

CAN COMMUNITIES PROTECT IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS?



Photo: Asad R. Rahmani

India has a long tradition of wildlife protection. Even today there are many wetlands, sacred groves and forests protected by the communities.

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Can rural communities protect birds, and Important Bird Areas? In a way, this is a strange question, one that we should not even have needed to ask. For the better part of Indian history, it is indeed communities that have coexisted with, and often deliberately conserved, natural ecosystems and wildlife. A bewildering range of belief systems, cultural practices, and resource use systems ensured that over much of India, conditions for bird populations to thrive continued for several centuries. The initiatives of Ashoka and many other rulers are celebrated by wildlifers, and justifiably so, but practices of conservation and restrained resource use by *adivasi* (tribals) and other communities were very much more widespread. This included sacred groves and sacred species, protection of catchment forests, rotation of fisheries to let aquatic areas rest, migratory grazing to allow natural grasslands regenerate, strict controls on hunting and the use of many plant species. Highly sophisticated systems of customary laws, associated cultural beliefs, and diverse village-level institutions, ensured the continuation of such practices.

Why then the need to ask this question?

A big break, and then a slow decline, took place in many of these practices during the British colonial era. The government took over massive areas of what were till then common property lands (and waters), ostensibly to manage them better than the “Indian masses”, but really for commercial extraction and political control. Not only did this put a lot of forest lands under destructive logging, it also alienated people from their surrounding natural resources, and made customary laws and village institutions redundant. The sense that nature was a part of village life, that humans had some responsibility towards other species, and that communities had to manage things on their own... all these took a severe beating. The neglect and distrust of community resource management practices continued even after Independence, as manifest in wildlife conservation and forest management laws and programmes. There is plenty of historical documentation on the process of community alienation and breakdown of traditions, caused by government policies, so we will not repeat the facts here. The point we are making is that what should have been a redundant question has assumed significance today, because in many parts of India, community traditions of conservation and restrained resource use are no longer visible, or continue to be neglected.

And yet, as we shall demonstrate here, the question can still be answered with a resounding “yes”!



IBAs and Communities

The list of Important Bird Areas, clearly shows that communities are continuing to conserve birds and bird habitats, and have great potential to do so even where they are currently not doing so. The list has several dozen sites that are in one or more of the following categories:

