

India's Dilemma: Conservation Success vs. Human Cost

A recent webinar hosted by India's Wildlife Economy (27 March 2026) brought together leading experts to examine the growing crisis of human-wildlife conflict (HWC) in India. The discussion highlighted a difficult reality: while conservation efforts have achieved notable successes, they have also imposed significant and often overlooked costs on rural communities.

Rising Conflict, Unequal Burden

India records approximately 1,500 human fatalities each year due to wildlife encounters, alongside extensive losses of crops, livestock, and property. These impacts fall disproportionately on rural, marginalised and forest-fringe communities, who bear the risks of conservation without adequate protection or compensation.

Panellists emphasised that local governance institutions, particularly Panchayats, have both the legal mandate and potential to play a central role in conflict mitigation. However, regional complexities—such as community-owned land and traditional practices in the Northeast—require context-specific approaches.

S



Policy Gaps and Institutional Fragmentation

A recurring concern was the lack of coordination among government departments. Wildlife management remains fragmented across forestry, agriculture, tribal affairs, and rural development agencies. A more integrated, cross-sectoral framework is essential for meaningful progress.

Legal institutions may offer a pathway forward. The National Legal Services Authority (NALSA), supported by recent High Court rulings, could help frame human-wildlife conflict as a matter of fundamental rights, particularly where state failure results in loss of life or livelihood.

The Limits of Compensation

Current compensation schemes are both inadequate and unsustainable. In Maharashtra alone, annual wildlife-related losses are estimated in the billions, yet only a fraction is reimbursed. This gap reinforces economic vulnerability and erodes public support for conservation.

Towards “Painless Conservation”

A more balanced model of conservation must recognise both ecological and human realities. A proposed three-tier framework includes:

- **Protected Areas** exclusively for wildlife
- **Shared Landscapes** with managed wildlife populations
- **Human-Dominated Zones** prioritising safety and livelihoods

Such an approach, supported by existing legislation and community-based models, offers a pragmatic path forward.

Reframing the Conservation Narrative

The debate also exposed a deeper divide between preservationist ideals and lived realities. While some advocate for strict protection, others question the social cost of conservation successes, particularly where communities face increasing threats from expanding wildlife populations.

India’s conservation achievements are significant, but they come with consequences that cannot be ignored. Those living closest to wildlife—often the poorest and least supported—are paying the highest price.

Conclusion

Sustainable conservation must be both effective and equitable. Reducing conflict, ensuring fair economic support, and actively involving local communities are not optional—they are essential. Only by aligning conservation goals with human welfare can India secure a future that protects both its people and its wildlife.

Mathen “Rajeev” Mathew

Vice President for Asian Affairs

IWMC World Conservation Trust

Member, IUCN SULi, CEESP and SSC