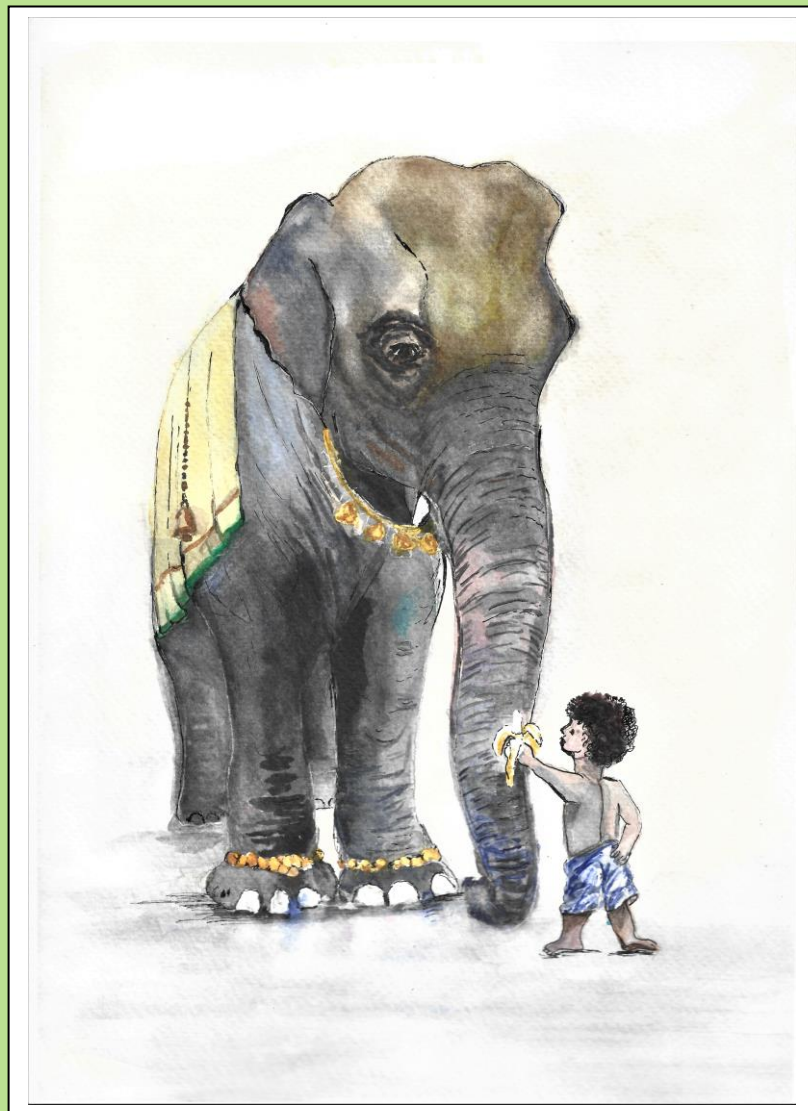


Joint Protected Area Management Some Policy Issues

Shekhar Singh



RaAG

Research, Assessment and Analysis Group

This discussion note was written in 1994 as an input to the then ongoing discussion on the feasibility of “joint protected areas” as a future strategy for wildlife conservation. The effort was to learn from the successes and failures of the joint forest management strategy.

The cover illustration is by Uma Bordoloi.

The decentralisation and democratisation of the management and control of natural resources is considered a priority today. This is understandable and justifiable, considering the centralised and bureaucratic control that, for over a century, has been the hallmark of forest management as also of the management of many other natural ecosystems and resources.

The most significant initiative in recent time, towards decentralisation and democratisation, has been the setting up of mechanisms and institutional structures for the joint management of forests. The success of the JFM experiments, especially in their "homeland" : West Bengal, has emboldened not only the Government of India but many state governments to "take the plunge" and facilitate the conversion of more and more forest lands from being traditionally managed areas into jointly managed ones.

JFM AND PAs

It is, therefore, natural that JFM, would, sooner or later, be looked at as a mechanism for managing wildlife protected areas (PAs). Superficially, as many PAs are also "forest areas", there is a *prima facie* case for extending JFM to PAs. However, what is often forgotten is that PAs, in terms of their objectives, lack some of the critical characteristics which would make them good areas for joint management of the sort prevalent in forest areas. Essentially, a critical element of JFM is the system of sharing with the local communities the direct economic benefits of the forests, in terms of timber and non-timber forest produce. The local communities, in turn, help protect and manage the forests.

