



Globalizing Nature

National Parks, Tiger Reserves and Biosphere Reserves in Independent India

Michael Lewis

On 11 June 1972, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi addressed the UN Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm. Gandhi was the only head of state to attend, and she had the honour of giving the last formal address. Her comments electrified the gathered delegates, as she spoke forcefully of the simultaneous need to both preserve nature and address human inequities. In the most memorable section of her address, she asked:

Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters? For instance, unless we are in a position to provide employment and purchasing power for the daily necessities of the tribal people and those who live in or around our jungles, we cannot prevent them from despoiling the vegetation. When they themselves feel deprived, how can we urge the preservation of animals? How can we speak to those who live in villages and slums about keeping the oceans, the rivers and the air clean when their own lives are contaminated at the source? The environment cannot be improved in conditions of poverty.¹

Throughout her address, Gandhi linked the need to preserve the environment to the need to pursue greater global equity among the peoples of the world, both within and between nations. She called for a complete rethinking of the basis of civilization, and although it would be hard, the developed and developing world needed 'to change their style of living' and 're-establish an unbroke link with nature and with life.'² In another speech given to a much smaller audience in India almost two months earlier, Gandhi made a similar critique and linked the extinction of plants and animals to racism and global inequities among humans: 'Why worry if [a] few tigers and rhinos and a few plant species are wiped out? ... this attitude of mind is the same which regards one species of human being as superior to another.'³

In these speeches, Gandhi developed an environmental ethic that equated the abuse of nature with colonialism (species extinctions linked to human rac-

ism). Simultaneously, she suggested that international environmentalism was also a legacy of the colonial world in its occlusion of the brutal poverty affecting so many people in the developing world – from the villages and slums to tribal peoples in the jungle. To stay the environmental course would be to perpetuate colonial relationships towards the poor and their environments, but to fail to preserve nature would be similarly exploitative. Thus Gandhi did not claim to aspire to a global (or colonial) standard of civilization and its nature, but rather sought to formulate a new model for civilizing both nature and India. However, her critique of ‘civilization’ (meaning primarily overconsumption and the exploitation of others) juxtaposed with a call for greater connections to nature did not look like a radically new vision of civilized nature, but rather a postcolonial iteration of earlier uses of nature to critique the worst excesses of modernity without challenging its basic principles. The history of the creation of Indian national parks confirms this.

Between 1972 and 1974, Gandhi provided the public rationale for a people-centred approach to environmentalism that put social justice at its core. To this end, she deputized a national Man and the Biosphere (MAB) committee to investigate biosphere reserves, a new mode of nature preservation supported by UNESCO that included people in its protected areas. But at the same moment, Gandhi led the push for a series of laws and policies that resulted in forming Indian national parks and tiger reserves. These new parks hewed closely to the global national park norm, and seemed oblivious to her socioenvironmental concerns. Ironically, the same leader who had encouraged the world to recognize the moral claims of the poor to the forests in which they lived was a key impetus in the dispossession of many poor forest dwellers in India from their traditional resource base. In looking more closely at these three modes for establishing protected areas, not just Gandhi’s contradictions come into focus, but also those of the Indian government as a whole. A postcolonial state that strove to formulate a new relationship between civilization and nature instead found itself soliciting international funding for conservation, building a shared national identity around the tiger, creating national parks that closely followed global models and simultaneously rejecting the rights of either the global community or scientists (whether Indian or Western) to prescribe how to preserve its own nature. Following her call for a new civilization and new relationship to nature in 1972, Gandhi’s India instead created a strikingly standard system of national parks that differed from the transnational model most notably in its incomplete implementation.

National Parks

Within three months of Gandhi’s 1972 Stockholm address, India passed the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WLP Act). This law established a legal basis for

national parks and sanctuaries in India, as well as protecting endangered and threatened species. India already had a handful of national parks controlled by state governments; the new law established a standard federalized legal framework for them. It defined national parks as locations that should have no human presence, nor cattle, nor human uses, and authorized the removal of villagers and tribal peoples living in national parks.

