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# Isolated forest conservation fails everyone in areas of Karnataka

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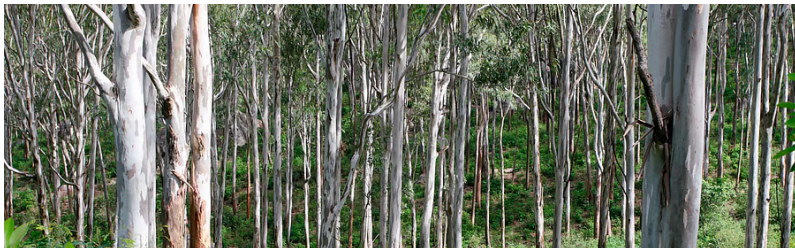
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**Pavan Kumar H** | DHNS

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Hubballi: Alienation of forest dwellers and tribal people from the protected areas of Karnataka is having an adverse impact on forest conservation. The abandonment of traditional practices, such as controlled seasonal fire and collection of minor forest produce, that once provided sustainable livelihoods, has left the communities, whose tradition and culture were rooted in conservation, in conflict with the forest department.

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While the tribal people, under the Forest Rights Act, have rights to collect minor forest produces (MFP) from the protected areas, experts say that forest officials, in the name of conservation, do not allow them to gather MFP.

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Experts believe that as long as local communities are not involved, no conservation efforts from the government can succeed. A senior researcher, who has worked in BRT Wildlife Sanctuary, says, "Earlier, tribal communities had a sense of ownership of the forest. But today they are being kept out of the conservation efforts."

She says one-third of the income for the tribal people used to come from MFP. Forests were tribal people's main sources of food, medicine and financial sustenance. "Now, by discouraging them from sustainable harvesting, the department is forcing them to take illegal and risky routes to extract the forest produce, which have market demand," she says.

Experts point out that a majority of human casualties in and around the protected areas is due to accidental encounters. Vittal B S, a tribal leader from Siddapur Hadlu in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve, says that controlled forest fire would have ensured a large view line and sighting of animals from long distance.

Tarsh Thekaekara, a Bengaluru-based researcher-conservationist, says that ecological research is increasingly converging on the fact that traditional forms of controlled, cool-season ground fires had multiple benefits, including preventing the spread of invasive species. "Weeds have taken over the space of grasses and palatable plants. This has resulted in a shortage of food for herbivores, forcing them to venture into human habitats. Carnivores follow them and this is resulting in increased human-animal conflict," he says.

Tarsh adds that India's fire policy still follows a colonial mindset of focusing primarily on trees, while ignoring grasses, which are vital for herbivores. "We need to urgently start managing the grassy understory of forests," he adds.

Not just in tiger reserves, the forest department is discouraging locals from using the protected areas in dry and open forests as well.

Hosapete-based conservationist Samad Kottur says, "Instead of species-specific conservation, the

department should look for habitat and landscape conservation.”

He says locals in and around Sandur forest area and Daroji Sloth bear sanctuary used to share a symbiotic relationship with the wild animals. “While cattle used to get natural grass, their manure would enrich the soil content and set in motion a food chain involving dung-beetle and sloth bears. However, now as human intervention is strictly restricted in protected areas, there is an overgrowth.”

Samira Agnihotri, Associate Professor at The University of Trans-Disciplinary Health Sciences and Technology, says the current conservation frameworks such as relocation of tribals, translocation of animals and erecting barricades to prevent human-animal conflict are just addressing the symptoms of issue and not the solutions. “Indigenous people had solutions and they were coexisting with the wild,” she says.

Experts, however, caution that a balance must be maintained. Jayshree Ratnam, Director of the Wildlife Biology and Conservation Program at the National Centre for Biological Sciences, says there is no “either everything or nothing” in conservation efforts. “Forest-associated indigenous people need to be able to benefit from forest produce extraction. But that does not mean overharvesting.”

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