatives, which can be used as wildlife habitats, In Nepal for instance, villages close to the national park have their own tourism programme. People have waterholes and machans on their croplands where tourists can watch rhinos for a fee. Interested houses/entities can always buy private land and stock it with animals bought from the government. Thousands of animals die every year in PAs because of congestion, stress and overpredation. We can sell those animals to private game parks etc.

How can tourism and conservation be made to work for each other?

The general perception is that tourism is very bad and so we restrict tourism only to very small areas and invariably, those areas are the most vulnerable. We let people go into critical areas with very high density of wild animals, which leaves a high impact. But, wildlife tourism benefits conservation in several ways. Tourism should be a two-way process-dispersed and diversified. We should harness the benefits of tourism and extend them to as large an area as possible. For example, limits must be imposed on the activities and the number of people that are allowed to enter.

How are we looking to diversify tourism activities?

I believe that tourism can be a major driver of conservation even outside PAs. Tourism will be successful when forests and wildlife thrive and local people can benefit from these activities. One idea is to divide forests into 'recreation blocks.' Agents will be appointed to run eco-tourism programmes in those areas on the government's behalf. No construction and/or infrastructure will be permitted within these forests. Tourists will only be permitted to visit these forests for a short duration. These agents have the option of offering incentives to local people to change their lifestyles and their practices so that the forest improves. Maybe, if our law changes, they will be able to buy wild animals from some national parks and stock that area. The idea is to enable ecotourism to serve as one more tool in conservation.

Why do we have so many vacancies in the Forest Department, especially at the ground level? How can we deal with this?

These policies were made 20-30 years ago when there was a general sentiment in India to limit the number of government employees. Therefore, people weren't recruited towards the end of the 1980s and through the '90s. Those that were recruited before this are retiring now, which will leave many more posts vacant. But now the Madhya Pradesh government has permitted us to recruit about 1500 forest guards after 5-6 years. By the time we recruit them, another 500

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posts will become vacant. The governments should realise that ad hoc policies are very harmful. Recruitment cannot be done in fits and starts. We should have a continuous system and should know how many people we need and then assess the need to continue to recruit them.

Is the IFS a preferred career choice among today's youth? How can the IFS attract talent?

Well, it should be! It's a reasonably high profile, well-paid job with great opportunities to live a diversified life. Yes, you live in small places that may be lacking in facilities but that isn't a deterrent. I think the only problem is that other all-India services seem more privileged than Forest Services. IAS, for example, has an advantage in the number of years and the influence you have on policy as well as the work of other agencies. If this is rationalised and if IFS is able to contribute more to policy and related issues as well, then more people will surely join. If forest officers contribute more to that, have more say in that, attraction will go up.

Given that we haven't been able to effectively save our tigers, why are we considering reintroducing animals like the cheetah?

Its not an 'either/or situation'. The cheetah has always been a part of our heritage. We're just trying to revive that heritage. Nothing else. Why are we protecting tigers? Because tigers symbolize something and we think that by saving the tiger we can save a lot of our resources. It's the same with the cheetah! It is as iconic as the tiger. If the tiger can be useful for conservation, so can the cheetah.

*-Kavya Chimalgi
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