However, as things stand, there are few direct economic returns that can be shared with the local communities from national parks and sanctuaries. The law prescribes that in a national park nothing can be extracted or done unless it is for the benefit of the wildlife. In a sanctuary, barring grazing and rights which are determined not to be inimical to conservation, the same prescription applies. Tourist activities are the only exception, both in a park and a sanctuary.

Therefore, the first question is : can enough be provided out of tourism, and grazing in sanctuaries, to make joint protected area management (JPAM) a workable proposition for PAs? As things stand, the answer seems to be a NO, especially if you consider that almost all the tourist facilities in and around PAs are owned by the Government, corporate houses, or non-local individuals. Also, the levels of grazing in most of the PAs are such

that management imperatives would require that intensity of grazing be brought down rather than increased.

Perhaps a part answer to this problem would be for the Government (state and central) to take a policy decision that all tourism activities related to a protected area and/or in and around a PA should be to the primary economic benefit of the local communities. This could, then, be the beginning of another type of JFM where the communities were not compensated by getting direct access to the biomass of the area but participate in the protection and management of the area because they have access to the benefits of tourism. The quantum and prevalence of tourism, being dependent on how well the PA was protected and managed, would be an incentive. The major danger here would be the tendency to sacrifice biodiversity values for tourism values : something that continues to happen today even without JFM. Consequently, could enough resources be generated from environmentally sustainable tourism to make such a proposition workable?

AN ALTERNATE VIEWPOINT

There is, however, another school of thought that maintains that the laws governing PAs should be changed so as to allow local communities access to the biomass therein. It is maintained that PAs should be primarily managed by the local communities, with a minimal "joint" presence of the forest department. Such an approach raises at least two types of questions:

1. Don't the wild animals (and plants) have a right to at least a small part (4%) of the country as their exclusive home, undisturbed by humans?
2. Does this generation have the right to disturb all natural gene pools, especially as the process of natural succession is still imperfectly understood?

As a response, proponents of the view that PAs must be opened up argue that human beings are more important than animals and that interest in "wildlife conservation" is an elite preoccupation. They further argue that conservation of biodiversity through such methods is anti the poor people.

However, the fact of the matter is that the conflict today, in the country and around our PAs, is not a conflict between wildlife and people but between one class of people and another. It is not because the deer or the monkey is given refuge in a bit of forest that many people go hungry, it is because some people control and consume far more than they need, or deserve, that others have so little.

When the rural poor and their livestock are prevented from entering a PA, rather than demand the opening up of the PA, the question that needs to be asked is : why are these people being forced to commit ecological suicide ? Perhaps the answer that would then emerge is that it is not because of the PA but because large tracts of good productive land are illegally owned, much in excess of the prescribed land ceiling, by a few rich people, that no resources remain for the survival needs of the poor. These poor communities have little alternative but to turn upon those who are even weaker than

them, the animals, and compete with them for survival. In this process, not only are the poor trapped in a descending spiral of unsustainable use of natural resources where a large and growing population of humans and cattle struggle to survive on a progressively shrinking stock of forests and grasslands, but the future of the earth itself is threatened.

Consider also that even if all the PAs were denotified and opened up to the local communities, the problems of hunger, poverty and injustice prevailing in the country would not be solved. In fact, after a few years, every body would be worse off.

Those, therefore, who are moved by the plight of the underprivileged and who cannot but fight against oppression and injustice, must recognise that the animals are the weakest and the most oppressed of the earth's creatures. It is not these weakest of the weak animals who are the oppressors. The oppressors are those who have cornered the resources of the nation for themselves and make the poor fight the poor, and the weak fight the weaker.

SOME APPREHENSIONS ABOUT JPAM

JPAM, like its predecessor JFM, also attracts scepticism. There are people, both within and outside the forest department, who argue that JPAM is really a handing over of the PAs to those who have little or no interest in conserving them. That once the process of community control begins the forest department would be increasingly marginalised and, ultimately, the control would pass on to those (locals and outsiders) who are interested only in exploiting the PAs for their own profits..

