



The High Cost of Man-Animal Conflict

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(The editorial is based on the article "The high cost of man-animal conflict" which appeared in The Hindu on 13th September 2018. It analyses the problem of man-animal conflict across the country.)

Conflict between people and wild animals is one of the main threats to the continued survival of many species in different parts of the world, and is also a significant threat to local human populations.

In recent years, India has seen widespread conflict between wildlife and human beings. A large survey of 5,200 families around 11 protected areas across the country found that 71% of households reported crop losses due to raids by wildlife. These statistics are only the tip of the iceberg. The vast majority of crop losses and damage caused to wildlife are not reported at all. Such conflicts affect not only local populations but also have increase environmental impacts on ecosystem equilibrium and biodiversity conservation.

Some examples of human-wildlife conflict include:

- Predation on livestock or domestic animals by wild animals
- Ungulate damage to crops and fences
- Wildlife strewing about residential garbage
- Damage caused by squirrels or bats to fruit and fruit trees
- Bird nesting in undesirable residential locations
- Vehicle/wildlife collisions, aircraft/bird collisions

Reasons

- Encroachment of human beings in wildlife habitats for residential purposes and the expansion of cities, as well as allowing livestock to graze in forest areas is one of the principal reasons why wildlife has to struggle for its survival.
- Accidents are also being caused due to expanding road networks and increase in vehicular traffic. Some of the road networks even pass through protected areas, hence creating danger zones for wild animals.
- Land use transformations such as change from protected forest patches to agricultural and horticultural lands and monoculture plantations are further destroying the habitats of wildlife.
- Unscientific structures and practices of forest management in the country are another central contributor to man-animal conflicts.
- Moreover, tourism without proper guidelines disturbs animal habitats and further leads to man-animal conflict.
- Infestation of wildlife habitat by invasive exotic weeds like *lantana*, *eupatorium* and *parthenium* have resulted in decreased availability of edible grasses for wild herbivores. As a result, herbivores come out of forest areas and cause depredation of agricultural crops on the fringes.

- Decreased prey base caused by poaching of herbivores has also resulted in carnivores moving out of forests in search of prey and to indulge in cattle lifting.

Effects

- Man animal conflict leads to crop damage, animal deaths, loss of human life, injuries to people, injuries to wildlife, livestock depredation, and low compensation for such incidents further leads to degraded living standards of the affected population.
- The outcome of this conflict is very severe and it not only results in the loss of crops to farmers but also in the decline of wildlife populations.

Way Forward

- Relocation of human settlements should be done, which will alter the ecological setting in favour of wild animals, and thus prevent conflict.
- Ecocentric tourism must be promoted so that the unique habitats of animals do not get disturbed or polluted.
- It is the duty of the Ministry of Environment & Forest to provide assistance to State Governments for improvement of habitats to augment food and water availability, and to minimize animal movement.
- Training programmes should be conducted to address the problems of human-wildlife conflict. Awareness programmes should be conducted to sensitize the people about the Do's and Don'ts to minimize conflicts.
- Encouraging and supporting involvement of research and academic institutions, and leading voluntary organizations having expertise in managing human-wildlife conflict situations.
- Maintaining and managing the national parks and wildlife sanctuaries in a proper manner to minimise man-animal conflicts.
- Poaching of wild animals should be stopped so, that the number of wild animals can stabilize at its carrying capacity allowing it to reach equilibrium in the ecosystem. Thus, equilibrium in the numbers of prey and predators in the forest ecosystem would be maintained.
- Wildlife habitat fragmentation should not be done in the name of developmental projects.
- Constructing solar powered fencing, protection walls, using natural fencing (eg. bee barriers) will also help in minimising conflict between human and wildlife.
- Using GPS tracking collars and GIS mapping software, researchers can identify hot spots where human-wildlife conflict is likely to occur. And such data can also help in forming policies.
- Prompt delivery of compensatory assistance for the victims of conflicts may help mitigate local hostility towards animals to some extent.
- Environmental justice could be achieved only if we drift away from principles like *sustainable development and polluter pays principles*, as these principles are based on a strong bias towards interests of human beings rather than environmental concerns. When choosing between development and environment, the tilt should always be towards saving the environment.

Innovative practices around the world to minimise man-animal conflicts:

- To keep elephants at a safe distance from their farms and homes, some African villagers have turned to two unlikely, all-natural solutions: bees and hot peppers. Elephants dislike the chemical capsaicin found in chili peppers, prompting farmers in Tanzania to smother their fences with a mixture of oil and chili peppers.

- Villagers in India have had recent success preventing tiger attacks by exploiting their knowledge of big cat behavior. Tigers stalk their prey and attack from behind, so forest workers began wearing masks on the back of their heads to prevent sneak attacks.
- Solar powered electric fences keep crop-raiding elephants out of fields in Africa, while wildlife managers in Alaska use tasers to deter moose and bears that have become habituated to humans presence.
- Imagine getting a text message from a wild elephant. In the Western Ghats of India, a new conservation initiative has utilized texting as an early warning system to prevent human-elephant encounters. Elephant tracking collars embedded with SMS chips automatically text nearby residents, warning them of recent elephant movements.
- In Canada, they constructed wildlife corridors, areas of preserved native habitat in human dominated regions, providing wildlife with a safe pathway as they travel between one to another.

