RECLAIMING INDIA'S CONSERVATION NARRATIVE: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND A VISION FOR THE FUTURE.

A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CONSERVATION IN INDIA

India's journey in wildlife conservation has been marked by evolving philosophies that trace back to ancient traditions, colonial wildlife laws and post-independence policies. In recent years, the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) of 1972 has fortified the nation's commitment to safeguarding its natural heritage. Yet it has also created significant challenges. While certain emblematic species have thrived under strict protection, the disconnection of local communities from wildlife management, coupled with prohibitive laws has led to escalating human-wildlife conflict. Rethinking these policies, drawing on lessons from India's own history and comparing global models, may hold the key to a more balanced and prosperous future for both people and wildlife.

India's conservation ethos can be traced to a time long before codified legislation. Indigenous communities and local rulers once practiced sustainable hunting known as *shikaar*, that aimed to regulate animal populations and fulfill dietary needs without jeopardizing habitats. Such traditions thrived in part because of sacred groves, seasonal prohibitions and strong community-led enforcement, reflecting a fundamental reverence for nature. During the colonial period, the British introduced new administrative structures and game reserves that, while laying early foundations for modern wildlife laws, centralized control and sidelined local practices. This pattern of top-down management has influenced many aspects of conservation policy ever since.

Following independence, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 created a unified legal framework for wildlife protection in India. This legislation recognized the urgent need to halt the decline of various species and established a network of national parks and sanctuaries dedicated to wildlife preservation. Despite its strong protective measures, the Act also marginalized traditional stewardship by replacing sustainable use practices with blanket bans on hunting and trade in most wild species. Over time, tensions have arisen where local communities, who receive minimal benefits from wildlife, bear the brunt of habitat encroachment and crop destruction. Although species like the tiger have rebounded under these stringent laws, the unintended consequences of prohibition have become increasingly evident.

A Tiger Hunt At Jhajjar, Rohtak District, Panjab - C.1855

THE HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT: A GROWING CONCERN

India's modern conservation landscape is troubled by the rise of conflicts between humans and wildlife, largely driven by habitat fragmentation, high human population densities and a lack of local incentives to protect animals. Farmers lose significant portions of their crops each year to wild boars, nilgai, blackbuck and axis deer, with some estimates suggesting that depredations can wipe out more than half of a season's harvest in severely affected regions. This results in widespread economic strain, especially for marginal farmers who lack alternative livelihoods. Property damage and tragic human casualties occur when elephants, which number over twenty-seven thousand, enter farmlands and tea estates in search of food. States such as Assam, West Bengal and Odisha frequently report incidents of elephants raiding crops, destroying property and sometimes causing human fatalities. Leopards, forced to find new territories due to shrinking forests, are increasingly sighted near human settlements, leading to conflicts in Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and beyond.

Tigers, often celebrated as a conservation success story, have now exceeded a population of 3600 in India. This milestone has come at a price. Territorial pressures have been observed in major reserves, pushing tigers to the fringes of protected areas where they may prey on livestocks and even threaten human lives. These challenges underscore the dual nature of strict protection: while it prevents the overt exploitation of wildlife, it leaves rural populations bearing numerous costs without meaningful economic rewards.

PROHIBITION-BASED LAWS AND PARALLEL CHALLENGES

India and Kenya both stand out as biodiversity-rich nations where wildlife management has relied heavily on prohibition-driven models. In Kenya, a nationwide ban on hunting was enacted in 1977 in the hope of reversing wildlife declines and leveraging tourism as a conservation engine. In India, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 imposed stringent bans on hunting most species and centralized the oversight of wildlife resources. Despite their different political histories and ecological contexts, these two countries have seen comparable outcomes that illustrate the unintended effects of tightly prohibitionist legislation.

