

Wildlife Conservation Beyond Protected Areas: A Konkan Case Study

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For a long time in modern India, the general belief and priority has been wildlife protection through a network of protected areas. While, properly protected areas certainly help in conserving wildlife populations and biodiversity hotspots, this in itself is not sufficient for the long-term survival of any species or the larger resource rich landscape. It is quite well known, at least among naturalists, researchers, and local villagers that a lot of wildlife still exists outside our protected areas, which are often vital corridors for migration and dispersal. It would be interesting to have a glimpse of this wilderness and understand the factors that ensure conservation of these 'unprotected' wildlife populations.

The Konkan Case Study

The narrow strip of land between the Western Ghats or Sahyadri (of which it is a part) and the sea is called Konkan, from about Surat to Mangalore. Further south, it is known as Malabar. This region is known for its rich biodiversity in myriad habitats, such as forests, rivers, creeks, coastal plateaus, and mangroves, forming a mosaic with semi-altered landscapes, such as orchards, fields, and villages. In Maharashtra, the northern Konkan districts have a mixture of government forests, croplands and urbanized areas. But the southern districts of Ratnagiri and Sindhudurg are dominated by privately-owned forests seamlessly merging with human landscapes.

The presence of Tiger, Wild Dog, and Giant Squirrel is clearly documented by researchers and reported in regional and English newspapers, from the talukas of Sawantwadi, Dodamarg, and Kudal. In the past decade, Elephants have also migrated here for the first time in known history. While the presence of the first three mammals indicates good forest cover, the elephant presence also points out to partial degradation of its original habitats in Karnataka. Gaur and Sambar are

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Exhibit A: Coastal plateau merging into mangroves and moist deciduous forests in Rajapur Taluka



found in all talukas abutting the main range of Western Ghats from Dodamarg to Chiplun, with some sightings of the former are reported even from the coastal talukas of Ratnagiri and Guhagar. Studies by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) indicates presence of Leopard, Barking Deer, Mouse Deer, Small Indian Civet, Palm Civet, Porcupine, Golden Jackal, Wild Boar, Grey Mongoose, Smooth Indian Otter, and several bat species across most forested patches, creeks, and plateaus. Recently, a Black Panther accidentally fell into a well in Rajapur taluka, which was reported by regional newspapers.

Most typical birds of Western Ghats are widespread here. The near threatened Malabar Pied Hornbill has been regularly sighted by BNHS staff in mango orchards, mangroves, plateaus, and amidst the hustle-bustle of towns like Ratnagiri and Chiplun, indicating presence of huge trees for roosting. The near-threatened Great Pied Hornbill is common in talukas along the main range of Sahyadri. Malabar Whistling Thrush charms one's ears near human habitations in talukas as far apart as Chiplun and Kudal. Critically endangered White-backed Vulture has regular nesting sites in the talukas of Dapoli and Mandangad, including among coconut groves, as identified by researchers of Sahyadri Nisarg Mitra. Birds like Sri Lanka Frogmouth, Malabar Grey Hornbill, White-bellied Sea Eagle, and Brahminy Kite are commonly found in a mixed habitat of forests and plantations.

Exhibit B: Malabar Pied Hornbill in coconut grove in Kudal Taluka



Sustainable Lifestyles

From the ancient Vedic times to the present day rural hinterland, sustainable lifestyles have been the norm in India. These practices have been rooted in the philosophy of 'live and let live', since Indians have been considering all forms of life as sacred. The lifestyles evolved such that all basic needs were met from local natural resources, without robbing the same for satisfying excessive greed. Such sustainable philosophy and action, nicely echoed in Gandhiji's thoughts in modern times, always ensured the presence of wildlife, including mega mammals, in close proximity of human settlements. This fact has been highlighted even by foreign researchers working in India. The BNHS studies in Konkan region bring out the following facts about eco-friendly way of life:

- ▶ Low carbon lifestyles with limited dependence on motorized commuting and energy usage for basic needs
- ▶ Decentralized habitation with few urban pockets and rural housing that continues to be in sync with the environment
- ▶ Options pertaining to consumption of goods and services, which are not energy intensive
- ▶ Belief systems that promote co-existence and festivals that honour nature when celebrated in the original form
- ▶ 'Idea of Success' among locals still involves retaining the rural ambience of villages and livelihood options that are in harmony with nature, while ushering in relevant development

Exhibit C: Traditional house in close proximity to nature in Mandangad Taluka



Photo credit: Atul Sathe

The Future

Wildlife conservation away from protected areas would entail humans living in harmony with nature. Having said this, as is observed elsewhere, the simple eco-friendly ways of life in Konkan are fast changing, particularly in the district and taluka headquarters. Misplaced notions about wasteful development are catching the fancy of these largely self-sufficient communities, which may translate into lifestyles that do not necessarily conserve and respect nature. But one can hope that discretion will prevail in the thinking and planning process at all levels to ensure sustainable development without robbing Konkan of its green cover.

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The views expressed by the author are personal. For more details, contributor can be contacted at atulsathe@yahoo.com.