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CONTESTED CULTURES

a symposium on

knowledge, use and

conservation of the wild

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The problem

HUMAN engagements with nature are expressed through an extensive range of cultural forms that are dynamic, complex and often defy singular logics and ethical approaches. Whether traditional or modern, biocentric or utilitarian, societies continue these engagements along several axes that include but are not limited to protection, veneration, killing and subjugation. The Indian scenario too is an equally diverse one. Its wide array of human communities celebrate an equally vast variety of close engagements with species that range from reverence to destruction. However, being the second most populous nation with one of the fastest growing economies on the planet, India faces significant environmental concerns and is at an important juncture in thinking about sustainability.

In this context, contemporary India has witnessed the emergence of a conservation movement, the key features of which include a top-down imposed fortress-conservation model (based essentially on the separation of humans from nature), the distinct rise of an urban derived conservation community and animal rights and animal welfare based activism. Hunting and harvesting of species have begun to be viewed through the lenses of the modern conservation discourse creating a polarized field of opinions and begging the question whether contemporary conservation has a place for these ingrained human practices that were once considered hallmarks of our identity as human beings.

The contemporary Indian scenario of conservation is backgrounded by a much longer history of human-nature relationships related to different forms of consumptive and non-consumptive use. The broad historical subdivisions ranging from the pre-colonial to contemporary times can be characterized by different forms of hunting, harvesting and extraction, the domes-

tication of plants and animals, and practices amounting to numerous religious, symbolic and regulatory ties to a multitude of species. These relationships were also embedded within specific class and caste relations some of which were of an unjust nature. For example, though the imperial and colonial periods celebrated hunting by the elite, the same also involved the active participation and contribution of people recruited lower down the socio-economic ladder.

This paradox, of a wealthy and powerful elite relying on the skills and knowledge of forest dwellers and rural communities, has contemporary resonance in the reliance of modern-day conservation scientists on the knowledge and assistance of poor and marginalized 'field assistants' to facilitate and enable their research. Such instances serve to illustrate the problematic and continued existence of persistent power differentials surrounding knowledge, class and status. The large history of human-nature encounter through hunting is further illuminated by versions of 'history from below', where enmeshed within the practices of hunting and utilization are traditional practices of adaptation that rely explicitly on tolerance and non-violence.

The consequences of this range of cultural relations with animals can be seen even in India's megacities which are sometimes known to house the odd large predator. On the other hand, a clandestine, high value trade in wild animal parts and products (most notably tiger parts), fuelled by demand from outside the country serves as yet another dimension of the contemporary situation. The Indian subcontinent is also home to numerous wild ancestors of domesticated species of plants and animals. In fact, taken-for-granted categorizations such as wild and domestic are not always abrupt divides, as evidenced by both deliberate and accidental gene flows among species belonging to these categories. For several species such as pigs and fowl that are products of millennia of hybridization and

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behavioural modification, purely 'wild' forms are unlikely to exist making it impossible to maintain a clear cut 'nature/culture' distinction.

It can be argued that with the worldwide emergence of the enterprise of nature conservation came a significant tapering down of the scope of human-nature relations that can be encompassed under the broad framework of biocultural diversity. Conservation succeeded in privileging particular forms of relations and reshaping and marginalizing others through specific discourses, concepts, techniques and institutions (e.g. nature preservation through the rule of law, scientific protection, expertise and bureaucracies for management).

Through the rise of a rationalistic, science based approach, knowledge about conservation became the prerogative of a privileged few (e.g. scientists, activists, managers) and excluded others who had equally strong or stronger claims to inclusion based on traditional knowledge and lived experiences. Hunting and consumptive practices are human-animal engagements that were especially broad in terms of their relational scope but have undergone this restrictive transformation. In some arenas, the idea of hunting and harvesting or sustainable use itself has become a third rail topic that invites the ire of conservationists and animal activists. Hunting of endangered species of whales by some nations, harp seal hunts in Canada and the argument for harvesting hawksbill turtles in some parts of the world are only a few of the more conspicuous examples.

In India, conservation practices from the late nineteenth century onwards began to ascribe specific values to hunting, drastically diminishing its rich cultural meanings. Hunting, in mainstream conservation discourse, has become little else but the extermination by humans of animals for certain needs, namely nutrition, protection or exchange and trade. According to this idea, if alternatives could be found for these needs, then hunt-

ing is bad. Hunting or resource use that either exceeds the nutritive needs of humans or interfered with how conservationists understood the natural world of the animal was treated as negative and morally (and in cases, legally) wrong.

