

Study Finds 13,450 Families Living Near Protected Areas Displaced Since 2000

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Between erosion of the Brahmaputra river and the expansion of Kaziranga, residents start a human chain at Riri, near Bokakhat, to save the village commons. Photo: Anupam Chakravartty.

Bolpur, West Bengal: Between October 2 and October 8 every year, India celebrates wildlife week. While conservationists use this time of year for various awareness programmes across the country, few recall the contributions of communities living close to the wildlife, inside protected areas (PAs) like national parks and bio-reserves, or discuss India's conservation model. Indeed, according to a new analysis, 26 PAs in the country – and by extension the underlying model of conservation – have been an important source of conflicts and displacement.

An interactive map launched on October 5 by Environmental Justice Atlas, a project that documents and catalogues social conflict around environmental issues, at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, with Kalpavriksh, a Pune based non-profit, found that over 13,450 families living inside or close to PAs have been displaced in the last two decades in India.

PAs in India are administered with an iron fist in the so-called 'fortress model'. According to one definition, "Fortress conservation is a conservation model based on the belief that biodiversity protection is best achieved by creating protected areas where ecosystems can function in isolation from human disturbance."

“A strict ‘protect and conserve model’, favoured by a powerful conservation lobby in the country, has increased the PA network from 67 in 1988 to 870 in 2020,” the authors of the analysis and map said in a press release. “However, these lands are not uninhabited, and approximately 4.3 million people are currently living in and around India’s PAs, which now encompasses around 5% of the national territory.”

Forced additions

When the nation was restricted indoors during the COVID-19 lockdown, forest-dwellers and Adivasi groups had it worse. Eleanora Fanari, of the Environmental Justice Atlas group, cited the examples of the forceful eviction of the Van Gujjar community in Uttarakhand’s Rajaji National Park, near Dehradun, and attacks on women of the Tharu tribe by forest officials in Dudhwa National Park, Uttar Pradesh, after they blocked access to the forests in June and July.

In Assam, the recent addition of more than 3,000 hectares to the Kaziranga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site known as the world’s largest habitat of the one-horned rhinoceros, left many communities living next to it worried about eviction. Recently, the All Assam Tea Tribes’ Students Union (ATTSU) protested against the park’s authorities for not consulting the locals, mostly tea-plantation workers, before making their decision.

According to Anit Gar, a local ATTSU leader from the region, some 550 families from the Hatikhuli area stand to be evicted. “We have learnt from various sources that the next round of evictions will happen in our area,” Gar said. “We want the state government to settle the questions of our land before they divert it to the park.” Authorities are still yet to acquire about 1,600 hectares to be added to the park area.

Communities around Kaziranga clearly recall the violent eviction in 2016 at Banderdubi village, in which two persons were killed by security forces carrying out an ‘anti-encroachment drive’ under the Gauhati high court’s orders. Members of the Mising community have expressed similar fears, given their location on the riverine areas of the eastern range of Kaziranga. They have been opposing the park’s expansion and the addition of a new range that will cover 19,000 hectares.

From 43,400 hectares in 1977, the size of the park has increased to 91,500 hectares in 2020. “With nine additions to the park areas, by acquiring land belonging to various marginalised communities – where will the communities dependent on the fertile soils and fish from the river go?” Pranab Doley, an advisor with the Jeepal Krishak Sramik Sangha, a peasants’ rights organisation, asked. Doley and other locals have been demanding that the government implement the Forests Rights Act 2006 in and around Kaziranga to protect the forest-dwelling and riverine communities’ rights to the land.

Two of the bigger eviction drives in the last two decades concerned the Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra and the Kanha National Park in Madhya Pradesh, both to create more conservation space. Fanari said that 2,952 families from 16 villages were displaced to create the tiger reserve at Melghat in 2007, and 450 families Gond and Baiga, two forest-dwelling communities of Central India, had been displaced in 2014 for the tiger reserve in Kanha.

Growing chasm

The researchers, based on their interaction over the last three years with several grassroots organisations working with communities in and around protected areas, reported that conservation-centric policies have left communities isolated. “The introduction of categories

such as ‘tiger reserves’ in the Wildlife Protection Act 2006, non-legal policy categories like ‘wildlife corridors’ and ‘biodiversity reserves’ – including terms such as ‘inviolable’ spaces or ‘critical tiger habitat’ – affect local communities inhabiting these spaces,” the analysis’s authors said in the press release. “These policies create confusion for the inhabitants and complicate their implementation on the ground.”

Conflicts in PAs are becoming more frequent, according to their map, partly due to authorities criminalising community activities. “Criminalisation ... and policies that seek to militarise conservation have led to large scale violence in these territories, sometimes leading to murders of community members,” they added in the release. A prominent example is the shoot-at-sight orders around Kaziranga and increased presence of military units, which park authorities have defended as deterrents to poachers.

According to Neema Pathak-Broome of Kalpavriksh, who was a part of the study team, India’s ‘fortress model’ of conservation has ignored the real reasons for wildlife population decline by actively alienating local people. “These include intensive hunting of tigers and other large animals by British and local rulers in the past, and the continuous decline in wildlife habitat due to continuous, large-scale diversion of biodiversity-rich areas for ... infrastructural and ‘developmental’ projects like roadways and railways, dams, mining, etc,” she said in the release.

Their map also identifies large industrial projects that Central and state governments have prioritised over biodiversity. According to Fanari, India’s conservation model is in stark contrast to the agenda pursued by the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), which India is part of. CBD recognises the rights of indigenous communities and the importance of these communities in managing and conserving protected areas. And India’s model “does not recognise the rights of communities and Indigenous people, and instead endangers human lives and the nature it is intended to protect,” the authors concluded.

Source: <https://science.thewire.in/environment/fortress-model-conservation-protected-areas-forest-dwelling-communities/>