In each case, local communities have been sidelined, unable to reap direct benefits from wildlife on their lands. Kenyan farmers and pastoralists living near major parks, much like Indian villagers bordering protected areas, frequently regard wildlife as an economic burden. Elephants or lions raiding crops in Kenya mirror the crop damage and livestock predation caused by nilgai or leopards in India. With no legal avenues for regulated hunting or culling, wildlife agencies in both nations grapple with escalating human-wildlife conflicts while farmers suffer crop losses or threats to personal safety. These bans also fail to curb illicit activities in the way policymakers had originally hoped: bushmeat poaching in Kenya and similar poaching networks in India persist, partly because prohibition leaves no framework for sustainable, transparent wildlife use.

Both countries also lean heavily on tourism revenues, tying conservation funds to the ebbs and flows of the global travel industry. Kenya's wildlife authorities depend on international safari-goers who can stop visiting when travel restrictions or economic downturns arise, leading to funding shortfalls for ranger patrols and habitat maintenance. India faces a similar vulnerability in reserves that rely on tiger tourism; events like the COVID-19 pandemic underscore how quickly critical income for protected areas can dwindle. This leaves agencies understaffed and insufficiently equipped to monitor and protect wildlife, which only intensifies poaching risks.

Under these conditions, community tolerance for wildlife diminishes: animals that destroy crops or endanger human lives are increasingly resented rather than safeguarded. When ad hoc culling does take
In places such as the sanctioned killing of nilgai in parts of India, the carcasses are often discarded instead of being utilized to offset protein deficits or financially support conservation efforts. This wasteful approach echoes Kenyan attempts at population control that similarly fail to integrate local economies or ecological sustainability.

The parallels between India and Kenya suggest that prohibitive wildlife laws can undermine the very goals they seek to achieve. By excluding communities from decision-making and denying them the rewards of sustainable wildlife use, these policies inadvertently foster neglect or even antagonism toward conservation objectives. Reforms that recognize cultural practices, establish scientifically grounded harvest quotas and ensure equitable profit-sharing can help convert today's "pests" or "poaching liabilities" into communal assets. South African and Namibian models, where legal frameworks enable community-based management and regulated hunting, demonstrate that local populations can become invested stewards of biodiversity when they directly benefit from its survival.

It is also worth noting that many anti-hunting advocates who champion ecotourism as a morally superior alternative may overlook the environmental costs of their own preferred pursuits. Recent data from a privately run 80,000-acre reserve in northern Namibia reveal that trophy hunting generates around 1.1 million USD annually from approximately 70 hunters, while the same reserve's ecotourism lodge brings in over 4.3 million USD from 11,000 visitors, most of whom travel long distances from Europe or the United States. The lodge's travel-related carbon emissions amount to around 35,600 tonnes of CO2 each year, whereas the hunting segment emits just over 450 tonnes. On a dollar-per-tonne basis, the ecotourism side produces between 18 and 37 times the emissions and once the impact of luxury lodging is factored in, that figure may rise to between 59 and 122 times. Moreover, the meat harvested by hunters, when substituted for local beef and lamb, saves nearly 2,900 tonnes of emissions, making the hunting operation carbon negative several times over. This example illustrates that "eco" in ecotourism can be a misnomer, as a single lodge's emissions can be equivalent to driving a car 35,000 kilometers per year for well over seven millennia. Scaling that figure to the broader ecotourism footprint in a country that receives over a million visitors annually magnifies the disconnect between perceived "green" tourism and its actual environmental toll.

South Africa and Namibia offer a different narrative. These countries have embraced a model known as Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), where local groups can legally earn revenue from activities like regulated trophy hunting and wildlife tourism. This arrangement ties the economic health of communities to the well-being of wildlife populations, encouraging rural residents to protect habitats, monitor animal numbers and deter poaching. In South Africa, private game ranching and hunting have

become billion-rand industries that bolster rural economies and create employment. Namibia's communal conservancies reinvest profits from tourism and hunting into healthcare, education and community services, simultaneously reducing conflicts with wildlife. By adopting similar frameworks, India might convert crop-raiding species like wild boars and nilgai from destructive "pests" into valuable resources, either through meat sales or regulated hunting permits that fund local conservation efforts. Degraded "wastelands" could be managed as game habitats, offering viable livelihoods while expanding biodiversity refuges.