- i. IBAs currently being conserved by communities on their own or with some external help, outside officially designated protected areas (PAs).** Examples of this include:
 - a. Forests such as Khonoma in Nagaland (where the community has declared its own Blyth's Tragopan Sanctuary), Mawphlang Sacred Grove in Meghalaya (representing hundreds or perhaps thousands of surviving sacred groves in India), Longwood Shola in Tamil Nadu, and a number of forested tracts in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands which are under tribal reserves or control including perhaps some of India's least disturbed areas like the Jarawa Reserve;
 - b. Grasslands or grassland-scrub-forest ecosystems such as Sangti in Arunachal (where the Monpa tribe has protected Blacknecked cranes and other species), Banni in Gujarat and Changthang in Ladakh (which have survived as grasslands till recently due to deliberately nomadic, low intensity pastoral practices of herder communities), Khichan in Rajasthan (famous for its wintering population of Demoiselle cranes strictly protected by the villagers), and Siroi in Manipur (the local people have been protecting the endemic Siroi Lily here);
 - c. Wetlands within or adjacent to villages, such as Kokkare Bellur in Karnataka (well known for its centuries old protection of Spot-billed pelicans and Painted storks), Loktak Lake in Manipur (where village youths have formed a Sangai Protection Forum and help in conserving the lake parts as also some catchment areas outside of the Keibul Lamjao National Park), Patna, Sheikha and numerous other jheels in Uttar Pradesh.
- ii. IBAs currently being conserved by communities on their own or with some help, inside PAs:** Examples include Chakrashila Sanctuary in Assam (which was declared a sanctuary on the demand of the local community and an NGO), Bhimashankar Sanctuary in Maharashtra (containing several sacred groves pre-dating the sanctuary by centuries, some still under strong community protection), Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan (with communities having formed Forest Protection Committees inside the Kailadevi Sanctuary before the PA was notified), Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan (containing several villages that are actively conserving forests and wildlife), and Askot Sanctuary in Uttaranchal (which contains several Van Panchayat forests still under traditional management of the village).
- iii. IBAs that were once under community conservation, but have been taken over by the government and notified as PAs.** This category includes sites such as Nelapattu and Pulicat in Andhra Pradesh, and Vedanthangal and Chitragudi in Tamil Nadu. These are wetlands that were once under the sustainable management of local people, who were protecting waterbirds and their nesting sites as a tradition. There is documented evidence of militant protection of birds in the case of wetlands like Vedanthangal (so prominent that the British colonial government even put up a board recognizing it as a people's reserve). In more recent times these sites were taken over by the government and declared PAs. In some of these cases such as Chitragudi, the unfortunate result of this takeover has been the breakdown of community practices and institutions managing the lakes. There are likely to be many more IBAs within this category, given especially that wetlands, grasslands, and many forests were earlier under community management, but the absence of historical documentation makes it difficult to demonstrate this.
- iv. IBAs that are official PAs, but are increasingly coming under some form of collaborative management between the PA authorities and local communities.** Examples of this include:
 - a. Great Himalayan National Park in Himachal Pradesh and Periyar Tiger Reserve in Kerala (both of which have had some positive ecodevelopment initiatives and dynamic forest officers who have proactively involved communities), Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan (where communities inside and surrounding the reserve have formed the Sariska Protection Forum consisting of several dozen villages, and have successfully countered poaching and wood theft), and Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Sanctuary in Karnataka (in which active livelihood work with the Soliga *adivasis* has created a strong stake in conservation);
 - b. Sites where community action has helped to stave off threats and thereby helped protect the ecosystem or wildlife, such as Chilika in Orissa (where traditional fisherfolk have helped reduce the threat from large commercial fisheries and aquaculture), Indravati Tiger Reserve in Chhattisgarh (saved from partial drowning by a dam, due to a strong anti-dam movement amongst the local *adivasis*), and Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan (which has witnessed a long-drawn and mostly successful people's movement against limestone and marble mining).
- v. IBAs that have community conservation initiatives in adjacent areas, or as corridors between two or more sites.** A prime example of this is the area between the Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve and the Askot Sanctuary, both in Uttaranchal. This area, of several hundred sq. km contains several well-managed (and some not so well-managed) *Van Panchayat* (Community Forest) lands, with significant forest ecosystems that act as corridors. Other examples include the Arvari and other river valleys adjacent to the Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan (where water harvesting and catchment forest conservation has significantly increased the available natural habitats), and the Joint Forestry Management (JFM) and community forestry areas near the Satkosia Gorge Sanctuary in Orissa.
- vi. IBAs that have no known ongoing community conservation, but where undocumented community initiatives may exist, or where there is high potential for community-based conservation.** This would include possibly several dozen sites on the list, particularly those where communities continue to live in predominantly traditional ways, or have begun to mobilise themselves on issues of natural resource management.

The assertion that the above kind of community initiatives are current and ongoing, and that the potential for such conservation is very strong, is not simply theoretical. Rather, it is based on the increasing documentation of initiatives across the country (many more than those named above), in which communities have demonstrated their ability to conserve ecosystems and species, with or without help from outside agencies (about 300 such cases are available with Kalpavriksh, and will be highlighted in an upcoming *Directory of Community Conserved Areas in India*).



Important Bird Areas in India – Communities and IBAs

Other than the ones listed as IBAs, it would be instructive to also look at a number of other community-conserved areas (CCAs) and species. Many of these are significant for wildlife, even though they may not satisfy the criteria of being an IBA (or may simply not have enough documentation to meet these criteria). Across Uttaranchal, for instance, many communities are protecting forests that are water catchments above their settlement; in the case of one such example, Jardhagaon in Tehri Garhwal, preliminary studies indicate the presence of over 100 species of birds (including pheasants) in the community-protected forest. A patch of 2000 ha of central Indian forests protected by tribals in Mendha (Lekha) village, harbours a similar diversity. Several village-level wetlands harbour heronries, with significant populations of single or multiple species. Peafowl are protected in large numbers across western India. Only one or two sacred groves appear on the IBA list, but there are many many more sprinkled across the country, with a diversity of bird population. Many villagers in Assam are known to harbour Greater Adjutant nesting sites.

