

Monkey and the Lion

Two hundred and fifty (250) urban rhesus monkeys from Delhi have been released during the month of June 2004 into the wild environs of Kuno Sanctuary in North West MP.

The news has disturbed the conservationists no end. One needs to delve deeper into its origins. Kuno Sanctuary was identified in early 1990s following a rigorous scientific enquiry led by the scientists at the Dehradun based Wildlife Institute of India, as the second home for the endangered Asiatic Lion. The Government of India supported a decade long project investing crores of rupees and the MP Forest Department made an outstanding effort to 'prepare' the Kuno habitat for the Lion. This preparation has seen relocation of around 10,000 people residing in 19 villages inside the sanctuary to sites outside. An effort to ameliorate the habitat and build up the herbivore prey base for the lions in the form of Nilgai, Chital, and Wild Boar has borne slow but steady results.

In its orders on a petition the Supreme Court directed the Central Government to have the captured Delhi monkeys released in the forests in MP. In consequence, 250 such monkeys have been released in the so called 'vacant' habitat in Kuno Sanctuary in the month of June 2004. Prima facie the manner of this transfer is against all conservation norms, the principles of animal welfare and the well settled and standardized practices of reintroduction of a wild species into the wilds, not to mention the irreparable harm that it would have done to Kuno Sanctuary in its claim to be the possible second home to the lions.

Wild animals that come to inhabit urban sites develop such traits and strategies that on one hand make them adapt to urban environments, on the other result in considerable decrease in their wild instincts and skills for survival in the wilderness. Non-human primates like monkeys and langurs living in urban settings tend to develop a dependence on human environments and often suffer from diseases like tuberculosis. They scavenge at the festering urban garbage bins and in the process get exposed to infections besides other forms of urban food poisoning, which debilitate them. Their free ranging existence within the sanctuary and nearby forests is bound to spread such infections to wild animals. In the worst case scenario they would tend to look for and maraud nearby human settlements. If the latter were to happen it would be a classic case of transferring a problem from a vocal urban conglomerate to a voiceless rural settlement.

It is to guard against such less than thoughtful happenings that wildlife experts specially the Reintroduction Specialist Group of IUCN have devised, after considerable scientific debate and deliberations, a set of "do's and don'ts" and protocols for reintroductions to ensure the long term survival of the released animals. These IUCN guidelines also provide for the safety of habitat of release and of the other animals living there from spread of diseases and disturbance to the latter's group dynamics. Wild animals whenever they are moved around require detailed individual health investigation and only those that have been tested to be healthy and free from any disease are selected for release. At the new site they also need a good period of acclimatization before free release. In short, such reintroductions are not easy and routine. Even Zoos around

Opinion

the globe despite their best intentions and care desist from attempting such releases.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 as amended in 2002 has provided for the establishment of the National Board for Wildlife and the State Board of Wildlife in each state to deal with policy and emerging issues on wildlife matters. Such a reintroduction is a major wildlife management activity and would clearly require a referral and advice from such a body.

The month of June is the worst possible month for any such reintroduction, more so into an arid habitat like Kuno Sanctuary as there is little water and food there in the form of leaves, fruits and berries for the monkeys.

In the present instance, a large group of monkeys from Delhi were apparently in a hurried fashion transported and released into the sanctuary without a mandatory referral to the State Wildlife Board, without any thorough medical check up and in a month of the year when such an action is best avoided. The fate of such monkeys in the wilds of the Kuno Sanctuary could be worse than in the lanes and by-lanes of Delhi. Clearly the powers that be have failed to observe the dictats of good science and animal welfare. The released monkeys even if they manage to survive the warmest month of the year without food and water in Kuno could soon become the nemesis of the villagers who are still to fully come to grips with a translocation they agreed to suffer in the interest of receiving lions from Gir and not indeed the monkeys from Delhi.

This article is not to suggest that the man-animal conflict scenario is unreal or the state should not be taking measures to resolve the problem. On the contrary it seeks to underline the increasing problem of man-animal conflict be it in Delhi with monkeys or Mumbai with straying leopards or Chattisgarh with wild elephants. The Kuno misadventure only highlights the poor state of the State's preparedness to deal with such issues. Resultantly ad-hocism prevails. While the state seeks to wish away the problem, the media treats it with little more than an event and the NGOs choose to mull over the merits and the demerits of taking the bull by the horn. Above all, the highest court in the land gets misadvised into directing actions that might create more problems than solving the existing one.

It is time that a national task force consisting of eminent conservationists was made to go into the whole question of human-animal conflicts leading to actions that balance the requirements of both the animals and the humans. If the findings ordain changing the law or enunciating a national policy on the issue, so be it. But whatever it is, there is little time to lose.

H.S. Panwar & Manoj Mishra

HS Panwar is the founder Director of the Wildlife Institute of India, and the former Director, Project Tiger Government of India and Manoj K Misra is the former Chief Conservator of Forests, Chattisgarh and Former Director, TRAFFIC India / WWF India.