THE HIJACKING OF CONSERVATION NARRATIVES

Powerful global organizations have long shaped India's conservation strategies, sometimes overshadowing local contexts and centuries of ecological knowledge. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), among other influential bodies, has contributed significantly to funding and promoting wildlife initiatives, yet its largely prohibition-driven focus can diminish the roles of traditional community-based practices. By foregrounding charismatic species and fortress conservation models, such organizations may inadvertently portray strict bans as the only ethical avenue, even in situations where historical stewardship or scientific assessments might favor regulated use and local participation.

Social media amplifies these top-down frameworks through compelling, emotive messaging. The rise of teenage climate activists, often referred to as "new age Gretas," attests to how quickly impassioned narratives can go viral. Greta Thunberg's activism has undoubtedly galvanized a global conversation on climate change, but her brand of attention-grabbing protests can overshadow the granular, data-heavy discussions needed to shape nuanced conservation strategies. While I am the same age as Greta Thunberg, I would rather not spend my time staging arrests or reiterating lines that the public has heard for decades. Awareness matters, but it must go hand in hand with on-the-ground solutions that address human-wildlife conflict, habitat fragmentation and poaching.

Such emotionally charged narratives can hinder pragmatic, science-based wildlife management by framing any form of regulated use as morally unacceptable. This paints rural communities confronting crop damage or livestock losses as antagonists, effectively marginalizing the very people whose engagement is essential for lasting conservation. Sweeping prohibitions may generate immediate public support but often fail to resolve deeper issues, from unchecked overpopulation of certain species to the socio-economic hardship driving illegal resource use. India's conservation debates increasingly unfold on digital platforms, where dramatic imagery of injured animals or confrontations with forest staff often eclipses thorough research into ecological carrying capacities or financial mechanisms that could align communities' livelihoods with biodiversity protection.

Reclaiming India's conservation narrative necessitates balancing emotional resonance with rigorous local research. Organizations like WWF can still serve as valuable allies if they adapt to India's socio-economic realities rather than impose uniform, prohibition-centric prescriptions. Young activists can continue leveraging social media for environmental causes, but they also have a responsibility to advocate for deeper scientific engagement and community-led models. By synthesizing empathy with evidence, India can prevent external agendas from overshadowing its rich legacy of coexistence and orient conservation policies toward sustainable, equitable outcomes for both people and wildlife.

REASSESSING CONSERVATION POLICIES

India's current approach to wildlife protection underscores a rigid separation between people and animals,

which often proves inadequate in reducing conflict and promoting healthy coexistence. Large-scale culls of species like nilgai in Bihar highlight the paradox of discarding carcasses in a nation struggling with malnutrition. Such measures reflect a policy framework rooted in prohibition rather than sustainable management. While bans can sometimes stabilize dwindling wildlife populations, global examples reveal that absolute prohibition is rarely the most effective conservation strategy. North American states, for instance, rely on regulated hunts for species like deer and elk, using permit fees to fund habitat restoration and population monitoring.

A more balanced policy in India could allow communities to derive tangible benefits from wildlife. Achieving this will likely require amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) of 1972. Refined definitions of "hunting" could exempt legitimate self-defense or crop-protection activities from criminal charges. Streamlined regulations would empower farmers to guard their livelihoods without facing bureaucratic hurdles and community-based models could reward sustainable land management. By incorporating these adjustments into national policy, the country would move away from purely prohibitory measures and toward participatory conservation strategies that align with local realities.

RECOMMENDED AMENDMENTS TO THE WILDLIFE PROTECTION ACT (WPA) OF 1972

The following proposed amendments aim to empower farmers and communities, promote the sustainable use of wildlife resources and reduce human-wildlife conflict through regulated hunting and localized decision-making. While the current WPA provisions prioritize protection above all else, a reimagined WPA would balance ecological concerns with socio-economic needs, providing mechanisms for controlled utilization of wildlife in ways that benefit local populations and strengthen conservation.