What Motivates Communities to Conserve?

Why do communities conserve habitats and species? What motivates them to willingly accept restrictions and restraints on their own resource uses, or even risk their own lives in defence of wildlife? There are several reasons that can be discerned at the sites mentioned above:

- i. **Love or concern for nature:** Very much like the nature-lovers or concerned naturalists found in urban conservation groups, villagers too often display such feelings. The setting aside of a part of one's grains for visiting birds (e.g. for cranes and other birds in Gujarat and Rajasthan), taking care of injured young ones, protecting birds against hunting (e.g. Khonoma in Nagaland), and so on, are manifestations of the deep feelings that many villagers have towards nature.
- ii. **Ethical, spiritual, and religious beliefs:** Most spiritual and religious traditions of India advocate a harmonious co-existence with fellow species, with the belief that the earth was made as much for them as for human beings. Additionally, many habitats and species are considered sacred for various reasons, including as links with ancestors or gods, or as deities in their own right. The conservation of sacred groves (such as Mawphlang in Meghalaya), sacred wetlands (e.g. Khecheopalri Lake in Sikkim), sacred grasslands (such as some *bugiyals* in Himalaya), or entire sacred landscapes (like the Khangchendzonga / Rathong Chu valley in Sikkim), the protection of sacred species like Chinkara, Bluebull, Asiatic Elephant, Sarus Crane, Peafowl, and the conservation of heronries, are some manifestations of such beliefs.
- iii. **Livelihood security:** A large number of conservation practices are linked to the need to sustain biodiversity or bioresource-based livelihoods. Several wetland, forest, or grassland CCAs mentioned above, or the PAs named above that are moving towards participatory management, are of this nature.
- iv. **Ecosystem benefits and values:** Catchment and riverine forests have traditionally been conserved in many parts of India, for the water security and soil fertility they provide; a prime example of this being the Safety Forests of Mizoram.
- v. **Cultural pride and identity:** In some cases a renewed sense of pride in one's culture and heritage has motivated conservation, at times mixed with the feeling of love or concern for nature. This is the case, for instance, with the protection being offered to the Blyth's Tragopan in Khonoma, Nagaland, or the Sangai or Brow-antlered Deer in Loktak, Manipur.
- vi. **Resisting destructive forces:** In many cases, communities protect habitats or wildlife from destructive forces, such as big dams, mining, industries, logging, and so on. Because this is not a "proactive" form of conservation, it is not often considered, but many a biodiversity-rich area has been given a lease of life due to the stubborn resistance put up by local communities (including the examples of Indravati in Chhattisgarh, Sariska in Rajasthan, and Chilika in Orissa mentioned above).

The Need for Expanding Participatory Conservation

It is today imperative that IBAs (and other sites of biodiversity importance), move towards more participatory models of conservation and management. This is due to many factors:

- i. Many (though by no means all!) traditions of conservation (including sustainable use resulting in wildlife protection), continue across the Indian landscape and seascape. These include habitats (such as sacred sites, village wetlands, catchment forests) and species (such as peafowl, cranes, bustards). This is on both government and community or private lands. Moreover, several IBAs and other wildlife-rich habitats are within, or contain inside them, lands that belong to communities or private individuals within communities. In such situations, community-based conservation is the only effective option available.
- ii. Most IBAs have communities living within or immediately adjacent to them, having significant livelihood and cultural dependence on the local ecosystems and species; such dependence is a customary right of communities that have been in the place for generations, and needs to be respected and met through sustainable means.
- iii. Such dependence and links cannot be ignored except at the risk of making the local people more and more hostile, thereby creating conditions which eventually undermine official conservation attempts; conservation even with the strongest of police or armed forces cannot survive long in such a situation. In any case denial of basic rights and needs is unjust and a serious human rights violation, which conservationists need to be aware of.
- iv. The political atmosphere for declaring IBAs as PAs is largely negative in most states, and this will not change unless political leaders see a substantial public support for such a move.
- v. Indigenous knowledge that would be vital for the conservation of IBAs, is rapidly being eroded, and urgent measures are needed to support, enhance, and use such knowledge for conservation.
- vi. The focus on PAs as islands of conservation, with increasingly destructive land-use around them, is becoming self-defeatist. Classic examples include wetlands that are protected, only to have their biodiversity being destroyed by pesticide and fertiliser run-offs from their agricultural surrounds. Involving people in the surrounding areas, in land/water uses that are compatible, therefore becomes a necessity.
- vii. Communities themselves need new and additional knowledge, resources, legal support, and other facilitation to be able to continue or revive conservation practices. In particular, they need support to meet the challenges posed by powerful external and internal forces including national and international markets, vested commercial and political interests, inappropriate educational systems, and so on.



