

Cattle Populations from Protected Areas

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In India, as elsewhere, protected areas (PAs) have permanent resident populations who are historically dependent on forest resources for their livelihood. The Buxa Tiger Reserve (BTR), in the northern part of West Bengal, is one such reserve forest where villagers have been residing for more than 100 years. With the creation of a national park, employment opportunities for the forest villagers, who were once treated as an important labour force during the commercial forestry regime, have drastically declined. To reduce pressure on forest resources at the BTR, the World Bank financed India Ecodevelopment Project (IEDP) was initiated with the aim to involve local people by supporting sustainable alternative income generating activities. In consonance with the dominant view that livestock grazing in bio-diverse regions is destructive to nature, reduction in cattle populations and stall feeding of cattle have been included as reciprocal commitments under this project.

This paper is an attempt to assess whether the strategy of cattle reduction is really possible. It also tries to explore how far a reduction of cattle is acceptable or feasible in the context of present findings, especially in India. Results show that there is little impact on cattle populations after the project intervention. However, the slow but consistently decreasing trend

in cattle populations is evident due to natural processes like less resources, diseases, sale of cattle during the periods of crisis and natural calamities. Analyses also reveal that where alternative choices of income-generating activities were limited, people, especially those who had some land, adhered to traditional occupations like agriculture. In such a situation, cattle were regarded as an important resource due to multiplicity of use for sustaining daily livelihoods and also treated as a cash asset by rural as well as forest people for any activities requiring instant cash. The marginal cultivators, who do not possess their own resources for cultivation especially bullocks, have to hire either by giving something in return as kind or by paying high amounts as cash. So whenever opportunities arise, they try to procure items required for cultivation as observed in the IEDP.

Besides, forest villagers are reluctant to reduce cattle as they considered cattle of high economic value. They are not so much interested in rearing high bred cows due to poor understanding of rearing, less availability of veterinary care and unfortunate experiences in the past. Moreover, most forest villagers do not consider grazing in forests as harmful to forest and wildlife. But villagers from fringe areas are compelled to reduce cattle due to increased protection work, dwindling resources, reduced

manpower for rearing with the disintegration of joint family system and less pasture lands due to increased agriculture.

Most conservationists typically generalise, without focusing on regional or local variations. As a result, the policy of imposing models developed for one area and with one set of values upon another area and culture is frequently ineffective. As cattle are an integral part of the rural economy and livelihood especially for marginalised, vulnerable groups in forests where alternative employment opportunities are limited, the reduction or removal of cattle may not be a viable strategy.

A management strategy, like rotational grazing of livestock, might be an alternative instead of sticking to the strategy of reduction of cattle and curtailing villager's rights over forests especially within the PAs. This will instill forest people's confidence in conservation of PAs in India.

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