India's national parks, as codified in the WLP Act, were most immediately connected with the global national park movement that flourished in the post-1945 world, particularly in the United States, but also advocated by scientists and NGOs like the IUCN throughout the world. Further, though, India's national parks drew upon long-term indigenous traditions of princely game reserves and nearly a hundred years of British efforts to preserve colonial nature in India.⁴ M. K. Ranjitsinh, an Indian bureaucrat and the principal author of the WLP Act, was the grandson of a ruler of a princely state in Rajasthan. Ranjitsinh is insistent that the national park system that he played such a key role in devising was a product of indigenous Indian game reserve practices, not simply a Western overlay onto India. He has written that he grew up listening to family discussions of how best to manage wildlife on their lands. Ranjitsinh had an uncle who successfully reintroduced tigers onto his land and managed them at a stable population in a reserve with people and cattle excluded. Ranjitsinh claims, "That was the same principle I adopted when I started the cattle compensation scheme in India."⁵ Of course, 'indigenous' Indian practices in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were not carried out in cultural or political vacuums, and the British raj also provided both a precedent for later national parks and potential models for the rulers of the princely states.

The British Imperial Forest Service was established in 1867; in the Forest Act of 1927 the requirements for establishing a reserved forest were standardized (in many respects along similar lines to the 1972 WLP Act).⁶ These reserved forests were in no way national parks, however. The first national park in India was Corbett National Park (at that time called Hailey National Park), established with a special state law on 6 August 1936. This national park was the special project of a local British official concerned about the loss of the forests in that region, and the park was given legal status only within the state of Uttar Pradesh. It did not serve as a national model, and there was little in the way of further development of national parks in India as the Second World War broke out.

Following independence, the Government of India maintained the British forest system, eventually transferring the administrative structure to the Indian Forest Service. In 1952, the central government appointed a Central Board of Wild Life (later the Indian Board for Wild Life) 'to sponsor the setting up of national parks, sanctuaries, and zoological gardens' in order to conserve wildlife as well as to educate Indians.⁷ This board did not have a significant impact

during its first decade and a half of existence. A number of Indian states established sanctuaries and a handful of national parks between independence and 1972, but they were strictly state, not federal, designations.

Throughout the 1960s, internal and external pressure grew for the central government to formalize and expand a national park system in India. The Indian Board for Wild Life, with support from the private Bombay Natural History Society, released a series of recommendations. These recommendations were strongly influenced by the 1962 First World Conference on National Parks, held in the United States. This conference was organized by the IUCN, and cosponsored by the FAO, UNESCO, the Natural Resources Council of America and the U.S. National Park Service. Delegates from sixty-three nations attended this conference (four from India), and the stated purpose was 'to encourage the national park movement on a worldwide basis'.⁸ As the Indian Board for Wild Life reported,

[The Board] endorses the various resolutions and recommendations made at the First World Conference on National Parks ... in so far as they apply to India, and draw attention in particular to *Recommendation no. 3* which says *inter alia* that 'there is an urgent need to constitute on a world scale a systematic collection of type habitats as varied and representative as possible which could be permanently protected and to serve as standards for the future, and ... that the appropriate status for these type habitats where possible should be that of strict nature reserves.'⁹

As was evident at this conference, national parks were understood as internationally relevant and needed because of their value in preserving habitats and ecosystems. This had not always been the guiding purpose of national parks.

Since its beginning, the US National Park System had a strong recreational component and was linked to American exceptionalism as manifested in spectacular nature. Further, US national parks at least in part enabled the desire of Americans to experience an idealized frontier and thus imagine themselves linked to the key founding myths of the nation.¹⁰ However, by the 1960s U.S. and international conservation organizations were far more focused upon the role of national parks in preserving ecosystems and endangered species of fauna (and less frequently, flora) than explicitly recreational or nationalist goals. This can be seen in the United States in the influential Leopold Report, named after Aldo Starker Leopold (son of the more famous Aldo Leopold). Leopold had been asked to chair a committee considering elk overpopulation in Yellowstone. The committee had taken an expansive view of their task, and had produced a report suggesting management goals for the entire US National Park System. The Leopold Report quoted and referred to the First World Congress on National Parks at several points, and clearly saw national

parks as essentially conservation vehicles (and overwhelmingly focused upon large mammals). The most famous line of the Leopold report was its call for national parks to be managed as 'vignettes of primitive America'.¹¹

The Leopold Report ended up being the basis for a wholesale shift in the management practices of the US National Park Service – their official park service history refers to it as a 'landmark', and Leopold's influence as 'vast'.¹² This shifting management base for the US National Parks shaped and reflected larger international and scientific trends, and in turn was reflected in the Second World Conference on National Parks, held at Yellowstone National Park, and sponsored by the US National Park Service in collaboration with the IUCN. The theme of the meeting was 'National Parks: Heritage for a Better World'. The national park model that international environmentalists and scientists promoted at Yellowstone was no longer a recreational or nationalistic ideal, but instead a global system of nature protection. They hailed Yellowstone not so much as a geological amusement park (as it had been perceived for much of U.S. history), but instead as a large protected area in which biological processes could occur with minimal human disturbance, and which would ensure the continued survival of threatened species.¹³