Important Bird Areas in India - Communities and IBAs

These and other reasons are rapidly becoming obvious to sensitive conservationists in India and abroad. No wonder that the last few years have seen a slow but definite shift away from exclusionary, centralised conservation models to more participatory ones. This is a very strong trend in many countries including Nepal, Australia, Uganda, South Africa, and several Latin American and European nations. It is also an explicitly recognized shift in international circles, as manifest at (1) the recent World Parks Congress (Durban, September 2003), the biggest ever gathering of conservation practitioners and researchers; and (2) the 7th Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), which agreed to an ambitious Programme of Work including very strong actions on the participation of indigenous and local communities (see *Community-Based Conservation: the International Context*).

Community-Based Conservation: The International Context

Two key international events in 2003-04, have firmly established the role of community-based approaches to protected area management and to conservation in general:

1. The first, the World Parks Congress, was held in Durban in September 2003. This was the fifth of such congresses, organized every 10 years by the World Conservation Union (IUCN). It was by large the biggest ever gathering of conservationists, with over 5000 participants. Amongst its major outputs were the Durban Accord and Action Plan, the Message to the Convention on Biological Diversity, and over 30 Recommendations on specific topics. All these outputs strongly and explicitly stressed the need to move towards collaborative management of government-managed PAs, with a central role for indigenous and local communities (including mobile/nomadic peoples). This includes recognition of customary and territorial rights, and the right to a central role in decision-making. The biggest breakthrough, however, was the recognition of community-conserved areas (CCAs) as a valid and important form of conservation. The Durban Action Plan and a specific recommendation on CCAs, highlighted the need to incorporate and support CCAs as part of national PA systems. (see www.iucn.org/themes/wcpa/wpc2003, for copies of these documents)
2. The second, the 7th Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, was held in Kuala Lumpur in February 2004. Since the CBD is a legally binding instrument, its outputs are of great significance for all countries. One of its main outputs was a detailed and ambitious Programme of Work (POW) on Protected Areas. A crucial element of the POW relates to “Governance, Participation, Equity, and Benefit-sharing”, under which actions explicitly urge countries to move towards participatory conservation with recognition of indigenous/local community rights. As in the case of the World Parks Congress, the POW also makes a major breakthrough in committing countries to identify, recognize, and support CCAs. (see www.biodiv.org, to download the POW).

In India, this shift has been slow in coming. In the case of government-notified PAs, the first major move has been “eco-development”, which attempts to meet the needs of local communities through provision of alternatives and “weaning” them away from dependence on the PA. Unfortunately, barring 2-3 sites where exceptionally motivated forest officials have taken the concept way beyond this into actually involving people in management, this model has retained the conventional dominant role of the Forest Department and the assumption that communities are essentially destructive to nature. The new National Wildlife Action Plan (2002), the draft National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (2004), and other documents have more clearly emphasized the need for participatory conservation measures. In 2002 the Government of India finally recognized that other than government-notified and managed PAs, there is a potential to have legally notified community-managed PAs. It incorporated a new PA category, of Community Reserves, into the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act 2002. Unfortunately, what could have turned out to be a historic step, may prove to be a damp squib (see *Community Reserves: A Stunted Category*).

