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Culling Nilgai: To manage wildlife conservation and human interests, research is key

Janaki Lenin (<http://www.firstpost.com/author/janaki-lenin>) Jul 1, 2016 10:44 IST

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Conservationists are fond of saying India is a tolerant country for wildlife. Many of its billion plus citizens live cheek by jowl with dangerous beasts. Vegetarian animals eat their crops and predators snack on livestock. Some farmers claim compensation for their loss, but most stoically bear their burden. But this benevolent attitude is under siege.

For decades, farmers in Himachal Pradesh complained (<http://www.news18.com/news/politics/himachal-voters-make-monkey-menace-a-big-poll-issue-312491.html>) that they were unable to earn a living when hordes of rhesus macaques grabbed crops and fruits (<http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/monkeys-destroy-crops-in-himachal-farmers-fume-at-government-apathy-5476>) "http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/monkeys-destroy-crops-in-himachal-farmers-fume-at-government-apathy-5476". The farmers' distress became a political slugfest before every election in the state. Some abandoned their fields (<http://www.news18.com/news/politics/himachal-voters-make-monkey-menace-a-big-poll-issue-312491.html>) and quit farming. When sterilizing tens of thousands of macaques failed to control the problems, agriculturalists demanded culling notwithstanding the primate's association with Hanuman. It was the last resort.

People complained about nilgai, but when given shooting rights (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/india-untamed/2014/dec/27/changing-nilgais-name-management-strategy>), they weren't prepared to do anything. The problem was the name of the animal: this antelope was conjoined with the holy cow.

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Just 18 months ago, managers considered changing the animal's name to vanroz (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/india-untamed/2014/dec/27/changing-nilgais-name-management-strategy>), to sever the sanctity bestowed by its common name.

Across the country, most complaints of crop damage feature large mammals, like nilgai and wild boar. Rarely do farmers complain to the forest department about rodents, perhaps the worst offenders of all. They don't see the need to urge official action when they can deploy traps and poisons themselves. Should they pull the same stunt with larger animals, they could be prosecuted under wildlife laws. That doesn't prevent people from trying.

Wild boar are survivors and ought to be found in every habitat. Even with legal protection, they have been quietly exterminated from most of our farmlands.

The Centre approved proposals to cull these animals in particular areas (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/vermin-nilgais-on-hit-list-as-bihar-farmers-back-culling/story-03QDFkx9wJK6o5TOe1BhIK.html>) for specific periods. A sharpshooter engaged by the Bihar Forest Department shot at least 300 nilgai, even before an official name change.

Many believe culling will put an end to the daily pitched battles with wild animals. Although it is widely practiced in the US, Europe, and Africa, there is little evidence that it alleviates crop damage or loss of livestock.

The belief is: more animals eat more crops. Reducing numbers would therefore lead to less damage. However, this obvious logic doesn't play out so well in the real world.



<http://s3.firstpost.in/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/nilgai-380.jpg>

Even if numbers mattered, a short spell of culling won't fix the problem. Once an area is cleared of animals and there are no other claimants to the food, others move in from neighbouring areas. Within months, they replace the removed animals.

If the states seek recourse in culling, they are in for the long haul. They have to keep killing indefinitely until they drastically reduce the species' numbers or exterminate it, undoing everything India has achieved in conservation.

Perhaps more than a real fix, the states want to buy tolerance by giving in to the demands for culling.

Many conservation organizations around the world believe a state-mandated cull could prevent poaching and retaliatory killing of wildlife. In its 'A manifesto for large carnivore conservation in Europe,' the IUCN says:

Kodagu has few elephants but its residents complain a great deal about crop damage. The Nilgiris has many more elephants but reports fewer complaints. There's no evidence that increasing animal numbers leads to more dependence on human foods. Then how can culling alleviate the situation?

Even if numbers mattered, a

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“Legalised, well regulated hunting of large carnivores at sustainable levels can be a useful tool in responding to conflict, through slowing their increase to socially acceptable levels, engaging local populations in management, increasing their perceived local value, and decreasing illegal killing.”

In a recent article (<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/348/6241/1312>) for *Science*, two biologists Rosie Woodroffe and Stephen Redpath argued, “Pragmatic conservationists have long recognised that allowing some predator control — whether or not it achieves its stated aims—can help to build tolerance among land managers who might otherwise block conservation efforts.”

But there's no evidence that killing animals promotes tolerance.

In a paper published in April 2016 in the Proceedings of the Royal Society B (<http://rspb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/royprsb/283/1830/20152939.full.pdf>), ecologists Guillaume Chapron and Adrian Treves say contrary to accepted wisdom, culling reduces tolerance and provides an incentive for poaching. When the state killed wolves in the forest-less expanses of Wisconsin and Michigan, residents perceived that the benefits of wolves had declined. The authors came to these conclusions by modelling culling policies with projected wolf population growth rate, instead of actually looking at poaching figures and assessing people's attitudes.

Many rural Europeans and Americans have it in for wolves, and every smidgen of support for the beleaguered animals is hard-won. If a few animals have to be killed to buy acceptance for the presence of the species, wildlife managers and conservationists compromised.

While our farmers may not believe 'the only good nilgai is a dead one,' many clandestinely do away with animals. They use live wires, mouth bombs, poisoned or explosives-filled pumpkins, snares, and a variety of cruel and crude methods to dispatch animals. Wild boar with their lower jaws blown off wander in pain before succumbing to infection, blood loss, and starvation. Elephants are maimed or killed by exploding or poisoned pumpkins. Live wires kill indiscriminately – anything large or small that comes into contact is toast. Would such killings become more prevalent as the study on wolves indicates?

Three ingredients encourage poaching during culling periods, Treves told *Firstpost* — “One, the government signal should be negative, example, too many wolves and many people suffering, and culling must be widely publicised as an alleged remedy.” In addition, the species must be unpopular among those with weapons and an inclination to poach.

In India, none of the marked species draw the kind of hatred that wolves do in the West. So would people prefer to let the government do the dirty work for them?

John Linnell of the Norwegian Institute of Nature Research studied the ecology of leopards and wolves living in Maharashtrian farmlands. He says, “It (culling) is a fascinating experiment which needs to be conducted so India can gain experience with different options for managing wildlife in human-dominated landscapes. It may not work, but I think it needs to be tried. I only hope that it is being followed up so that knowledge can be gained from the process. However, I would also hope that a range of other options are being tested as well.”

We don't know what causes conflict, why some animals of a species prefer crops to wild forage, why particular areas are more prone to crop damage, and what measures farmers should take to protect their livelihoods. There is no single universal cause that

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drives animals to eat crops and neither are there any silver bullet solutions. It's impractical for biologists to investigate such situations region by region and custom-draft possible ways of deflecting animals.

A policy to deal with wildlife in farmlands would help. Wildlife policy and laws provide species-wide protection and prescribe how wildlife areas are to be managed. They say little about what managers should do when animals live in agricultural fields. The Karnataka Elephant Task Force (<http://envfor.nic.in/sites/default/files/press-releases/wl-01112012.pdf>) made a start in this direction by prioritising landscapes for people and elephants and recommending appropriate actions. There's no question that wildlife living with humans has to be managed. The question is how.

If this culling effort fails, as it is bound to, how will farmers react? Would they go back to non-lethal methods? Or would they demand the extermination of the species? Would culling in some areas instigate people in other areas to demand similar relief? We need more research in wildlife management and social scientists to assess people's attitudes. Not only is farm economy already in crisis so is wildlife conservation.

Unless we do more to help farmers, our famed tolerance for wildlife will be shot to hell.

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