

CHAPTER 8: MYTHS

8.1 MOST OF THE CONFLICTS ARE RESULT OF ANIMALS MISTAKENLY STRAYING FROM NEIGHBORING PROTECTED AREAS

Whenever there are any incidences of leopard or sloth bears conflict with human beings it is often claimed that the animal must have wandered from neighboring protected areas and not from our forest areas. This assumption is so commonly followed that in all of the forest census carried out till date by Mirzapur forest division, the number of leopards have been shown as zero. This may be attributed to the additional burden of responsibility which will come on the range staff if their range is declared to be habitat of many Schedule I species. During our survey, most of the villagers we interacted in Marihan, Sukrit, Patehara and Dramadganj forest range admitted that these forests are inhabited by leopards and sloth bears. In Dramadganj range, we also got several reports of sighting of tigers from villagers, but they are made to believe that tigers come from neighboring forests of M.P. and it is not a natural habitat. We found it very hard to believe this explanation by forest staff firstly because it is mere assumption and secondly because there has been no scientific study ever done by any reputed wildlife institute in this forest division.

The same rationalization is given when there is man-wildlife conflict in forest ranges adjoining protected areas. For e.g. In Patehara and Dramadganj range, whenever there are incidents of leopard straying into villages, the forest staff creates an impression in the public that the animals came from Madhya Pradesh jungle or Kaimur WLS, and it has been scared back into the forests from where it came from. Though this might be the easiest way to shred responsibilities off the shoulder, it is a very dangerous practice as it makes the villagers and animals more vulnerable for conflicts in future. The local media also plays a damaging role by not only being insensitive to wild animals but also spreading hate against wild animals among the local citizens. For eg. in recent events of sloth bear attacks in Dramadganj, one newspaper even said that forest department failed to capture the sloth bear and instead distributed compensation.¹ Such kind of reports published by reputed newspaper is bound to increase the probability of causing harm to wildlife by instigating unnecessary revulsions in general public. Instead they should be actively engaged to spread awareness on forests and ways to evade confrontation with wild animals.

Reports of Mugger crocodiles entering village ponds and wells have been reported from Marihan, Sukrit, Dramadganj and Patehara range as well. The captured mugger crocodiles are either released into nearby reservoirs such as Upper Khajuri and Meja. There has been no clue what happened to the rescued crocodiles after that as no one tracked them thereafter. In one the incidents, a leopard released in Patehara range became problematic for villagers living near Patehara range and there has been several incidents thereafter when the leopard tried to attack villagers and lifted animals. In none of the cases where animals are captured, forest department

¹ <http://www.jagran.com/uttar-pradesh/mirzapur-13859948.html>

staff could confirm from where the animals came from and nor the animals were geo-tagged to monitor their behavior and survival.

There is also a great confusion on the habitat of Mugger crocodiles in Mirzapur as they have been rescued from nearly all forest ranges, which proves they are widely distributed in Mirzapur. From local people we could get confirmed information that River Bakhar, River Belan (Patehara range) and connected streams are the main habitat of Mugger Crocodile as they can be seen in abundance during rainy seasons in both of these rivers. The same has been confirmed by all forest range staff of Patehara as well. A forest staff of Marihan range claimed that he has spotted Mugger Crocodiles in Panchsheel dari (Sukrit Range) 2-3 years before. A senior journalist told us that Mugger Crocodiles used to be found in most of the village ponds till last decade and now they can be seen in few reservoirs basking under sun. As most of the reservoirs are mostly built on some seasonal streams/rivers, we can assume that some of these reservoirs and dams may have some isolated populations of Mugger crocodiles which often stray into nearby villages. We recommend preparing a herpetofauna inventory of Mirzapur forest range with help of an experienced herpetologist.

It is a high time the Mirzapur forest division must acknowledge the presence of wildlife in their forests and proudly take initiatives to protect and improve their habitat to reduce such conflicts. Media must be educated enough of the importance of the forests for wildlife so that their wide outreach can be used to develop sensitivity among local villagers to wildlife and the importance of their protection. If we are scared to admit the presence of wildlife in our own forest range, it will not show the lack of interest of the department and escape from responsibility but will be very dangerous for the wild animals who inhabit these forests.

8.2 LANDSCAPE CHANGE HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH DECREASE IN WILDLIFE

We found this reasoning very commonly given by the forest department staff when they are asked about the impact on wildlife due to mining, construction of roads and other non-forest activities. Their first reason to justify such diversion of forest lands has been the same-the animals will adjust by migrating to other forest areas and there will be no loss to wildlife population. Another assumption often made while diverting forest areas for other activities are that the forest areas are not habitat of any important animals and no animal movement is observed. Such observations are often made by conducting a site visit and the conclusion is made based on their direct sighting experience. We found this exercise very vague as most of the animals found in forests are not only shy of human presence but are nocturnal as well. While we found no good reason to rely on such site visits, we found this practice highly perilous as such decision has a very outsized cumulative impact on the entire landscape and underestimate the habitat suitability for wildlife which leave the wild animal species highly vulnerable.