Under the heading of empowering farmers and communities, it would be essential to adjust Section 9, which currently prohibits hunting of any wild animal specified in Schedules I through IV. A carefully structured exemption for crop-raiding species such as wild boar, nilgai and rhesus monkeys would enable farmers to protect their crops without navigating lengthy bureaucratic processes. Similarly, Section 11 could be streamlined to allow local authorities to respond promptly when animals threaten human life or property, eliminating the protracted wait times that currently impede action. Section 12, which permits hunting only for scientific research and zoos, could explicitly include provisions for regulated lethal crop protection. This would ensure a more realistic population control mechanism, especially for species proven to cause extensive agricultural damage.

With respect to the sustainable use of wildlife resources, the WPA's Preamble could shift from a singular emphasis on protection toward an inclusive understanding of "wildlife management," incorporating community-based conservation. The broad definition of "hunting" found in Section 2 (16) should be refined so that essential activities like driving animals away from fields or practicing scientific, quota-based harvesting of overabundant species are not automatically criminalized. In tandem, Section 39, which currently vests ownership of all wild animals with the state, could be modified to enable communities to responsibly share in the benefits of wildlife through regulated hunts or the sale of specific wildlife products under clear, scientifically established guidelines.

Regulated hunting and community participation would also require targeted reforms. Section 11 is presently limited to the destruction of dangerous or disabled animals. Broadening it to permit community-led management of crop-raiding species would help rural populations manage local ecological realities while respecting overarching conservation goals. Section 29, which governs wildlife sanctuaries, could make allowances for regulated hunts in buffer zones or non-sensitive areas under well-defined scientific oversight, generating funds that could flow back into habitat upkeep. Likewise, the process of designating vermin under Schedule V, which currently occurs on an ad hoc basis—could be standardized to include species like nilgai and wild boar when populations are demonstrably causing socioeconomic and ecological harm.

Addressing human-wildlife conflict comprehensively would call for streamlining Section 11 so that approvals to manage or remove dangerous animals do not languish under undue bureaucracy. Replacing Section 62, which allows temporary vermin declarations, with a permanent and transparent mechanism for managing species that become problematic would encourage local stakeholders to act responsibly. This framework would harness principles of sustainable use and science-based quotas, rather than relying on blanket culls or short-lived legal exemptions.

For decades, India's conservation discourse has been influenced by global organizations and Western ideologies that sometimes disregard indigenous knowledge systems and community-level stewardship. Reclaiming this narrative means uplifting local perspectives and reconnecting policy with the diverse cultural traditions that have historically governed wildlife use. Protection alone has not resolved the recurrent tensions between people and animals, especially when rural communities bear the costs of living near wildlife without receiving corresponding benefits. Policymakers and conservationists must engage the public with fact-based messaging to counter the emotional or unscientific narratives that often dominate social media. Showcasing success stories in community-led management—both within India and from other regions—can challenge misconceptions that regulated use inevitably undermines conservation. By establishing local governance structures that reward sustainable practices, India can harmonize its legacy of coexistence with modern ecological science.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

India stands at a crossroads in its conservation journey. Bridging the divide between prohibitionist policies and the economic realities of rural populations will be crucial for creating sustainable pathways. Modernizing the WPA and integrating concepts of sustainable wildlife use can direct significant revenues toward habitat preservation, reduce human-wildlife conflict and nurture local support for conservation initiatives. Such reforms should be grounded in ongoing scientific research and equitable processes that ensure benefits flow to those who coexist with wildlife on a daily basis, including farmers, tribal communities and forest-dependent populations.

Empowering local stakeholders to transform wildlife from a perceived threat into an economic resource can help curb retaliatory killings and poaching. Revenue from responsible hunting, wildlife ranching, or controlled trade can be reinvested in anti-poaching patrols, habitat restoration and other community needs. Successful implementation of these approaches could yield stronger biodiversity corridors, fewer dangerous encounters with wild animals and a cultural shift where wildlife is valued for the tangible prosperity it brings. With an estimated 3600-plus tigers roaming India's reserves, there is already momentum for transformative thinking about how best to secure the nation's ecological future. By reflecting on indigenous traditions, embracing effective global models and proactively planning for
change, India has the potential to pioneer a conservation paradigm that places both wildlife and local communities at the heart of environmental stewardship.