The Second World Conference was held in September, the same month that the Indian WLP Act was passed. Both the conference and the new law illustrated the global state of the art in protected area strategy. The Yellowstone conference had been announced in 1969 at the IUCN general meeting, held that year in New Delhi. This 1969 IUCN conference was significant in its own right; it was the starting point for both WWF–India and what would become Project Tiger. Ranjitsinh, as well as many other Indian scientists and bureaucrats, attended both conferences. To Ranjitsinh or any of the attendees at these conferences, the national park model that was being promoted appeared to be less tied to any one nation than to scientific principles of reserve design rooted in population ecology and management practices based upon the exclusion of human resource uses and grazing. Insofar as Yellowstone was hailed as a model (and it was, repeatedly) it was disassociated from the actual history of its establishment in 1872, the 1916 Organic Act that had established the National Park Service and the recreational impulse that had motivated much of its history as a park.¹⁴ The nineteenth-century removal of its human inhabitants by the U.S. military and the park's large size were in neither case done for scientific reasons, but by the 1960s Yellowstone, this accidental eco-park, was reborn as the large nature preserve of the ecologist's dream. The disjuncture between Yellowstone's actual history and how it was promoted in the 1960s and 1970s is significant.

Although Yellowstone was promoted internationally as the gold standard of a large protected ecosystem, the Indian WLP Act was in fact more in line with

international standards of reserve design and management than any codified U.S. law. The WLP Act was simultaneously a protected area act (establishing national parks and sanctuaries with legal status) and an endangered species act, establishing lists of species to be protected and restrictions on hunting and trade in animals. The name matters: in India, national parks were formalized in the *Wild Life Protection Act*. The act makes practically no mention of recreation or tourism, other than in stipulating the various bureaucrats in charge of restricting it. Using the IUCN's protected area standards, national parks in India were in the strictest category of preserved land (Scientific Reserves), and Indian sanctuaries, where some grazing and management 'for the improvement and better management of wildlife' was allowed, fit into the category for Habitat and Wildlife Management Areas.¹⁵ In contrast, the vast majority of U.S. national parks fall into the categories for Parks (geared towards recreation and tourism) or Natural Monuments and National Landmarks.

There is no question that the WLP Act combined with a new enthusiasm for creating parks in India and reorganized a significant piece of the Indian landscape. In 1975, three years after the law was passed, there were 5 national parks and 126 sanctuaries in India. By 1985, there were 53 national parks and 247 sanctuaries, and by 1997, 65 national parks and 425 sanctuaries. As of June 2008, there were 97 national parks and 508 sanctuaries in India, covering 4.76 per cent of India's landmass.¹⁶ But these numbers hide a messier reality. A significant number of these sanctuaries and parks have not yet been finally certified by the central government because the state governments (and the state foresters) have not been able to bring the parks into conformity with the requirements of the WLP Act, particularly its insistence on no grazing by cattle (in national parks), no human settlements within parks and no human uses of the minor forest products such as thatch and honey. Even in federally recognized parks, there is significant noncompliance with the law. In 1989, in response to a voluntary government survey, 40 per cent of the national parks claimed to be in full compliance with the law, and only 8 per cent of the sanctuaries.¹⁷ As participation in the survey had been voluntary, we might assume that the noncompliance rates were even higher. A separate 2000 study claimed that a minimum of 3 million people (illegally) lived within these Indian protected areas at that time.¹⁸ The WLP Act, strongly encouraged by Gandhi, did not reflect an environmentalism of the poor or a new model of development. Rather it seemed to be a direct infringement upon the living conditions of poor peoples living in and near these protected areas, an act more in keeping with international protected area standards than local realities. By the 1980s, one in five protected areas in India reported physical clashes between local peoples and forest officers – in some cases even leading to death.¹⁹

