

BOOK REVIEW

Conservation Dilemmas in Contemporary India

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Nature Conservation in the New Economy

People, Wildlife and the Law in India

Edited by

**Ghazala Shahabuddin
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Nature Conservation in the New Economy presents a thoughtful analysis of how a steady reorientation in environmental laws following the liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s has impacted conservation policies in India. The editors, Ghazala Shahabuddin and K. Sivaramakrishnan, emphasize that this shift towards neo-liberal legal thinking has mostly served commercial interests and excludes a range of local stakeholders. The case studies in the volume provide deep insights into how legal loopholes, implementation challenges, and the unintended consequences of even well-intentioned efforts have worked

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to whittle down genuine conservation outcomes. Besides emphasizing multidisciplinary approaches, the collection of nine richly detailed essays addresses four main themes: the study of wildlife laws and policies; regulatory environments; institutions and social change; and the role of science in implementing conservation agendas.

The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 (WPA) is often heralded as India's key legislation that offers legal protection for wild animals. The opening chapter by Ambika Aiyadurai, however, raises several questions about the WPA's efficacy—particularly its impact on local communities. Through a case study of the Mishmi tribe in Arunachal Pradesh, Aiyadurai points out how a simple reading of the WPA could end up casting the Mishmi as a potential threat to wildlife since they are dependent on hunting for their livelihood. The WPA, consequently, is a source of tension rather than a tool for conservation. As a way out, Aiyadurai proposes that the effectiveness of wildlife protection laws will depend on how sensitive conservation agendas are to the world-views of communities inhabiting the environments in question.

State-controlled forest conservation is a recurring theme in several of the essays. M. Vikas challenges the purported success of forest management laws such as the National Forest Policy of 1998 by examining how the strong belief in separating humans from nature actually results in emphasizing the aesthetics of afforestation rather than taking the science that is required for achieving good conservation outcomes seriously. The essay highlights how the establishment of the Delhi Ridge as a protected area caused the usurping of the commons that were previously used by pastoral communities. While Vikas laments the exclusion of local communities and the marginalization of their knowledge of forest management, Rinki Sarkar's detailed study of Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) raises doubts about the role of communities in shaping desired conservation practices. Sarkar's research suggests that when given increased access to markets, communities often tend to stress the delicate ecosystem of Chilgoza pines (*pinusgerardiana*) and bird habitats. For Sarkar, a possible strategy to mitigate the situation is “a citizen science kind of participatory framework”(213) that could aim to blend indigenous and scientific knowledge for better policymaking.

Rajkamal Goswami and T. Ganesh, in their essay on community forests in Meghalaya, further complicate the role of the Indian state in forest protection in the post-liberalization phase. By comparing factors like population density and the rise in plantation agriculture, the authors deftly illustrate how community forests experienced more intense degradation than reserved forests in the region between 1994 and 2014, as communities

opened up forests for industrial use. To address this dilemma, Meghna Agarwala *et al.* flag the need to develop ecosystem services frameworks for measuring forest resilience in their essay. They believe such valuation exercises, which draw upon the differing perceptions about species value by stakeholders, could offer ways for local communities to evolve conservation priorities while meeting commercial interests.

The politics of conservation is brought out by Ghazala Shahabuddin in her essay, which explores the various twists and turns that dogged the attempted reintroduction of the Asiatic cheetah in India. By discussing how the reintroduction could have had an adverse impact on the ecosystem and local communities, her essay underscores the dynamic and fragile nature of the ecosystem. While largely political calculations prevented the cheetah's reintroduction, the essay sheds a searching light on how policymaking often prioritizes the needs of a few with little consideration for informed conservation.

Neha Sinha's essay focuses on the complex linkages between water resources and urban ecosystems. It points out that biologically diverse ecosystems have in fact emerged from human-created water bodies such as stormwater drains and swamps in cities across the states of Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. While wetland ecologies provide several critical ecosystem services, in urban areas they continue to remain excluded from wetland rules and regulations and are often encroached upon. Like the earlier essay by Vikas, Sinha too asserts that conservation policies need to go beyond treating these urban ecologies as merely aesthetic contributions and instead should acknowledge them for the important services they provide as wetland ecosystems.

Kanchi Kohli and Manju Menon in their essay attempt to address one of central questions raised throughout the book: is meaningful conservation impossible? The authors provide a detailed survey of coastal management plans in Karnataka and Gujarat to illustrate how the Coastal Regulation Zone Notifications (CRZ) are systematically failing in India. While the CRZ notifications of 2011 emphasized the need for participatory conservation, Kohli and Menon argue that developmental agendas seem to win invariably at the cost of the environment.

In the final essay, Archana Bali and Kartik Shanker weigh the effectiveness of certain kinds of conservation policies within coffee plantations located in the Western Ghats. The authors discuss changes in hunting practices and the felling of trees brought about by the WPA and Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act in particular. However, they point out that market fluctuations have had a much greater impact on tree cover and the hunting pursuits of

local populations than regulations. They contend that while the lack of infrastructure available for officials can explain why some of the policy implementation is weak, realizing meaningful conservation outcomes greatly depends on how different social groups relate to their ecological endowments.

By thus exploring the various political and economic fault-lines that run through different conservation policies in India, this compelling collection of essays highlights the need to go beyond merely scrutinizing legislations. Rather, understanding how policymakers interact with practitioners, researchers, and various local stakeholders is key to designing meaningful and effective conservation on the ground. *Nature Conversation in the New Economy* is an important contribution to a field that continues to cry out for more multidisciplinary dialogue.