

Opinion : Only the Truth must Prevail

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Replace the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA), 1972, the Indian Forest Act (IFA), 1927 and the Forest (Tribal rights) Bill, 2005 with an integrated legislation

The truth is that after frequent amendments, the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act WPA is today utterly confused and directionless and has become an un-implementable embarrassment. Even in 1972 it was a desperate piece of legislation for crisis management, and, now, thirty years hence the nation must look beyond its increasingly restrictive provisions. The Indian Forest Act IFA of 1927 vintage is in a state of senility and no one seems to even remember that it has continued on the statute books for 78 long years as if the forestry establishment or the forestry science in this country has been all along a static entity. The currently pending Forest (Tribal rights) Bill is a wellintentioned but ill-conceived measure as it seeks to treat simplistically a highly complex situation and hence is best allowed to abort.

What is needed is a Renewable Natural Resource (Conservation) Act, which incorporates the good parts of all the three above and is futuristic in its vision and application. It should not suffer either from the siege-mentality of the WPA which revels in prohibition of all sorts or the free for all mandate of the tribal bill. The nation needs a legislation that has gone through the rigour of a good working draft followed by public hearings, expert debates and active discussion in parliament, all with a pre-agreed time frame, before finally taking a healthy birth.

Focus on the whole and not just the parts The truth is that the wildlife protected areas (PAs) especially few national parks and species like tiger and elephants have taken on 'holy cow' sanctity and all consuming attention, as if the rest of the country's wilderness and wildlife was by default, dispensable. Nothing can be more self-defeating than such an attitude. If allowed to persist it would turn all such PAs into inland 'Islands' with no longterm conservation future for them or the wildlife therein, no matter how large may be the current number of 'pretty' animals there.

A forest ecosystem must be seen and managed as a whole, first charge on which is the ecosystem services like water recycling, carbon sink, soil conservation, medicinals and other non-wood products. The forest as a whole, in form of natural landscapes would of course provide 'natal' and 'dispersal' areas for the wildlife to thrive there in perpetuity. Similar attention is also required on all non - forest wilderness and wildlife specially the vast coastal belts, deserts and the trans-Himalayan region with their unique and thriving wildlife.

Focus on trends and not numbers The truth is that there never was any need nor it was ever feasible to count wild animals the way we do the humans. After all, wild animals don't need categorization into BPL (below poverty line) or otherwise. What were and are needed, are good and easily derived indices to establish population trends. For it alone is useful and enough to determine if good populations of

species under monitoring are there to reproduce as well as to be seen frequently in all age and sex classes, by experts as well as by the tourists in a vibrant natural ecosystem.

Focus on frontlines and topline The truth is that unless forest protection frontlines (forest guards and rangers) are 'enabled' and illegal harvest frontlines in form of vocational - hunters (Pardhi, Baheliya, Kanjar, Badia, Nari korva etc) and spoilt rich brats (young and old) turned pleasure-hunters, in metropolises (Delhi, Bhopal, Dehradun, Mumbai, Bangalore etc) are rehabilitated (vocational hunters) or 'disabled' (rich brats), the destruction of nation's wildlife wouldn't stop. The alleged poaching of blackbuck by the Nawab of Pataudi and his cohort not very far away from the national capital is a rude reminder of the ground situation as it prevails in most parts of the country.

The truth is that the top lines either in states or in the centre with few notable exceptions come to occupy their positions by virtue of seniority with little regard for suitability or competence. Now that the Hon. Prime Minister has put into place a revised system of assessments for bureaucrats it is hoped that the mediocre (as there are in all walks of life) or unsuitable would not manage to occupy positions of import and mess up things.

Focus on locals The truth is that unless the local people develop a vested interest on the long term sustenance of wilderness areas lying in their neighborhoods no amount of policing would work. Such a situation would emerge only once the locals start benefiting in real and significant terms from ecotourism revenues, ecodevelopmental initiatives as well as fair and equitable access to bio resource like small timber, medicinals, fodder, thatch and the like. The 'developmental' projects, which impinge on forest resources, like multipurpose hydro-electric dams, highways, coal mining etc must be first made to meet the local people's needs of power and irrigation and contribute to the 'ecodevelopment funds' set up for the explicit welfare of the locals. It is only an assured security of local livelihoods which would ensure security of wildlife and wilderness areas in the country.

Focus on institutions The truth is that the majority of forestry research and training institutions in the country have become dysfunctional. The national institutions that subsist on tax payer's money must be made fully accountable and productive under all circumstances or else laid to rest as unviable white elephants.

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