

The price of living with tigers

Is it fair to let loose an animal that has previously attacked humans?



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is not a conservationist but many creatures share her home for reasons she is yet to discover. @JanakiLenin



Chequered It's not an easy relationship; both sides pay a price. AFP

In a matter of days, a tigress will find a new home in Bor Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra. According to news reports, she was trapped in Brahmapuri, 150 kilometres away, in mid-July after she killed two people and attacked five others. Forest Department officials say Bor has few humans and plenty of prey to sustain the cat. However, worried residents of 71 villages around the 138-square kilometre reserve passed a resolution against the move. Now wildlife officials plan to observe the two-year-old tigress' behaviour in an enclosure within the forest before letting her run wild. She'll also sport a radio-collar so they can track her. Releasing this animal makes a mockery of wildlife management.

Like any other rural area, most residents around Bor grow crops and tend livestock to which wild animals help themselves. Despite these deprivations, some villages won awards for their conservation practices, reports *The Hitavada*. This forbearance could disappear should the tigress threaten human life.

Stories of magnanimity

In November 2014, wildlife officials trapped a young tiger that had killed a woman in Chikmagalur district, Karnataka, and released it in Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary. The radio-collar malfunctioned and the tiger disappeared off the radar. The 80 employees of the state forest department camped in the forest couldn't find her. Five weeks later, it killed a woman and had to be shot. The whole exercise did no good for either tigers, people, or conservation.

Most stories of people and wildlife in the media are of the confrontational kind. Reading them, one would think villagers are an intolerant lot, dead against wild animals. But throughout the country, rural people show a magnanimity often lacking in urban citizens.

In 2012, a tigress took up residence in the fields of Amaria, near Pilibhit,

even raising her cubs amidst the hub-bub of villagers' activities, according to the WWF. Instead of panicking, her human neighbours were unperturbed, valuing her ability to keep four-legged crop-eaters away.

Some went further, offering refuge since people had "invaded her forests." Having been raised to the sounds and sights of the countryside, her cubs think that is home, and not the forest some distance away. After her cubs became independent adults two years later, she walked along the River Dehra and reached the vicinity of bustling Kanpur, a distance of at least 260 kilometres, where the NGO continues to watch her.

This isn't the only example of a tiger living among people. About nine tigers live outside Bhopal. One lay sprawled across a road earlier this year, bringing traffic to a stop. Joggers and walkers came upon their saucer-sized pugmarks. Panicky debates followed of what to do with these tigers. Since they didn't do anything to cause alarm, everyone calmed down.

As I write this on International Tiger Day, cute photographs and love notes plaster social media. City folks may visit wildlife parks on holiday, stay in resorts, and return with memory cards packed with photographs that rack up Facebook likes by the hundreds. Many even call themselves conservationists after signing a few online petitions.

Real conservation lives in India's

villages where people make space for animals that often cause hardship. That means sleepless nights guarding crops, losing goats and calves to tigers, and making far less income than their counterparts elsewhere. Forest officials compensate some of this loss but who offsets the stress and trauma of dealing with risk?

Conservationists are fond of saying nobody votes for tigers. Here are people who would

No one can blame villagers if they wished for a life without wild beasts. Many snare animals for the pot or to permanently keep them from their crops. But they don't have that deep-seated anxiety as American sheep farmers have for wolves and coyotes.

If that were the case, India would have far fewer wildlife numbers and species. It's not an easy relationship; both sides pay a price. Anything, like releasing the Brahmapuri tigress, that rocks the peace doesn't serve conservation.

Is it fair to the people?

"The tiger has a confirmed history of conflict with people," says Poonam Dhanwatey, a trustee of Tiger Research and Conservation Trust, Maharashtra. Letting it go into another

forested area isn't going to change its behaviour. The problem moves with the tiger from one area to another, which also has villages on its fringes. "Previous human-tiger/leopard conflict cases have clearly shown that problem animals tend to get into trouble if released again."

The bigger question is: Is it fair to the people living there? They'd have to tend their fields and animals, constantly looking over their shoulders and worrying about the safety of husbands, wives, and children. Should they have to bear this burden? If the tigress kills someone, can the department be tried for wilful negligence?

Conservationists are fond of saying nobody votes for tigers. Here are people who would, but our policies and management style make them disenfranchised citizens.

You'd think forest officials would learn their lessons from the many tragic cases of releasing human-attacking tigers and leopards in the past. In the U.S., any dangerous wild animal that takes livestock is taken out. The very question of letting loose an animal threatening human lives doesn't arise. But here, officials take lives and generosity of spirit for granted.

Remember these villages have won awards for their wildlife-friendly attitudes and lifestyles. It's easy to destroy their goodwill but hard work to win it back.

I wish there were a People Living with Tigers Day, for India would be a poorer place without them.