

Alley cats

It seems like open season on leopards. Over the last month, leopards accused of attacking people in states as far apart as Haryana, Maharashtra and Orissa, have been killed by hysteric mobs.

On the afternoon of Dec 18, 2010, a leopard is said to have attacked three farmers in a village near Gurgaon, Haryana. Panicky villagers hammered it with iron rods and lathis and finally, one of them shot it dead.

Another midday drama unfolded on Jan 9, 2011 in the town of Karad, Maharashtra. A child is reported to have spotted a leopard sitting atop a house. When a crowd of people gathered, the cat snuck into an empty building. Instead of trapping it inside by barricading the doorway, the mob stoned it. With no secure place to hide, the cat charged out and in the ensuing melee, six people were injured. The police chased it with lathis and fired in the air. A man stepped out of a bar, collided with the fleeing leopard and down they went. A police official rushed forward and shot the leopard dead before the man was seriously injured.

A couple of days later, on Jan 13, 2011 a leopard was spotted in a forest plantation about 5 km from Bhubaneswar, Orissa. But before forest officials could arrive, a mob beat it to death reportedly instigated by a local television reporter who wanted dramatic visuals.

Conservationists have urged the National Board for Wildlife, the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the Ministry of Environment and Forests to take action against the people involved. But why do such incidents occur?

In virtually all the cases reported by the press, the leopards were provoked to attack; left alone, they would have quietly skulked away. But how does one prevent an excitable mob from harassing a cornered animal? Imposition of curfew until the animal is safely out of the way is one option. The other is for the Police and Forest Departments to start working in tandem. The former controls the crowd providing the space for the latter to either trap or tranquilize the animal. However, the local Forest Department outpost has to have the skilled personnel and appropriate tools handy for the success of such an operation.

Why do such situations arise in the first place? It is often surmised that leopards are “straying” into villages and towns because infrastructure projects such as dams and mines are depriving them of home and prey. To prevent more such tragic episodes from occurring, some activists have called for the restoration of connectivity between forest fragments and a stop to all further forest loss. While these are inherently sound conservation goals, the question is: can they prevent the collision between people and leopards?

In order to manage conflict, you need to know what is causing it. Fortunately, we’ve learned a few lessons from studies conducted by the leopard researcher, Vidya Athreya in the agricultural fields of Junnar and Akole districts in Maharashtra.

Contrary to widespread belief, here, where there is virtually no forest at all, it is not the absence of prey inside forests but the abundance of feral animals in the countryside that encourages leopards (and other carnivores such as wolves and hyenas) to live with humans. It is futile to manage leopards in this kind of landscape without first cleaning up the garbage, controlling the numbers of stray dogs and feral pigs and securing livestock in paddocks for the night (which the Akole people do and there is no conflict). Elsewhere, when villagers report that leopards are prowling through their fields, the Forest Department hauls the animals away to a forest. Randomly picking up big cats from villages and dropping them in forests actually causes a very real threat to human life.

In Junnar, in the early 2000s, when leopards that had not hurt anyone were preemptively captured and relocated, they began attacking people. We do not yet fully understand why a seemingly benign action should have such a dramatic consequence. Despite evidence, relocating leopards still remains the management tool of choice.

Forests are finite repositories of big cats. As juvenile leopards reach adulthood, these highly territorial animals need to find new land to claim as their own. It is only natural that they explore adjoining agricultural areas where there is food and shelter. If left unmolested, they may settle down to live with humans without causing a problem.

The irrigation projects of the mid 1980s changed cropping patterns in this part of Maharashtra; tall, dense sugarcane stands began to dominate the landscape. This is also the time when the locals say that leopards began to live amongst them. Yet, over the last twenty years, the people suffered little anxiety. Astonishingly, leopards are even hunting in Akole town because of the concentration of stray dogs and feral pigs. Studying situations such as this, we've learnt that leopards are quite at home in the absence of forest and wild prey. Further insights into the lives and needs of these cats that live with humans will enable better management of leopard-man conflict in the future.