

Helping people help wildlife

Thirty kilometres from the coffee-growing district of Chikmagalur in the southern Indian state of Karnataka lies the Bhadra Tiger Reserve. Here, the towering ridges of the Western Ghats wrap around a gently undulating landscape dissected by scores of streams and draped in the finest moist deciduous forests anywhere. These forests harbour an impressive assemblage of wildlife from the large and imposing elephant and tiger to a dazzling array of lesser marvels including birds, lizards, snakes, frogs, and insects. Also scattered across Bhadra's forested landscape are sixteen hamlets. These hamlets consist mainly of peasants who till the land as sharecroppers to raise seasonal crops of wet-paddy, graze their small cattle holdings, and gather assorted produce from the adjoining forests.

So, is Bhadra an idyll where people, forests, and wildlife coexist harmoniously? Is it all serenity amidst the green splendour? The answer, unfortunately, is 'no'... both for the villagers, and the wildlife. For the people, life within a wildlife reserve confers some advantages while imposing serious hardships. While the air may be fresh, the water clean, and fuelwood and fodder in plenty, life in a wildlife reserve also means a deprivation from the most basic amenities that people elsewhere take for granted. Dusty tracks make for roads until the monsoons reduce them to treacherous stretches of impassable slush. Electricity is a distant dream. Education, where available, ends with the glory of a understaffed primary school. Of course, there is not even the most rudimentary healthcare facility. And there are large and potentially dangerous animals. Every year, despite many sleepless nights in the defence of their crops, villagers lose nearly 15 percent of their paddy to raiding elephants. Marauding leopards and tigers annually devour some 12 percent of their livestock holding. Occasionally, villagers are themselves killed in attacks by elephants and tigers. The result of all this is a deep, gnawing resentment among villagers for the wildlife reserve itself. Often, this resentment spawns angry reprisal: large carnivores are poisoned at kills, elephants are shot in crop fields, and forests are set on fire.

The lot of the area's magnificent wildlife and forests is no better, really. Thousands of cattle from these villages graze in the surrounding forests, seriously reducing the availability of forage for wild herbivores, and hindering forest regeneration by consuming tree saplings and bamboo. Pressures of human hunting emanating from the villages have also contributed to keeping wildlife populations low. The extensive removal of small timber, fuelwood, bamboo, and other forest produce by local villagers also poses a serious challenge to the region's wildlife habitat. Slowly, but surely, the splendoured forests and wildlife of Bhadra are becoming the stuff of legend.

Given these circumstances, and constant demands from Bhadra's villagers for access to civic amenities and a better life, the government worked, albeit in fits and starts, to draw up a plan of relocating and rehabilitating these villagers to a site outside the park. The plan gathered dust under the wobbly interest shown in it by the bureaucracy, and during a decade of inaction, the hopes of the villagers turned first to frustration and then to cynicism. Conflict between the forest department and the people attained an unprecedented stridence.

In 1998, when the new Deputy Conservator of Forests, Yatish Kumar, took charge of Bhadra, the people were rather unimpressed. They had seen how little difference a turnover of officials had made to their fate. Conflicts were rife, and annually large parts of the park were burnt in acts of redirected aggression as villagers to avenge the impediments posed by the

forest department to what the villagers saw as means of bettering their lives. Over the first year there, Yatish endeavoured to re-establish communication links between the forest department, the villagers, and conservationists. Simultaneously, he took a serious interest in pursuing the relocation and rehabilitation plan that had been shelved. Thanks to constant follow-ups at various levels of government, the plan was finally backed by a financial commitment of 1.68 crore rupees. Meanwhile, the steps being undertaken by the forest department had begun to instil a good faith in the villagers that the protection of wildlife did not necessarily have to prove prejudicial to their interests. In 1999, the bamboo in Bhadra flowered and died, leaving vast stretches of tinder dry fuel. The threat of fires loomed larger than usual, and there were pressures from all over to extract the dead bamboo to avoid catastrophic fires. However, under an emerging atmosphere of healthy trust between the villagers and the forest department, it was possible, for the first time in years, to ensure that virtually no fire occurred in Bhadra. Such readiness by the villagers to cooperate found even more support, as action followed assurance, and by late 2001, over 6 crore rupees had been made available by the government and the process of relocation and rehabilitation had actually commenced.

Under this relocation scheme, the relocating villagers are given a generous valuation for their property (fields, house, trees, etc. are purchased at prices that match, or even exceed prevailing market rates), and the efforts to make it arable are also valued and compensated. Following this, land has been allotted to the relocating villagers in one of two resettlement sites, Malali-Chennhalli (MC Halli), located in the well-irrigated command area of the Bhadra Reservoir close to the town of Tarikere, and Kelagur-Balehalli, a site suited for growing coffee. These land allocations have been made based on the size of lost holdings. Landless people, who comprise half the relocating families, are all being provided with one acre of irrigated land. Besides this, the villagers are being given a residential site, a construction grant for a new house, and a transportation allowance. However, as the project progresses, it becomes clear that certain important elements of the rehabilitation process have been overlooked. Importantly, for instance, most families that are relocating to MC Halli are extremely poor wage-earners, unable even to finance the preparation the land for agriculture, procure seed or manure for the first crop, or travel to the rehabilitation site during the transitional stages before the final relocation. It is here that supplementary financial assistance to the project can make a significant difference to the villagers, enabling them to cope better with the big change that their life is seeing .

To survive into the future, the wildlife in our country needs large areas that are minimally impacted by humans. The process of trying to create such inviolate areas is one fraught with serious practical and ethical problems and can be accomplished only if local communities desire and support the necessary relocations. The only way this be accomplished is by making welfare of relocating communities a serious priority in the effort to reduce human pressures in wildlife reserves. Not often is it possible to undertake an effort that contributes simultaneously to the welfare of people as well as wildlife. As one such unique effort, the rehabilitation programme in Bhadra is richly deserving of support.