Tiger Reserves

In November, 1972, two months after the WLP Act was passed, the Indian Board for Wild Life released the project proposal for Project Tiger. This plan was an ambitious attempt to save the tiger from extinction by dedicating a subset of the newly formalized national parks and sanctuaries to tiger protection, expanding their size if possible and increasing funding for management in those areas. The project proposal claimed, 'The best method of protection of the tiger is to have large areas of at least 2,000 km², with similar contiguous areas.' With little apparent irony, the report went on to claim, 'The Task Force could not locate many areas as large as 2,000 km² which could be reserved for tiger preservation.'²⁰ In fact, in the eight tiger reserves that were originally proposed, only one even had the potential of being expanded to that size (although it would have involved increasing the sanctuary's size tenfold, and today it is only 500 km²). All of them, from small to large, required substantial curtailments of human use, including the relocation of people living within the proposed tiger reserves. As the proposal explained, 'It is desirable that small pockets of forest villages should be shifted. In case it is not possible, at least the village cattle ... should be diverted to alternative sites.'²¹ The Project Tiger proposal met with governmental and international approval, and Project Tiger was begun in 1973.

Indian national parks and Project Tiger were legal fraternal twins – born at the same moment and in the same social environment, with the same small group of elected leaders, scientists and bureaucrats involved in planning them. Each initiative justified the other – Project Tiger needed parks with strong legal protection in order to be effective, and national parks needed a popular rationale for displacing people and their practices. Both were spurred along by the 1969 IUCN meeting in New Delhi; both were strongly advocated by Indian and international scientists and both were seen as essential parts of a larger national strategy to confront an ecological crisis: the extinction of key Indian fauna.²² The cheetah and pink-headed duck were gone. Were the Asian lion, Asian rhino, mugger crocodiles, Asian elephant and tiger to follow? Tigers were the charismatic stars of Indian conservation, the species that garnered the most attention and the most money. But they were only one of many endangered Indian species (including birds) that would benefit, theoretically, from this new protected area strategy.

Project Tiger was implemented via Tiger Reserves. These were not new parks, but instead existing national parks and sanctuaries that would be expanded and managed more carefully, with more research, accountability and enforcement. The task force that established Project Tiger understood the tiger to be what we would now call a keystone species. As they explained in their justification for the project, the tiger 'keeps the population of herbivores under

control and thereby saves the vegetation from overgrazing and the land from denudation. It also maintains good stock of animals.' The authors believed that by saving the tiger, they would be saving all of the other associated fauna and flora in those forests – in a fit of exuberance, they even claimed that the tiger was 'the best protector of the forest wealth from pilferage', by attacking ne'er-do-wells, we might assume.²³

Conservationists believed that the tiger was charismatic enough to bring about larger changes in popular attitudes both in India and abroad, and attract interest and money. 'It is a most colourful creature which arouses public attention, brings to life a lifeless forest, makes it thrilling and attracts tourists from world over [*sic*]', they wrote. The tourist money was mentioned more than once. As they wrote in their project justification, 'In East Africa, for example, the entire tourism revolves around their wildlife, and if properly developed India also can increase its foreign exchange earnings from this source considerably.'²⁴ There are several pages in the project proposal devoted to planning a tourist infrastructure, including the possibility of camping in tents – 'at your own risk'²⁵ In this, the Project Tiger Task Force diverged considerably from the WLP Act, and this has continued to be a point of contention between government officials who want the tiger reserves to make money and scientists and foresters who perceive tourists (and the things local guides do to impress them) as impediments to ecosystem and tiger health. This tension was written into the planning document, as in one paragraph where the writers encouragingly note, after listing spotlights, saltlicks and feedlots, 'The tiger in the centre of a camera view-finder is an ambition of every tourist visiting India. ... Even tiger viewing can be made easy by artificial means.' This is then followed in the very next paragraph by, 'The reserves are also to function as National Parks and therefore, sound principles of park management should be adopted.'²⁶ Proper management was then specified to mean limited tourist access into the cores of parks, called here 'wilderness zones'.

As it turned out, since national parks and sanctuaries made up the actual space for tiger reserves, and foresters often attempted to make as much of the park a wilderness zone as possible, tourism was quite limited. Travellers to Indian tiger reserves were often struck by the relative paucity of a tourist infrastructure, and the lack of access to tiger habitat. In Corbett National Park and tiger reserve, for example, tourists were not allowed to walk in the park (let alone camp in tents!); they were strictly kept out of the core area. There were a limited number of jeep trips and elephant rides each day, most leaving from the small and basic guest lodge. Although Corbett is an extreme example, tiger tourism in India was a disappointment to those government officials anticipating an Indian safari industry. Only retroactively, planners realized that the lazy-seeming lions of the Serengeti bore little resemblance to the stealthy and secretive tigers. Even elephants in India like to hide in the jungle, and in the

absence of intrusive tourist practices, much of India's most spectacular wildlife is difficult to observe on a casual tour.

