

Protecting India's Protected Areas

An official committee's recipe for forest management will, if implemented, have a disastrous impact.

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The Forest Rights Act of 2006 (FRA) continues to be a matter of intense controversy. Some insist that forest dwellers should be allowed to exploit all forests, including Protected Areas (PAs) such as national parks and sanctuaries, for their livelihood. Others argue, on the basis of empirical and scientific evidence, that extractive exploitation within our small PAs cannot be ecologically sustainable at current human population densities, especially when the forests are linked to national and international markets. In this context, the recipe of the N C Saxena Committee on implementation of the FRA for redressing historic injustices to forest dwellers will precipitate an ecological crisis.

Of deep concern are two drastic measures recommended by the Saxena Committee. First, it proposes dismantling state protection of forests and progressively handing over management to gram sabhas. Second, it favours adoption of market-friendly policies and deregulation of non-timber forest products (NTFP) to facilitate their trade. The majority opinion of the committee appears to be that local stakeholders will have the innate wisdom and restraint to "sustainably" exploit forest products while ensuring the preservation of natural ecosystems and endangered species.

India's sanctuaries are the last refuges where endangered species have some degree of security. Rampant, market-driven exploitation of forest products in these ecologically sensitive hotspots of biodiversity can adversely affect the delicate balance of nature. For instance, a tiger that requires 3,000 kg of live prey a year needs a healthy herbivore population for its survival, which is only possible in a healthy habitat. What level of human extraction of forest products is "sustainable" for these species? Scientific studies have shown that most species of large wildlife decline and disappear when they have to compete with high-density human populations. In India, where forests have shrunk drastically and turned into tiny islands amidst a sea of humanity, it would be suicidal to dismantle state protection of our PAs.

It is well-documented that forests in India's north-east, largely under the control of autonomous tribal councils, are suffering from severe faunal impoverishment or the "empty forest syndrome". As starkly revealed in the documentary film *The Wild Meat Trail* by

Rita Banerjee and Shilpi Sharma, many tribal communities with enough cultivable land and livestock to meet their nutritional needs, are relentlessly exterminating wildlife from their community forests by shooting, trapping, and snaring every creature, from the smallest to the largest, for cash. The majority of this illegal wild meat is sold in local markets that cater to consumers from neighbouring towns and villages. In contrast, many wildlife reserves across the country, where the protectionist paradigm has been in place since the 1970s, such as Corbett, Kanha, Kaziranga and Bandipur, support some of the highest wildlife densities in the world. This does not mean all is well with the system of forest management in India. The tiger extinctions in Sariska and Panna, and many other failures, leave us in no doubt that forest governance is in dire need of sweeping reforms and a change in authoritarian mindsets. But the remedies proposed by the Saxena Committee may end up being worse than the maladies it is ostensibly setting out to cure.

Today there are about 600 PAs in India that together constitute just around 3-4% of our total land area. Granting land and community rights therein to growing populations of forest dwellers engaged in raising crops and livestock and commercial collection of forest products for insatiable markets, is a retrograde step. It is a matter of record that since independence, vast areas of wildlife-rich grasslands and wooded areas under the control of local communities have been decimated. While the consequences of mining and dams in forested landscapes are clearly visible, the insidious destruction caused by millions of people extracting forest products remains largely unseen. It is therefore imperative that we insulate at least the 3-4% of India comprising PAs from all incompatible and extractive uses, while allowing scientifically monitored multiple use of other categories of forests. Obviously this must go hand in hand with redressing past injustices to forest dwellers through policies that will enable them to improve their own lives and those of their children. What forest dwellers require is not a marginal improvement of their status quo but a set of proactive solutions that will provide real emancipation, such as fair resettlement outside PAs, education, and new livelihood options that can get them out of their dependence on forests.