

Wildlife Week: Make it meaningful

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First week of October is the time for Wildlife Week celebration by the Forest Department across the state. Drawing and essay competitions for school children, expert talks and screening of movies for education and awareness, and walk for wildlife are some of the events organised during the celebration. The coronavirus pandemic this year makes the celebrations virtual and public gatherings low.

Our success should be judged by the measures implemented to conserve habitats and corridors and resolve wildlife conflicts. The fragmented and degraded habitats are further impacted by the increasing presence of invasive species such as lantana, eupatorium, parthenium etc. They not only threaten wildlife conservation but also prevent ecological services the vast expanses of forests. General of Forests Sir Dietrich Brandis on the 1876-78 famine: "In the districts, the demarcation, protection and improvement of public forests is a measure of pressing necessity, which must no longer be deferred. The misery of the late famine has been greatly increased by the denudation of the forests which has diminished the production of the cattle fodder and has had an injurious effect on the water supply in streams and tanks (ponds)."

To reduce the dependency on forests, households on the fringes of forests are supplied with cooking gas connection, solar lamps, solar water heater, bio gas plants, social security plantations and fruit orchards etc. Supply of LPG to the families bringing firewood from forests has been a very important component implemented for more than two decades. A similar programme with much wider coverage is the Ujjawala scheme. Despite these programmes, people have continued bringing firewood from forests and wildlife habitats continue to degrade. 'Ujjawala' is an important scheme monitored by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In his words, "millions of mothers and sisters are relieved of inhaling smoke and their costs of curing illnesses are saved." The scheme is linked to forest conservation and reduction of carbon emissions. The PM, in his keynote address at the UN Economic and Social Council said that the implementation of efficient use of energy, installation of 450 GW renewable energy projects, supply of cooking gas and electrification of villages has contributed in reduction of 38 million tonnes of CO₂. However, if Ujjawala beneficiary does not afford the cost of refill of LPG cylinder and continues to bring firewood from forests, then projection of PM may be unrealistic. A recent report published in "SBI Ecowrap" says that 5.92 crore households had Ujjawala gas connection till December 2018 and annual refill data for households that had gas connection for more than a year shows that 24.6% never came back for refill, around 18% refilled only once or twice, 11.7% took three refills, while nearly 46% took four or more refills. A non-Ujjawala household consumes six to seven cylinders in a year while Ujjawala household in 2018-19 on an average consumed only three. With LPG prices zooming, demand for firewood is also rising. The option for the communities residing in and around forests is simple: they can bring any quantity by removing the young forest crop. In the economic package announced by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman during corona pandemic, Ujjawala beneficiaries got free LPG cylinder till September 2020. This should help revival of the forests, if LPG refill is subsidised beyond this period for beneficiaries adjoining forests. A study in the Malnad belt of Karnataka has found that the supply of solar water heater can reduce.

Poor Implementation

The programmes meant for restoring wildlife habitats are poorly implemented. Unless the gaps are plugged, wild animals will find their habitats shrinking and the corridors for their movement lost. Human-wildlife conflict then assumes a dangerous proportion. When a human is mauled by tiger or leopard or trampled by elephant, action is demanded by public and Forest Department will be at the receiving end. People generally mob the scene and pressurise Forest Department for immediate capture of the conflict animal or even shooting to kill it. Elephants in big herd move outside forests and damage agriculture crops. Ex-gratia payments approved by the government is often inadequate for high-value crops like tissue culture banana, coconuts, areca nut and paddy etc. People also get agitated when highly-priced cattle are killed by tiger or leopard. They go in revengeful mode and put poison on the carcass of the cattle. When a carnivore revisits the carcass, it consumes the poison and gets killed. People in coconut estates take revenge on elephants herds as well. To drive away the herd, they often open fire injuring some of them. Elephants profusely bleed, develop septicemia and die even after six months. Even if the post-mortem finds metal pieces embedded in the body of the elephant, there is no method to trace the culprit. To protect the crops, sometimes a villager illegally uses electric fence and elephants get electrocuted. By the time the departmental staff visit the scene of offence, culprits and materials become untraceable. Culprits are not brought to book even in 25% of these cases. Without restoring and developing habitats, conservation of wildlife is an uphill task. The department must focus on eco-development and habitat development programmes to conserve wildlife. Celebration of the Wildlife Week is becoming too formal and hardly any useful purpose is served on the ground.

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