

The different shades of human-animal relations

WHERE are our wild animals? If I were to ask this question to a shopper in a mall, the answer would be, in tiger reserves and wildlife sanctuaries. Some may excitedly talk about the tiger they saw in Ranthambore or elephants in Periyar and how they enjoyed the untouched wilderness and the pristine scenery. Perhaps they would have photographed a leopard perched atop a branch, the sun playing on its silken coat.

This image is shattered when in a village elsewhere, the headless body of a young child is found half eaten. The child was not in a forest, but at his doorstep, picked up by a leopard when the grandfather stepped inside the house to get a glass of water. Elephants break down people's houses, lions go into villages in the night to prey on buffaloes, wolves take away shepherds' sheep, and leopards and hyaenas sit patiently outside farmers' houses to take away unprotected goat.

Ask biologists and some of them would reply that potentially dangerous wildlife is omnipresent in our rural landscape. Our work in the agricultural fields of Maharashtra has for the first time shown that leopards share the same croplands as people. The GPS collars on the animals gave us hourly readings, allowing us to



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view their lives as they used the sugarcane fields to sit in all day and make a round of the houses in the night.

What was even more interesting was that the resident population of leopards had never killed any human there. This also highlights how little we know about conflict and why they kill people. The area with more than 200 people per sq km had resident populations of hyaenas, jackals, jungle cats, rusty spotted cats and foxes, all living off domestic animals and rodents. People were regularly facing losses, but apart from paying compensation, which was often late and poorly administered, there is no other help from the government or society.

In India, urban people are generally not aware that wild animals live outside our parks, among people who are mostly poor. It is only in recent years that research inputs in India are focusing on wildlife outside protected areas. The recent report by the Elephant Task Force also acknowledges the losses local people face due to elephants that share their land. But there is no policy to deal with this complex issue.

It is not only India, but even developed countries in the Americas and Europe face this problem of carnivores living among humans. They exterminated their dangerous wild animals decades ago, but present-day conservation efforts led to the recolonisation of mountain lions, wolves, bears and others. What we Indians have on our side, unlike Western countries, is the inherent tolerance shown by people. Rural folk, even today, take it as part of life and I have heard many farmers say that the animal has to eat as well, which is why the leopard took his goat. They also go on to say that God will give them more. We, too, need to assist our rural country people to reduce their losses to wild animals that people like you and I want to conserve.

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