

# High and dry

## Conservation cannot ignore pastoral rights



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Since early this year, the news on tigers vanishing from Sariska and Ranthambore, India's flagship conservation areas in Rajasthan, has dominated the media and shocked the Indian public. However, few are aware of the parallel decline – in fact near-death – of India's pastoral cultures, even though it concerns the livelihoods of millions of poor people throughout India.

As a signatory to the **United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity**, India has committed itself to “respect, preserve and maintain the knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.”

However, this commitment has been rudely shaken by recent events. On July 2, 2004, a letter was sent to the chief secretaries, the principal chief conservators of forests and the chief wildlife wardens of all Indian states by the **Central Empowered Committee** (CEC), a body constituted by the **Supreme Court** (SC) of India and composed of three officials from the Union ministry of forests and environment and two non-government wildlife conservationists, including tiger expert Valmik Thapar.

The CEC letter referred to an **SC order**, dated February 14, 2000, which restrained the removal of dead, diseased, dying or wind-fallen trees, driftwood and grasses from a national park or game sanctuary. The letter also listed a number of instances where tree/bamboo felling, canal-digging, mining, underground mining, collection of sand/boulders, laying of transmission lines/optical fibre cable/pipelines, grass cutting, collection of minor forest produce, grazing, construction and road widening had been allowed without permission from the SC under the guise of park management. The letter goes on to request strict compliance so that none of the “prohibited activities” take place. This memo was forwarded down the line of command, finally reaching the forest officers charged with implementing the order on the ground, in August 2004.

## Rights and wrongs

While the intent of the CEC move was essentially to defend forests against commercial extraction and abuse, the memo has had one disastrous effect. Since August 2004, no grazing permits have been issued for livestock keepers living at the outskirts of protected areas such as the **Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary** in Rajasthan. I mention the latter, because I have lived in this area and studied the situation for more than 10 years. The area covered by the wildlife sanctuary represents the summer grazing ground of a large number of sheep and camel herders, belonging to the **Raika** caste. The Raika have had ancestral grazing rights in the forest since the times of the Maharajahs. The sudden withdrawal of grazing permits, therefore, has sent shock waves through pastoral communities in Rajasthan, and probably in other places as well. In the villages at the edge of the Kumbhalgarh Sanctuary, the Raika held panicky meetings, some families started selling their sheep, the price for animals dropped, the exodus of young boys sent to the city for menial labour, intensified. The end of a customary way of life and of the close relationship between the Raika and their animals seems just around the corner.

While the need to protect forests is beyond debate, what of the nearly four million tribal and poor people who live inside protected areas and are dependant on their resources for survival? Moreover, pastoralists often do not even reside inside protected areas, but depend on them only seasonally, to support their livestock. Putting blanket restrictions on the removal of grass and dead wood deprives people of their livelihoods and results in large-scale displacement. As Madhu Sarin has pointed out, the conduct of the SC and the CEC even conflicts with the National Forest Policy, 1988, a document whose section on ‘*Tribal people and forests*’ states, “having regard to the symbiotic relationship between the tribal people and forests – a primary task of all agencies responsible for forest management, including the forest development corporations should be to associate the tribal people closely in the protection, regeneration and development of forests as well as to provide gainful employment to people living in and around the forest.”

## Give pastoralism its due

There are also other issues here. The survival of pastoralism is interlinked with many aspects of **sustainable land use**. Besides conserving domestic biodiversity, it is a means of producing food in dry lands without depleting groundwater resources – which may be the most important aspect to consider in a state such as Rajasthan. A report by the Food and Agriculture Organization, *Pastoralism in the new millennium*, even concludes that the politically popular development of rangelands by mining fossil water is not sustainable in the long run and that pastoralists may eventually reclaim this land.

With the decline of the pastoral people, such as the **Maldhari** in Gujarat and the **Raika** and **Rebari** in Rajasthan, the species they are the caretakers of will be affected as well. The Rebari raise camels, sheep, goats and cattle – not just any kind of livestock, but breeds that are well-defined and famous the world over. The notification of the Kumbhalgarh sanctuary has had an impact not only on the Raika located at its periphery, but also those living some distance away. Its closure is a main reason for the thousands of female camels now annually being sold for slaughter in Uttar Pradesh and even Bangladesh. As it is, camel population has shrunk by around 50 per cent over the last 10 years. Unless the Rajasthan government ensures grazing opportunities for camel breeding herds, the next generation will see this element of India's biodiversity – and Rajasthan's signature animal – only in zoos.

Rajasthan also has eight scientifically recognised sheep breeds. One of them is the **Marwari sheep**, locally known as Boti. This breed is extremely drought-resistant, ideally adapted to long migrations and scant fodder resources. Just as the camel, these animals are able to make sustainable use of Rajasthan's rangeland vegetation. But the sheep population of Rajasthan is also in decline – between 1997 and 2003, numbers have reduced by 31 per cent. The Raika have also created the **Sirohi goat**, a goat breed that turned out to be more productive than imported Swiss goats. Finally, the Rebari are the guardians of the **Kankrej cattle**, that has been among the founding stock of the South American beef industry, and of another breed, the **Nari cattle**, that was never documented by scientists, but is extremely disease resistant and has good milk yields.

These breeds form part of India's heritage of domestic biodiversity – they have been nurtured over many generations in adaptation to the environment and are the result of indigenous knowledge about animal breeding. Being endowed with genetic traits for disease and drought resistance, they form very valuable animal genetic resources for the future. The survival of these breeds is linked to the survival of pastoralists and impossible without their continuing custodianship.

Once again, the breeds stewarded by pastoralists represent biological diversity just as the tiger does. But this domestic biodiversity is seen as an enemy or antagonistic to wildlife conservation by many environmentalists. In fact, the animals kept by pastoralists retain many of the characteristics of their wild progenitors. Ecological research in the Sahara about the effects of camel feeding on desert vegetation demonstrated that grazing by this species actually stimulates plant growth. It is well recognised that predator species such as the wolf or leopard depend on livestock as prey and hence elsewhere pastoralists are actually compensated for livestock they lose.

## Unusual redress

To return to the CEC letter, what are these pastoral people doing about the sudden withdrawal of their traditional rights? In a surprising departure from the time-honoured route of giving extra bribes to the forest guards and thereby obtain entry to the forest, the Raika have formed a **Sangarsh Samiti** (struggle committee). **Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan** (a non-governmental organisation that has worked in the area for some time) noticed the odd fact that the original sc order referred to by the CEC does not even mention the word grazing among restricted activities.

Encouraged by the Sansthan to take recourse to legal aid, the Raika have also hired a lawyer to represent their interests. Since they had never before broken out of the rural social hierarchy and usually pursue their goals through submissive behaviour towards their patrons – the land-owning castes, this was an extremely courageous step for the Raika to take. The advocate's polite enquiry to the secretary of the CEC, requesting him to clarify the status of grazing, is yet to receive a reply. Currently the Raika are weighing further action and now have tabled a petition to the **Rajasthan High Court** to get clarification about their situation from the government. The question here is – do they have grazing rights or not?

It is high time that the role of India's estimated pastoralists in sustaining biodiversity and in making use of patchy, seasonally available resources for food production is officially acknowledged and that they receive the support that is due to them, according to international conventions to which India is a signatory, and in deference to their contribution to the economy.