In post-Independence India, with the passing of the Wild Life (Protection) Act in 1972, which prohibited multiple forms of hunting in large swathes of territories, the image of hunting has taken a further beating. Among its primary proponents was the former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who was ideologically opposed to shikar and other forms of hunting, proposing that the inclusively framed Indian Wildlife Conservation and Management Bill, 1972 be rephrased as The Wildlife (Protection) Bill, 1972. The word 'protection' was used to explicitly avoid the killing of animals.¹

Related to the ideologies of protection is the adherence to a set of moral and ethical overtones that are in line with dominant class ideologies (e.g. urban groups favouring eco-tourism and other forms of non-consumptive use, as well as the creation of protected spaces for animals through coercive measures imposed on local communities) and caste and religion based sensitivities (promotion of abstinence of meat, especially with respect to certain species).

The process of Sanskritization and gentrification have benefited the preservationist model which tends to exclude the rights and world views of traditional societies that are tied to land and natural resource based occupations. Paying lip service to some of these ideas are attempts at attribution of preservationist intent to past Indian rulers (e.g. Ashoka) as well as Orientalist readings of ancient scriptures and texts that suggest an inherent environmental ethic. This selective portrayal ignores the vast diversity of human-nature relationships on the subcontinent.

1. Jairam Ramesh, *Indira Gandhi: A Life in Nature*. Simon and Schuster India, 2017.

Over the last decade, this dim view of hunting has been reinforced by several studies many of which exemplify preconceived biases on its negative impact. This relates both to studies on species declines especially those that implicate local communities as villains even in the face of greater development pressures driven by industrial agriculture, mining, urbanization, etc. In fact, a number of scholarly articles start with the premise of hunting as an inherently immoral act. Additionally, scientists and conservationists are typically the sole arbiters of knowledge about hunting, despite the fact that elements of long-term knowledge related to harvesting and ecological regulation tend to be embedded within local contexts, individuals and networked relations.

This telescoping of conservation focus resulted in simplistic concerns for the continued biological existence of certain animals seen as separate from humans and their existence. An important related focus of conservation was to change how humans ought to engage with animals to ensure the latter's continued biological/ecological survival. A sharp separation is now forged between the human species and animal species without adequate attention to cultural encounters between the two that often results in the death of one or the other.

At one end of the spectrum of conservation discourse lies the animal rights perspective. The animal rights viewpoint holds that animals have a separate, intrinsic right to existence in a manner quite similar to that broadly held for human species – one without pain and suffering, with freedoms that guarantee their well-being and, importantly, an existence characterized by being alive. Inspired by the ideas associated with rights of animals are related disciplines that examine specific types of relations between humans and animals such as some scholarship in the recently emerging fields of animal geographies and critical animal studies, which have sought to elaborate the myriad ways in which non-human species culturally enrich human worlds through their lively and fleshy existence. These disciplines seek to destabilize the dominance and superiority of humans over other species (termed more-than-human species), and in doing so, sometimes question the right of humans to negatively affect the lives of other animal species.

Similar to the arguments of animal rights activists, the scholarship from such academic fields seeks to explore the ethical grounds that condone humans extinguishing the lives of more-than-human species. While such disciplines indicate that they wish to advance a broader appreciation of human-animal cultural relationships, these conditions can exclude or question those relations that result in injury or death to animals, such

as hunting. Recent analysis has argued for a broadening out of this work to incorporate a 'decolonizing' of the sub-discipline, drawing attention to how the imperialist project exported ideas around the world.² This author argues that recognizing the operation of power to establish and reinforce racial and cultural difference is key in challenging the legacy and hegemony of European modernity.

There appear to be only few conditions under which hunting (killing) is considered ethically permissible. Promoters of animal rights and even preservationist conservationists occasionally condone the hunting and harvesting of certain animals by poor tribal groups. Their qualifications of 'poverty' and 'tribal' or 'forest dependent' disclose other assumptions. Poverty suggests that a person would only kill since she/he would not have another choice. A tribal/forest dependent status suggests that such groups can only have subsistence relations with nature (marked chiefly by nutritive needs of immediate social groups). Other cultural values that 'poor tribals' might associate with hunting or resource use practices are inadmissible under the ethical framings of both animal rights and preservationists.

Much conservation literature continues to overlook these aspects of human-animal relations despite the contributions of anthropology, an older field that has itself changed and expanded its course in the companionship of numerous other disciplinary streams. Instead, contemporary conservation continues to focus on establishing acceptable conditions under which the use or hunting of animals might be permissible, ironically resurrecting older tropes about primitive humans only warranting subsistence needs. For instance, cultural predispositions are particularly dominant in widely criticised practices such as big game hunting in almost all societies be they traditional or modern.

