

Wildlife-human conflicts in India: the imperatives of contraception for wildlife population control

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Wildlife-human conflicts, resulting in loss of agricultural crops, livestock, human lives and animal lives, are widespread across India. The basis of such conflicts can be traced to a complex interplay of factors related to the historical patterns of land-use by people resulting in habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation, the behavioural and foraging ecology of wildlife species, environmental variability especially with respect to climate, and the diverse nature of wildlife-human interactions rooted in local culture or religious beliefs. Conflicts between a variety of wildlife species, especially elephants, antelopes (e.g. nilgai, black buck), non-human primates, and carnivores (e.g. leopards), have increased greatly in recent decades in the country. Ironically, much of this conflict can also be traced to successful conservation efforts resulting in increasing wildlife populations, abundance at local scales, and their dispersal over larger human production landscapes.

Various measures from scare techniques to barriers, capture and relocation, and culling have been used to mitigate conflict. Most measures have either failed or have succeeded only to a limited extent. The successful management of conflict is constrained by inadequate financial resources and trained manpower, proven models of mitigation, and widely divergent views among the conservation community as well as local people on addressing the issue. In a country with deep-rooted cultural beliefs about animals, culling as a management option is highly controversial not just among conservationists but also among certain communities. This is especially true of animals such as elephants, nilgai antelope and monkeys considered as sacred. The need for wildlife population control through other means such as contraception becomes obvious. Here again there are several barriers, social and logistical, to overcome, but the development of safe contraceptives would be an important tool in managing wildlife populations to achieve broader conservation goals.