

The Statesman

The conservation crisis

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The year 2021 arrived with a hope of change and breaking the shackles of the Covid pandemic and its associated sociopolitical- economic repercussions. In India, it has brought forward a bleak picture of failing wildlife conservation efforts. Reports by Conservation Lenses and Wildlife (CLaW), indicates that during the first 81 days of 2021, 39 enigmatic royal Bengal tigers lost their lives whereas official sources reported 16 tiger deaths. The causes were physical injuries, habitat loss or impact with speeding vehicles. Maharashtra heads this list followed closely by the state of Madhya Pradesh.

The alarming part of this conservation catastrophe is that 10 of these tigers died as a result of human wildlife conflict. Four tigers were poisoned to death at Umred-Karhandla- Paoni Wildlife Sanctuary (UKPWS), Maharashtra. Others were killed when they transgressed in human settlements following territorial disputes with other tigers.

Human-wildlife conflict is the negative interaction between humans and wildlife, resulting in serious obstacles in wildlife protection efforts. Only awareness and local participation in conservation projects can manage this issue.

Forest fire cases have been reported from all corners of the nation.

Forest tracks at Kullu and Shimla in Himachal Pradesh burned for days in the pristine Western Himalayan ecosystem before they could be contained. Dzukou Valley, nestled between the North-eastern states of Nagaland and Manipur in the Indo- Burma biodiversity hotspot, burned for two weeks in the month of January. This region is noted across the world for its endemic biodiversity. A report focused on the fact that seven out of 11 critically endangered mammals can be traced in the untouched montane, submontane and rain forest ecosystems of North-eastern India. Fifty-four per cent of India's threatened mammals, 68 per cent of birds and 63 per cent of reptiles can be found in this region.

In the months of February-March 2021, Simlipal National Park in Odisha burned due to an uncontained forest fire for about a fortnight. It is the abode of vulnerable and endangered mammals – the Royal Bengal tiger, leopard, Asian elephant, sambar, barking deer, gaur, four-horned antelope and about 231 bird species.

Global warming and climate change are already destabilizing the ecological services and functions in most of the biodiversity-rich regions across the globe. There has been an increasing trend of

uncontrolled forest fires since the last five years. The Forest Survey of India (FSI) has detected 2,77,758 forest fire points between 2004 and 2017. The forest fire points skyrocketed from 8,654 to 30,892 in 2009-10. According to reports, 21.4 per cent of national forest areas are under various levels of forest fire risks.

The Covid pandemic has impacted global wildlife conservation efforts. A scientific investigation has revealed that there has been a 55 per cent rise in destruction of the Amazon rain forest since the start of the pandemic. Age-old coral reefs of the Caribbean are getting destroyed due to fungal infections without conservation efforts to manage the problem. New Zealand is seeing increased destruction of its native species due to increased rat infestation and decreased conservation efforts to eradicate them. Decreased ecotourism has put several conservation projects in the developing nations under severe financial crunch. Of course, scientific reports also indicate that there has been an increase in the rate of pregnancies in zoo animals and sightings of wildlife nearer human habitats due to the lockdown, but the loss of financial liquidity is impacting conservation efforts.

India is now focusing on rebuilding its slumping economy with various plans. But these plans are undermining the conservation needs and environmental protection schemes. The EIA draft notification is aiming to make 'environmental clearances' for industrial projects 'easy'.

Andaman developmental plans will seriously impact the pristine ecosystems in these islands which are part of the Sundaland biodiversity hotspot.

Forest land diversions for facilitating industrial or mining projects are a common occurrence in India. A report highlighted that 11,467.83 hectares of forest land had been diverted in 22 states between 1 January and 6 November 2019. The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Annual Report 2019- 20 indicated that these diversions are to facilitate 932 non-forestry projects under the Forest (Conservation) Act (FCA), 1980.

The developmental project plans are also impacting the Western Ghats- Nilgiri ecosystem which is another biodiversity hotspot. Reports indicate that the Hubballi-Ankola Railway Project will destroy around 596 hectares of protected areas and will fell 178,325 trees. Expansion of Kaiga Atomic Power Plant and Sharavathi pumped storage hydro-electric project will also cause wildlife loss in this pristine ecosystem.

Economic growth and sustainability must not be achieved at the expense of wildlife conservation. For a healthy co-existence between humans and nature, conservation must be given precedence. Climate change impacts, increased natural disasters and the proliferation of new diseases are clearly indicating the sustainable path nations should follow to safeguard the threatened wildlife and conservation spaces. Conservation efforts need to be increased to protect India's wildlife. Policy makers must work alongside local populations to make it a success.

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