Unpacking a Crisis of Human-Wildlife Conflict

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There is growing concern in India that a 'crisis' of human-wildlife conflict is underway.

A variety of conservation organizations and the Indian Forest Service believe these conflicts may hold significant ramifications for the long-term survival of high-priority conservation species like the tiger, leopard, and Asian elephant. Social research is therefore essential for better understanding contemporary relations between humans and wildlife living in shared landscapes. But what if this narrative of crisis itself is misleading, and masks more foundational political and economic conflicts that are hidden behind the framework of understanding negative interactions between people and wildlife as 'human-wildlife conflict'?

(A 'machan', or traditional hut built in trees or on stilts to help farmers guard crops from wild animals like elephants and wild boar. Photograph by Jared Margulies.)

In an article just published in *Geoforum*, I describe along with my co-author Dr. Krithi Karanth, the Asian Regional Director of the Wildlife Conservation Society, how closer attention to *domestic* animals and their relations with humans, rather than peoples' perspectives about wildlife, proves a more revealing research approach for examining human-wildlife interactions and contestations. Our research shows how shifting away from a focus on human-carnivore interactions to focus instead on the livestock economy and the animals that mediate human-carnivore relations reveals important findings for better understanding narratives of conflict.

Our study focused on villages surrounding Bandipur National Park in Karnataka, India. We found that narratives espoused by state actors suggesting local communities' tolerances for living with wildlife were in decline due to the erosion of cultural and religious values people placed on animals were misleading. Instead, our research shows that rapid changes in regional livestock economies coupled with increasingly authoritative or 'top-down' conservation management have ruptured local livelihoods, and that these changes were in turn producing new spaces of encounter between cattle and large carnivores. Our results suggest these new geographies of encounter are exacerbating local community concerns about where people and their animals are coming into contact with tigers and leopards.

To learn what shapes peoples' perspectives on tigers—stop asking questions about tigers!

Studies of conservation tend to focus on the species conservationists and the public care about most: the rarest, most endangered, and most charismatic species. Tigers and leopards are no exception, garnering a disproportionate amount of research funding and attention from the media in comparison to other wildlife.

When I began 10 months of dissertation research on the politics of conservation and human-wildlife interactions in South India in 2015, most of my conversations and interviews with a diversity of stakeholders would quickly come to focus on issues related to human-wildlife conflicts. I interviewed dozens of farmers and livestock owners, and over 100 Forest Department staff and officers, in addition to conservation NGO staff and researchers, among others, in an attempt to draw out insights on the politics that shaped narratives about human-wildlife relations in a landscape where the narrative of a 'human-wildlife conflict crisis' was becoming increasingly popular. Already over halfway through 10 months of dissertation fieldwork, I felt I had more or less gained a reasonable sense of the diverse perspectives different kinds of people had in relating to wildlife.

About six months into my fieldwork, I began noticing small differences in cattle I hadn't paid attention to before. There were different breeds of cows, and they were being raised in different ways, and by different groups of people. Curious about these differences, I started asking people more detailed questions about cows. Suddenly, I began hearing stories about tigers and leopards I had never heard before, stories that didn't sit easily alongside those I heard when interviewing Forest Department staff about 'human-wildlife conflict'.

In short, I discovered I spent 6 months in South India asking the wrong questions. And when I began talking to people about livestock, an entirely new sense of what was actually underpinning human-interactions and perspectives about wildlife emerged.

(A local 'scrub' cow near Mangala, Chamarajanagar District, Karnataka. Photograph by Jared Margulies.)

Local residents explained there were two primary 'types' of cows raised in the region. The photograph above is of 'scrub cow', a non-descript native breed of cow raised in the study region for dung, which is sold primarily to coffee plantations as fertilizer. The other main type of cattle raised in the region are 'hybrid cows', cows cross-bred between native Indian cows and high-producing European dairy cattle. These cows are raised for their milk production.

I soon learned how different social groups owned certain types of cows while others did not, and how the spaces in which these different breeds encountered wildlife varied. In turn, I began asking research participants new kinds of questions—this time about the economy: questions about dung, milk, cattle enclosures, coffee prices, and grazing practices.

For the next few months, I worked to understand the complex and diverse linkages underpinning discussions of how local communities and state forest department actors were framing 'human-wildlife conflict.' Global coffee prices set in Brazil needed to be understood in relation to labor demographic shifts as a result of urbanization and rural depopulation in India. Changing fertilizer demands on coffee plantations were causing rapid cattle demographics shifts, and in turn increasingly strict conservation law enforcement was disrupting new cattle grazing practices. Access (or not) to land and capital meant certain kinds of people were raising new kinds of cows and entering the dairy economy while others were not. And all of these linkages became necessary to understand how people thought about living in close proximity to tigers and leopards.

In summary, our research found that declining tolerance for livestock loss was a response to a changing agrarian economy, and in turn, that new geographies of human-wildlife interaction can produce new sites of conflict. By paying closer attention to cows, rather than carnivores, our research was able to explicate linkages between global coffee prices, cattle populations, and negative human-wildlife interactions in a contested landscape of high-priority for wildlife conservationists. Our research suggests ways in which conservationists might work towards improved human-wildlife interactions through assisting communities managing exposure risks in *where* carnivores encounter cattle and other livestock.

Conservationists need to do more to directly support means of mitigating long-term negative economic consequences when livestock are killed by carnivores. An important step in this direction is to better

understand and assess the foundational and compounding impacts that the loss of livestock can produce in communities economically impacted by the wildlife conservation agenda.

Article Highlights:

- Critically analyzes narrative of human-wildlife conflict in Bandipur National Park, India.
- Declining tolerance for livestock loss is response to changing agrarian economy.
- Explicates linkages between global coffee prices, cattle populations, and negative human-wildlife interactions.
- Geographies of human-wildlife interaction can produce new sites of conflict.
- Political animal geography as a field of study is advanced by way of political ecology.

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