

Man Vs Carnivore. A conflict: Can it be resolved?

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Thane district in Mumbai has been ravaged by the spate of leopard attacks, that has claimed 15 victims. As a result, the people living in the region are virtually terrorized. The number of incidents have come down recently, yet the fear of a surprise attack from the surrounding densely wooded forest prevails. The silent killers have openly resented the encroachment from human beings, resulting in the latter falling a prey to them. The conflict has been age old. Several experts have come and gone, matters discussed in the Mantralaya, as well as in workshops and conferences, yet there seems to be no answer or solutions coming forth.

The fact remains that burgeoning human population, the ever expanding human habitation and industrialization has been the root cause which has led to the protected areas of forests being encroached upon. If one has to look at the issue in its proper perspective, the area belongs to the wild animals, whose very existence is now under threat. As a matter of fact there are illegal colonies constructed in the protected areas which should not have been there in the first place. A proper No objection certificate has to be acquired from the Forest department, without which there cannot be any construction activity in such sensitive areas or even in its vicinity. Reserved and protected areas are also exploited by the owners of domestic cattle for grazing. This provides a tailor made opportunity to the carnivores to kill a domestic cow or a calf effortlessly, since they have to toil much less in search of a herbivore to douse the pangs of hunger. This becomes a regular habit with the cats who then openly plan their attacks on the domestic animals and the interfering human hordes involved in preventing the leopards from achieving their objective leads to the attacks being directed towards them. Acute shortage of herbivores, which forms the important food base of the carnivores in any Sanctuary or National Park more than often leads to attacking the domestic animals. The department must therefore carry out a proper herbivore census every year to gauge the pressure and existence of food species in a protected area. Sanjay Gandhi National Park urgently is in need of this. The department must also strictly ensure that the pens and colonies of the cattle grazers are located at least five kilometers away from the boundary of the protected forest. Actually there should be a complete ban on cattle breeding and location of pens in the vicinity of protected areas restricting movement of the local people there in.

The cats also seem to have improvised on their life styles. Earlier, they use to prefer a solitary life, but now tigers have been observed in the wild, living together in a family group. The need of the hour is to give a serious thought to the facts stated earlier. Acute shortage of food species, and the disturbance caused as a result of freedom given to tourists under the garb of eco-tourism, to roam about freely in sensitive and ecologically fragile areas or protected forests is causing wide spread damage. The sound of the vehicles moving about in the core areas has led to the carnivorous animals showing tremendous change in their behavior, resulting in their fleeing towards the villages on the periphery for the dubious safety. This brings them face to face with the perils of humanization. Annually burning of grass and leaf litter under the tendu tree is also a major cause

for the animals to flee from their areas out of sheer fright, resulting in their encroaching upon human settlement. There is an urgent need to have some serious thinking done on this issue.

Leopards strongly resent encroachment of man on its territory, resulting in their protesting by the only method they know of ie an attack, and it results in the leopard being trapped and caged and condemned to life imprisonment with a stigma of a "potential Maneater" being attached to it. This is now a virtual reality. Trapped innocent leopards or tigers should be released in large protected areas, but then this alone will not be the solution, to the problem. The carrying capacity of the area also need to be taken into consideration. Leopards become sexually active in two or three years after birth. A female gets pregnant and the gestation period ranges from 95 to 105 days and she continues to produce young ones till the age ranging from 12 to twenty. The forest department has to evolve a permanent plan to put an end to this sort of conflict by bringing in strict rules and regulations in place. An electrified fence could be considered along the periphery of the parks, such as the Sanjay Gandhi National Park, which will not harm any human being yet deter an animal from breaking free by giving it a mild shock. It will be a one time expense but result oriented. Tranquilising and fixing a radio collar around the necks of carnivores which show this kind of exuberance in venturing into human habitation, will also help in monitoring the movement of trouble creating cats. This may be an expensive project, but strict conservation efforts, never the less urgently need it. The Sunderban National Park strategy could also be considered for preventing surprise attacks. There the forest department has provided face masks to the staff, to be fixed behind their heads, which conveniently fools a carnivore as if the man has his face turned towards the cats, thereby forcing the cat to abort its attack. Planting of human like dummies with a mild electrical charge can also help, since the cat will hesitate to attack a human being after its nasty experience with the electrified dummy.

Reputed hunters of the bygone era like Mr. Balasaheb Mahajan, who has his farm near Bhiwapur close to a densely wooded forest, has devised novel techniques to deter animals from crossing over into his farm. He sprinkles red "Gulal", the powder we use in the festival of "Holi" along the farm boundary. This red gulal gives the animals the impression of blood lying along its path and the animal backtracks. Similarly, burning of human hair on the outskirts of a village facing the forests also deters the animals from coming anywhere near to the human settlement. In this case the smell of the burning hair is the irritant. It is for the department to ponder and find precious time give a thought to the above mentioned points, the solution to the conflict will be automatically found.

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