Community Reserves: A Stunted Category?

In 2002, the Indian Parliament passed the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, bringing with it two new categories of protected areas (PAs), Conservation Reserves and Community Reserves. For conservationists and community rights activists, this should have been cause to cheer, for finally it seemed that community-based conservation was being given due recognition. Unfortunately, a closer look at the provisions under the category Community Reserves leaves one with much less hope. Amongst the many defects that are likely to keep the use of this new category rather stunted, the following are most important:

1. Community Reserves (CRs) cannot be declared on government land, even though the majority of examples cited above, and available in the Kalpavriksh database, are indeed cases where communities are *de facto* conserving government-owned forests, wetlands, coastal or riverine stretches, and grasslands;
2. A uniform management structure has been prescribed for all CRs, consisting of 5 members chosen by the *panchayat* (village council) and a forest official. In most CCA situations in India, this could undermine existing, often very successful institutions, of which there is a bewildering variety; and in many cases communities are likely to be suspicious of being forced to involve a forest official;
3. Existing PAs cannot be converted to CCAs, even though many may actually be better conserved through such conversion; in Haryana for instance, the government has had to take the risky path of first denotifying a Bishnoi managed area that had earlier been declared a sanctuary, in order to renotify it as a CR;
4. Changes in Land-use after declaration of a CR, can only be done with permission of the state government; again, though this may be useful in the long run for conservation, many communities are likely to be suspicious about whether this is an indirect way in which governments are gaining control over community or private lands.

(For more details, please see statement of the *Workshop on Community Reserves, Conservation Reserves and other legal spaces for Community Conserved Areas, 3-4 February, 2004*; available at www.kalpavriksh.org).

What is the Recipe for Participatory Conservation of IBAs?

There are a number of important lessons that can be learnt from the IBA and non-IBA examples cited above. Detailed documentation on many of these is missing, so the lessons are necessarily based on the few detailed case studies available, and on the brief glimpses that we have of the others.

Some key lessons that would be relevant for PA agencies, NGOs, and local communities working at/on IBAs:

- i. **Learn from history**, especially of the wise use of resources by communities, and the mistakes of centralised state control, but also the increasing reach of vested interests and national/international markets that have distorted traditions.
- ii. **Provide secure tenure to survival and livelihood resources**, as a long-term stake in conservation. This is the most important step to reverse the alienation and hostility created by the conventional PA model, though of course given the strong vested interests in many areas, it would not be an easy step to take.
- iii. **Clarify roles of all partners**, especially the rights and responsibilities of local communities and government agencies, and mutually reinforcing roles in conservation and management; even in the case of areas managed solely by communities, this needs to be done with regard to different classes, castes, gender groups, and other intra-community categories .
- iv. **Initiate a process of dialogue** amongst various rights-holders and stakeholders, to reduce stereotypes, increase understanding, and arrive at mutually acceptable ways forward.
- v. **Encourage ecologically sensitive livelihoods**, especially to tackle real poverty and to link livelihoods to conservation. These could include Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) and aquatic resource-based livelihoods, genuine community-based ecotourism, PA management tasks, organic farming and agroforestry, and so on, depending on what is ecologically and culturally appropriate.
- vi. **Distribute costs and benefits more equitably**, tackling human-wildlife conflicts, and channelising conservation benefits to local people. Many CCAs and PAs face serious conflicts between some wildlife species and local people, through crop and livestock damage, injury and death to humans, and so on. This needs to be tackled with sensitivity and with site-specific approaches.
- vii. **Create empowered institutions**, such as joint management boards, village conservation committees, etc, with a clear say to local people in decision-making; build on relevant traditional institutions; where robust and proven community institutions exist, do not impose external institutional structures or compulsory government membership of such institutions.
- viii. **Provide firm legal backing to the initiative**, through statutory or customary law or both. This is particularly important for CCAs outside the PA network, where the absence of legal backing reduces the power of the communities to enforce conservation against outside forces.
- ix. **Build on traditional knowledge**, provide modern inputs sensitively. In the case of technologies like mapping, there is great potential for using traditional and new techniques in a complementary way.
- x. **Set up accessible and transparent dispute resolution mechanisms**. This could be for disputes between communities and official agencies, amongst different communities, or between various sections of a single community.
- xi. **Ensure public right to information**, especially to all aspects of the conservation initiative and developmental inputs that have a bearing on it. The conventional secrecy of governments (and some NGOs!) must be done away with.
- xii. **Consider various forms of PA governance**, as appropriate to the situation, including collaboratively managed PAs, community conserved areas (CCAs), private reserves, etc. (see, for instance, the note on how CCAs fit each of the IUCN PA categories, at www.iucn.org/themes/ceesp/wkg_grp/TILCEPA/WPC/TILCEPA_CCA_Mandate_and_Work_06.03.03)
- xiii. **Adapt to site-specific situations**, in particular to be sensitive to local ecological, cultural, economic, and political conditions rather than impose uniform solutions everywhere. This is a very striking feature of successfully managed CCAs, and surely official PAs can learn a lot from this.
- xiv. **Build capacity**, of officials to deal with community issues, and of communities to deal with conservation responsibilities and national/international forces. Some CCAs like Mendha (Lekha) have robust study circle initiatives through which villagers are kept informed of the latest developments; such institutions are needed in all IBAs.
- xv. **Be sensitive to cultural and spiritual values**, in particular intangible values assigned by communities to landscapes/seascapes, ecosystems and species.
- xvi. **Resist destructive ‘development’ and commercial pressures**, in particular those impinging on the conservation values of protected areas. Experience suggests that while in many cases communities on their own or officials on their own can withstand such pressures, they become much stronger in such resistance when they work together.
- xvii. **Treat conservation as a process, not a project**. It must be always kept in mind that communities have varying pace, and sustainable arrangements take time to build.
- xviii. **Integrate steps to tackle inequities within and outside communities**, including those relating to gender, class, caste, ethnicity, age. This is an area in which communities often need external help, since dominant sections within the community may hinder attempts by the weak to take part in decision-making and sharing of benefits.
- xix. **Monitor the results of the initiative**, especially to ensure that conservation and livelihood security are being achieved. Most PAs and CCAs are not yet carrying out such monitoring.



The Future of IBAs as Community-Conserved Areas

The reality of IBAs that are community-managed, or where communities are substantially involved, cannot be denied. But it is also true that in today's complex world, community-based conservation is no simple solution, nor a panacea to fit all situations. Caution is particularly warranted regarding vested interests that could undermine the initiative, and against romanticisation of the ability of communities to conserve biodiversity.

Nevertheless, there is enough evidence of the success of community-based approaches, particularly where these approaches have sustained government or NGO support, or where the communities themselves are strongly organised. We have no doubt that more and more IBAs will turn towards such approaches, and the worth of community-conserved areas, collaboratively managed PAs, and other models of participatory conservation will be recognized.

The following steps are needed in the near and long-term future:

1. Identification of all key IBA sites where communities are already conserving or have the potential to conserve;
2. Providing appropriate legal backing to community-conserved areas, in ways that communities are comfortable with, through categories in the Wild Life (Protection) Act, Biological Diversity Act, Environment Protection Act, or Forest Act, and/or through *panchayat* (village council) legislation;
3. Providing social, political, and financial recognition and incentives to such areas, where needed, and as appropriate to the local ecological and social situation;
4. Establishing firm rights, responsibilities, and roles of communities in relation to such areas;
5. Building capacity of officials, communities, NGOs, and others, to optimize their conservation efficacy;
6. Ensuring that in local/district, state, and national planning, all such areas are off-limits to destructive forms of 'development' including mining, big dams, urbanisation, industrial growth, and so on.

The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP), has recommended that 10% of India's landmass come under protected and conserved areas, of which at least 2% be effectively inviolate. It has stressed, however, that this can only happen with much greater levels of participation by local communities and other citizens, and the inclusion of CCAs and private reserves into the PA system. It seems to us that IBAs managed by various forms of governance, can be a critical part of this 10% target.



Photo: Aseel R. Rahmani