

People-Park Relationships. A case study of Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to understand the complexities involved in wildlife conservation taking the example of a protected area (PA) in India. The country is one of the mega-biodiversity countries of the world and at the same time a developing country with a heavy reliance on natural resources for its growth, and a large rural and tribal population for which the very forests, which have now been declared into PAs form their survival base.

Bandhavgarh National Park (BNP) covers an area of 448.84 sq. km. In view of the importance of tiger conservation in India, Bandhavgarh, which has the highest number of tigers in the world, was given the status of a Tiger Reserve in 1993. However, the area faces competition from people living within the Park and on the periphery for subsistence use and income generation. There is a high resource use overlap due to the various people's activities inside the Park. On the other hand, better protection has led to increased wildlife depredation in the form of crop damage, livestock and human losses to the local population. These human-wildlife conflicts pose major problems, which the Park officials have to contend with.

The study sought to understand the degree of dependence of the resident human population on the Park resources, pressures exerted on the Park as a result of this resource use, the changes that the inclusion in the Park entails for the people, and the interaction between the people and the Park authorities. A variety of methods were used to achieve this goal. The type and degree of people's dependence was studied mainly through focus group discussion and two-staged sampling of 155 households. Mapping of resource use and forest department surveys were applied to gain information about the Park officials' perception of resource use, benefits of the Park for the people and the wildlife and potential consequences of resource use by people. Secondary data was referred to with regard to conservation policies and legislations relevant for the Park and management practices.

The study revealed that people residing inside the Park are dependent to a very large extent on the Park resources for subsistence and income generation. The results showed that differences in tenure type did not have a significant impact on the restrictions faced and problems and costs incurred since inclusion in the Park. The pressure mapping of the Park revealed excessive overuse of Park resources by the people and a high degree of resource overlap with

the wildlife. This is detrimental for the Park and contrary to the conservation objective of the Park.

The study revealed that presence of alternatives not only influences people's acceptance of the PA, which is crucial to ensure the future viability of the PA, but also reduces the dependence of the people on the PA. Therefore, provision of alternative sources of employment are necessary for the long-term survival of the Park.

The study concludes that although relocation of the villages from inside the Park is a policy stipulation, at present its implementation is highly unlikely and the chances of relocation at a future date also appear slim. The contrast between the policy stipulation and reality has led to ambiguous regulations and weak enforcement of existing rules. The uncertainty imposed by the threat of relocation provides an incentive to the local people to overexploit the resource base for short-term benefits, as the people do not know whether they will still be there in the long-term to suffer the costs.

BNP is the only NP in India where eco-development has been launched in villages inside the Park. This might be in acknowledgement of the problems involved in relocation. More research is, however, needed to assess the success of this initiative and how it compares to policy alternatives like the provision of alternative sources of income outside the Park. Involvement of the inside villagers in Park management and providing them with a share of the revenues from eco-tourism in the area would also be desirable. This would provide a means for understanding the substantive needs of the local people and give them a personal stake in the condition of the Park. It would also help to build trust between Park authorities and the people, a prerequisite for securing the Park's future.