It is argued that considering the pressures most PAs are under and the difficulty PA managers are having in protecting the PA from the local communities, any increase in influence of local communities can only result in an increase in these pressures. It is further argued that given the fact that there is little that can be legally allowed in a PA and, that, in most PAs the pressures are already beyond acceptable levels, any increase in the influence of the local people can only lead to increased degradation of the PA.

In response, others argue that the local communities are quite capable of managing a PA. However, whereas the progressive transfer of control to local communities might be welcome for forest lands, which are in any case intended to be managed as multiple use areas, such an approach for PAs has various underlying assumptions. Some of these are:

1. That local people, left to themselves, would necessarily manage natural resources they control equitably and sustainably.
2. That, as a corollary, local people would also manage such resources better than the government can.
3. That there is both the wisdom and the option, at the local level, and enough of a concern for biodiversity conservation and for animal rights, to continue to conserve national parks and sanctuaries even at the cost of sacrificing the biomass and incomes such area would provide if they were denotified or otherwise opened up for use or exploitation.

4. That enough knowledge and expertise exists at the local level to adequately protect and manage a national park or a sanctuary.
5. That there are institutions and mechanisms within local communities which make it possible to develop a working consensus towards the management of wildlife protected areas, and that such mechanisms and institutions can also ensure that local communities act together against internal and external threats.

Many of these assumptions are not well founded. Take the first one. Is it really true that we manage well what we control? Most of us control our own bodies, but look at the way we treat them. But this is a widely used assumption which has perhaps been inspired by tales of Indian farmers who would rather give up their lives than their land. However, the farmer is protecting his or her own land, not community land. The farmer is true to an age old human instinct, shared across cultures and nations, where people have fought and died over their private property. No such parallels exist in India over community property, at least none where religion or historical tradition was not the major motivating force. In fact, as a general rule, the world over but especially in India, community property is the worst managed.

Besides, the farmer has been brought up in an unbroken tradition where land must be looked after and cared for. How many of the people living around PAs today, barring a few tribal groups, are privy to such an unbroken tradition? Can it be really said that they feel for the forests and the birds in them and that their instinct would be to conserve them?

Of relevance, here, is the experience of the tribal states of North-East India where the bulk of the forests are still owned and controlled by tribal councils. Yet, the North East shows evidence of the greatest amount of deforestation in India.

The concern for animals and for biodiversity, among local communities, differs from area to area. Whereas there are well known examples of the Bishnois, who protected their environment at great personal cost, there are many other communities, including tribal communities, where any thing that crawls, runs or flies is hunted mercilessly. Religious and cultural sentiments have enabled some communities to maintain sacred groves while others, with different imperatives, have destroyed everything around them.

In any case, for many communities conservation is no longer a real choice, for their poverty, or their aspirations, make the opportunity cost of a PA too high to afford. Whereas society must ensure that their poverty is removed and their aspirations are fulfilled, this cannot be done at the cost of the PA.

CONCLUSIONS

But then, what is the answer. Perhaps the answer lies in an approach which has a mix of measures.

- The forest department should be made progressively more answerable to the people in its management of PAs.
- The local people should have a say in the setting up and demarcation of PAs, and in the formulation of management strategies.
- The local people should be given incentives to participate in the management of PAs.
- Local communities should have an exclusive right to the earnings from the PA, especially earnings from tourism.
- There should be diversion of biomass pressures from the PA by promoting JFM around PAs, and
- there should be a package of ecodevelopment initiatives where socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives to meet income and biomass requirements are built up through a participatory, location specific, process.

It is through a mix of such activities that India's protected areas can be managed sustainably and justly. Given the current laws, PAs cannot generate enough biomass and revenue to make it worthwhile for the local villagers to spend time and effort managing and protecting them (as happens under JFM). The relaxation of laws for permitting greater extraction from PAs is also not desirable. However, PAs cannot and ought not survive at the cost of the poor people, nor without their participation and support. The larger society must pay for developing alternatives to the resources of the PAs and must ensure that these alternatives become available to those who traditionally depended on the PAs for their survival needs.

