

Cattle and Conservation at Bharatpur

A case study in science and advocacy

Michael Lewis



Photo: Ghazala Shahabuddin

Few subjects can polarize a group of conservation practitioners more quickly than grazing in protected areas. For generations of ecologists and park managers throughout the world the destructive nature of livestock grazing on natural systems was so apparent that it never even needed to be discussed. In contrast, villagers and various social ecologists often see grazing as essential to individual (and village) economies, and an acceptable and traditional use of protected landscapes. While many conservationists can intuitively sense that overgrazing can destroy an ecosystem, and that there is a carrying capacity for even the most heavily modified pasture, the reverse proposition – that a complete ban on livestock grazing might be harmful in an ecosystem that has evolved in the context of grazing – is not so self-evident.

In response to the assumptions of conservationists,

and only rarely based upon scientific study, national parks throughout the world have been created as cattle-free sanctuaries. This applies equally in India, where the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 defined Indian national parks as cattle-free zones. This law created a universal standard for Indian national parks, forbidding grazing even in places where it had been occurring for centuries. In some parks and places in India, domestic grazing has caused a great deal of harm. In almost all protected areas, overgrazing is a threat. But is it possible that in at least a few national parks, some low level of domestic grazing is perhaps necessary for ecosystem stability?

At Keoladeo Ghana National Park in Bharatpur, cattle removal did not have the desired effect of improving the health of the ecosystem. When cattle (as well as local fodder collection) were banned in 1982, a Bombay Natural History Society study showed that

the park's habitat and endangered bird populations began a slow decline. The waterways began to be clogged by a few weedy species (the non-domesticated herbivores would not eat them), and the grasslands were subject to repeated wild fires that were fueled by the abundant and ungrazed grasses. In conjunction, this reduced the suitable habitat for the birds (such as the Siberian crane) that had made the park so famous.

This case study challenges the assumption that conservationists can apply seemingly universal truths such as “domesticated cattle are always harmful” on local landscapes. The attempt to use ecological insights from one scientific study or one region of the world to devise universal conservation practices is highly problematic, fraught with risks, easily politicised and frequently ineffective. Concretely, this suggests that protected area management needs to be based upon careful ecological study of each specific protected area, and that conservation advocacy (and legal frameworks) should allow for this. All too often though, conservation occurs in the midst of a crisis, and there does not seem to be time for local study. But as Bharatpur illustrates, the price of acting too hastily, and on the basis of non-scientific assumptions, is sometimes the very ecosystem crash that conservationists are trying to prevent.

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Community Conservation Inequality and Injustice

Myths of power in protected area management

Daniel Brockington

There is a clear belief in many conservation circles that protected areas cannot survive without the support of their neighbours. Protected areas' neighbours are more numerous than their guards. If these poor rural neighbours want to collect firewood, graze their livestock or hunt wild animals then they will, often with impunity, and conservation will suffer. I call this belief 'the principle of local support'.

The importance of local support has been observed in many instances, but it should not be built up to be a universal principle. There are occasions where it does not work, and we need to be wary of it for several reasons. First, the principle of local support assumes that the weak can obstruct the agendas of the strong. It ignores the fact that rural groups are often politically, militarily or financially weak. In contrast, conservationists can be relatively well-funded, well-connected, and well-armed. Second, the principle assumes that where rural people perceive they are being treated unfairly they will take effective action to achieve a more just distribution of resources.

This may be possible, but is in stark contrast to many instances around the world where inequality and injustice continue to be perpetrated regardless of

opposition to them.

I outline a detailed case study from the Mkomazi Game Reserve in Tanzania, which shows how conservation can flourish despite local opposition. I argue that advocates of community conservation need to pay more attention to such so-called fortress conservation's strengths and especially its powerful myths and representations.

If conservation's misfortunes are concentrated onto a relatively weak group it is quite possible for this inequity to be sustained. It is not existence of poverty or injustice that will cause problems for conservation, but their distribution within society. Understanding how inequality and unjust conservation are successfully perpetrated will make it easier to understand the politics of more participatory community conservation projects.

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