Opinion: Monkey, Lion, Leopard and the Deer

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Panwar and Mishra's article (2004[1]) on the movements of non-human primates deals with a very relevant and disturbing issue. Disturbing because there does not appear to be any concern among Indian conservationists about the disastrous consequences of the rampant movements of wild animals or worse still, lack of information on the effect of the same.

The most commonly translocated animals are
1. problem animals that have come into conflict with humans (non-human primates, leopards, snakes)
2. surplus zoo populations (usually herbivores).

The former are usually taken from, as Panwar and Mishra say in the context of non-human primates, "vocal urban conglomerate" and released into "voiceless rural settlements". This is particularly dangerous because of the power the rural populace have to take the law into their own hands thereby destroying all the conservation efforts of the past decades. The urban citizenry can only go to the press, but people in the rural areas can directly eliminate wildlife. Although, the latter kind of movements: i.e., translocations of herbivores from zoos into Protected Areas are not directly harmful to human life but the thought that the TB infested ungulates are released into our already stressed Protected Areas is frightening. This combined with the fact that there is absolutely no post – release monitoring of any kind in our country makes this trend all the more dangerous. It also does not put any responsibility on the zoo managers to control the populations of their ungulates. In this age of scientific advancement, we Indians still live in a pre-historic time zone with respect to management of wildlife; be it captive or wild and more serious is the fact that there are no constraints preventing better management except the lack of desire to change.

Perhaps I am being a bit harsh but consider the numbers and areas involved with respect to animals capable of harming humans. 250 rhesus monkeys moved to a rural setting because the urbanites did not want the marauders. At least 150 leopards moved from one are to another in Maharashtra over two years because of man – leopard conflict at the site of capture, at least 25 leopards moved in North Bengal in five years. Uttaranchal, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat; all these states respond to man leopard conflict by moving leopards trapped at the conflict site to forested areas. Leopards trapped in Uttaranchal are moved to Rajaji NP. Leopards trapped in North Bengal are moved to Gorumara NP, Chapramari WLS, Buxa TR and Jaldapara WLS. Even in Gir this was the management strategy where leopards and lions (in the past) trapped outside the park were moved back into the core area, a distance of less than 100 km. This has also been routinely carried out in Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP), Mumbai where leopards trapped due to conflict in and around SGNP are released back into the core areas of the Park. Considering the pattern seen across the country, one cannot help but raise the question of whether these movements are actually exacerbating conflict? In the case of leopards there is no doubt that it is and the reasons are directly related to the biology of the species which we do not even consider even while making management plans for situations related to the species in question. It is also a matter of concern that there is hardly any relevant biological information on species that come into conflict in the Indian setting.

Four important biological aspects of leopards indicate that by translocations we are actually increasing leopard populations as well as increasing conflict. *For details please see* 3-FlowchartAndReco.pdf (at http://www.ncra.tifr.res.in/~rathreya/JunnarLeopards/). In brief, they are
1. the highly territorial society of leopards
2. the presence of floaters in the population
3. their phenomenal homing powers and
4. their capability to survive near human habitations.

However, even before we consider the biology of large cats, the very definition of translocation implies that we are increasing populations. **"Translocation[2]"** is defined by the IUCN as "the intentional release of animals to the wild in an attempt to establish, re-establish, or augment a population". The definition therefore implies that following translocation, the area will have a presence of the species (establish, re-establish) or an increased presence of the species (augment). In our country, it will only "augment" leopard populations since the leopard occurs throughout India and would also be present in numbers that the habitat can support optimally, at the sites of translocation. ***In effect we are augmenting a population of "problem animals" through transloctions.***

This might also explain the increase in leopard populations in many parts of our country. However, do we want an increase in the numbers of leopards that are adapted to surviving close to humans? Translocation is a very scientific procedure meant to be carried out under the supervision of scientists; a specific act meant to establish and/or increase populations of a species whose existence is threatened. Translocation is NOT recommended as a strategy for dealing with problem animals (see Linnell *et al.* 1972[3]*) which is what it has become in our country.*

There needs to be a complete rethink on this issue of movements of wild animals either because they have come into conflict or because they are a burden to our zoological parks. In the former case, we are actually increasing conflict, be it with problem-causing leopards or monkeys and by doing so we are moving back the conservation clock by many decades and eroding the past tolerance levels of rural people to wildlife. And as Panwar and Mishra recommend it is time that policies and guidelines are created with the help of managers, scientists, NGO's and conservationists for species that often come into conflict with humans.

(Footnotes)

1. Panwar, H.S. & M. Mishra. **2004.** Monkey and the Lion. *Zoos' Print* XIX (9).
2. IUCN, "Position Statement on the translocation of living organisms: Introduction, re-introduction, and re-stocking (IUCN Council, Gland, Swizterland. 4 September 1987).
3. Linnell,J.D.C., R. Aanes, J.E. Swenson, J. Odden & M.E. Smith. **1997**. Translocation of Carnivores as a Method for Managing Problem Animals: a Review. *Biodiversity and Conservation* 6 (9) : 1245- 1257.