The cumulative evidence from the literature on anthropology and archaeology point to a largely cultural (but nevertheless evolutionarily strategic) basis for the hunting of large game by males. Though a range of scholars within these disciplines warn us against the treatment of traditional societies as incarcerated by the sole requirement of food acquisition, the case for culture does not appear to be argued strongly in conservation practice. In the latter context, the cultural ideas of rights, preservation and companionable living for non/more-than human animal life appear to stand in opposition to cultural values embedded in hunting, use and killing of animals.

2. Alice J. Hovorka, 'Animal Geographies I: Globalizing and Decolonizing', *Progress in Human Geography*, 2016.

Some minority voices within conservation research have also recently called for more inclusive and diverse approaches to understanding human-animal relationships, including situations where humans can be either the predator or the prey.³ Recent work exploring the cultures of animals and how those cultures relate to specific cultures of humans also suggests that taking seriously the knowledge and behaviour of marginalized communities can add to conservation practice.⁴

Despite this, the mainstream conservation discourse has begun to find confluence with the strong currents of animal studies, whose theorization draws from a fairly limited space – one that examines relations between elite classes and specific animals but often omit to draw on empirical work that involves hunting, killing and eating animals. There is also limited interrogation of basic parallels related to killing and death, that hunters, like all living things sustain their lives through the deaths of others. A point of difference is that hunters, foragers and fishers in small-scale communities engage with animal deaths directly, getting their hands bloody or dirty in the course of acquiring the things they will eat. In modern industrial and post-industrial societies, the deaths of the things eaten tend to happen out of sight and with other people's hands, or with machines.

In other words, at the global scale, humans are clearly the top predator on the planet. Much of our violent predation is enacted by machines, and much of the death is collateral damage: trawlers that harvest hundreds of tonnes of fish as well as 'bycatch' and damage seabed ecosystems; bulldozers clearing land for infrastructure and agriculture; open-cut mines; construction of enormous concrete dams that have impacts over huge areas both up and downstream.

Thinking clearly about all our roles in the deaths of individual animals and plants, species and ecosystems is challenging. It is relatively easy to apparently absolve ourselves from implication by not participating in the actual deaths that provide our food; or conversely to romanticize the lives and values of those living 'close to nature'. While these questions and contradictions apply globally, in India they are particularly acute: its cultural invention of *ahimsa*; the country with the largest cattle inventory in the world; where current statistics sug-

3. Simon Pooley, M. Barua, W. Beinart, A. Dickman, G. Holmes, J. Lorimer, A. J. Loveridge et al., 'An Interdisciplinary Review of Current and Future Approaches to Improving Human Predator Relations', *Conservation Biology*, 2016.

4. Joel Berger, *The Better to Eat You With: Fear in the Animal World*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

5. N. Paulson, 'The Place of Hunters in Global Conservation Advocacy', *Conservation and Society* 10(1), 2012, pp. 53-62.

gest over 70% are non-vegetarian in food choice; where in modern times only one major species has become extinct, although many others are now vulnerable.

Contestations regarding the pre-eminence of multiple cultural views characterize conservation discourse and practice. Historically, human-animal relations may have been confronted by numerous ethical questions. However, the enterprise of conservation and its associated scholarly discourses and apparatus is responsible for eliminating several of these ethical conversations by narrowing the focus on select biological ethical problems, especially that of killing animals. However, this enterprise has not fully succeeded in its endeavours and the multiplicity of human-animal relations (including of hunting and use of animals) endure despite the opposition.

Power mediates human-animal relations and contestations of power underlie contestations over the expression of cultural rights. Across India's land and waterscapes, people resist a seamless shift into new conservation logics and their ideologies. Even though most conservationists regard these forms of animal use (especially hunting) as unethical, one can discern in these relations a different politics. Conservation would be served well if its practitioners halted the tradition of privileging a narrow band of human-animal relations. We need to move away from highlighting only the ethical question of humans extinguishing non-/more-than-human animal life, and instead become attentive to the diversity of nature-culture manifestations and ethical questions associated with cultural practice and cognitive justice.

A recent review of the potential contribution of hunting to conservation concludes, unsurprisingly, that 'environmental values, interests and beliefs among hunters and other environmentalists are often divisive instead of complementary.'⁵ The author centres this conclusion in debates between sustainable use and protectionism, but both of those positions separate humans and nature, one positioning nature as a resource, the other positioning it as pristine and outside society. For societies who derive some of their resources through hunting, foraging and fishing, this dualism is often absent: they are actively enmeshed in ecosystems of myriad beings, of which they are just one component. Killing and reverence for animals go hand in hand. In a country with well over a billion people, there is currently a need for a plural and inclusive set of views.

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