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Mitigating human-wildlife conflict must factor in incentives for local communities

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India today has the largest population of the tiger. (Express Photo)

Any human-wildlife conflict affects both the sides often in tragic ways, like the death of four tigers in Mhadei, Goa, and the reported arrest of the locals who poisoned the animals after their complaints were not attended to in a way it should have been. Pramod Sawant, the chief minister of Goa, reportedly said that, “we demarcate and fence the borders of the wildlife sanctuaries” in order to end 80 cent of the problem. Although the intentions are good, this isn’t a solution. Tigers do not understand boundaries made for administrative purposes. What happens when a tiger goes “outside” and kills cattle?

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but to also use human-use landscapes. This rationale is as old as tigers and humans are in India. People have accepted this, and incorporated it in our culture. All our deities have animals associated with them; it shows the inclusion of these animals in our mind space. The Velip community in Goa worship the tigers and this practice is done even today, although it was started at a time when tigers were still present all over Goa. When my parents had taken me to the Verne temple in 1968, on the top — near a spring — there was a tiger. My frightened family ran down and when they told the temple priests about the animal, the response was acknowledgment. Yes, he comes to drink water.

People have always shared space with wildlife in India. No doubt, the repercussions are sometimes very serious like it happened in Mhadei. However, the solutions elsewhere, not in fencing the land which neither people nor tigers will adhere to, a tiger can get over the fence just as much as a human can. The best way forward to ensure that the locals view an engagement with tigers as a path towards development: This is something the administration can definitely do as has been shown in many other tiger reserves, including in Maharashtra. The health minister Vishwajit Rane, in whose constituency the tiger carcasses were found, called the creation of the tiger reserve as a measure against development. But that is because we have not seen the money that the tigers can bring in. Unlike activities such as mining, tigers are a renewable resource. They are always going to be there, and will the rivers and the forests, giving the local people income and development as long as there are tigers.

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But this model has to be one which ensures that the benefits of tourism go directly to the communities in that landscape. Many other states have adopted this model where the money that comes in from tourism goes into the Tiger Conservation Fund, which in turn is used for the development of the local villages — as has been done in Tadoba tiger reserve, Maharashtra. Crores of rupees that come in yearly are also used to provide training to the local youth, to better the services in the villages around the tiger reserve. The tiger reserve staff facilitate these development activities for the locals. There is no way the locals will then grudge their tigers, if the benefits are there for all to see.

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In the short term, compensation procedures need to be improved. The communication and interaction between the forest department and the locals has to be improved. In Maharashtra, a decade ago, the compensation amount was paltry and the process was cumbersome as well as time consuming. Today a helpline

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the service process, the people don't complain much. Because they know they are getting their services/compensation in a proper time-bound manner.

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The solutions are simple: Inclusive development with a long-term vision that cares for the environment. It is about better public services in terms of transparency, accountability and genuine assistance. After all, we are talking about communities who need to be custodians of the tigers and tigers who can, in turn, provide the communities much-needed development in remote areas.

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This article first appeared in the print edition on February 25, 2020 under the title 'Man with wild'. The writer is an ecologist with WCS, India.

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