Although tourism did not develop in Project Tiger as much as had been hoped, Project Tiger was successful in creating the tiger as a national symbol and nationalizing protected nature. The lion was the royal symbol of India from at least the 3rd century BCE and is still found on rupee coins, but in the late 1960s and 1970s the government made a concerted effort to use the tiger as a symbol of Indian nationalism.²⁷ Unlike the Asiatic lion, restricted by the twentieth century to one small park in western India, tigers were found throughout India. And while lions were associated with Africa in most international environmentalists' minds, no country in the world had as many wild tigers as India. Project Tiger, then, became not just a conservation programme but also a tool for national pride, branding and unification. This was not subtle. The planning document relates, 'Tiger Reserves are situated in eight different states, in different climates, in all the four corners of the country ... thus contributing towards the emotional integration of the nation.'²⁸ The planning document is suffused with nationalism: 'The tiger has become, in a way, a symbol of the whole wild life and nature conservation movement in India today ... Project Tiger is essentially an Indian venture, which nonetheless will attract worldwide interest and support.' And then again, later, 'The project is entirely an Indian endeavour.'²⁹ Tiger nationalism was further manifested in the decision by the Government of India to deny research access to U.S. ecologists who had been involved in helping to plan Project Tiger and had anticipated working on tiger ecology themselves. This occurred in the context of several factors: Indo-U.S. geopolitical relations following the 1971 India-Pakistan War; a bureaucratic power grab by the Indian Forest Service; U.S. military funding of some U.S. ecologists in India and a larger attempt by the Government of India to assert greater control of Project Tiger, to nationalize it, in a sense.³⁰ If the tiger were to serve as a national symbol to unify the nation, it would not do to have U.S. scientists doing the work. These U.S.-led tiger studies subsequently moved to Nepal, where many of the same disputes about tigers as objects of tourism, as objects of science or as untrammelled wild beasts would play out in a different national context.³¹

Project Tiger was officially launched on 1 April 1973 at Corbett National Park – India's first national park, newly protected under the national law, and now a flagship tiger reserve (though by no means possessing the largest tiger population in India). Other national parks could have been effective choices – Kanha National Park, to the south, had both a larger tiger population and the most intensively studied tigers in India. The Sunderbans National Park to the east had probably the largest population of tigers in India. But none of these other parks had Corbett's relatively long history – the choice of Corbett for this inaugural function was an explicit merging of this new national symbol

(the tiger) with India's oldest and most famous national park. And of course, Corbett National Park was named after Jim Corbett, the famed tiger-hunter-turned-tiger-photographer and conservationist, a metaphor, perhaps for the transition that environmentalists hoped the entire world might make.

Subsequent years would see the same problems that plagued national parks causing trouble in the more specialized tiger reserves. Relocations of villagers from core areas in Kanha and Ranthambore did not always work well. Local peoples complained that the government cared more about tigers than people. Forests in tiger reserves were sometimes burned (as at Nagerhole), and villagers sometimes participated in, or refused to stop, tiger poaching – as when Sariska Tiger Reserve was found to have no surviving tigers in 2006. India's famous tiger reserves, then, were not predicated upon an environmentalism of the poor.³²

Biosphere Reserves

Since the 1968 UN biosphere conference, UNESCO had been building towards the creation of the international Man and the Biosphere Programme (MAB). MAB was launched globally in 1971 and in India in 1972. MAB advocated a new form of protected area known as 'biosphere reserves' that explicitly dealt with how to preserve nature within the context of human communities and uses. Biosphere reserves were a new and improved model for protected areas, with different use zones and people expressly included in the plan – as indicated in MAB's title. At Gandhi's request the Indian MAB committee considered the appropriateness of biosphere reserves for India, leading to their eventual establishment in the 1980s.

Biosphere reserves in India followed a very different trajectory than national parks and tiger reserves. Unlike national parks in the 1970s, there were no international precedents for biosphere reserves – they were a model for a new form of protected area born primarily of scientists' visions for a rational global system of protected areas that incorporated all of the world's biomes and that offered a new way to understand human-nature interactions. The Indian MAB committee was charged at its outset with leading 'a major programme of research in the field of ecology and environment'.³³ Implicit in MAB was the belief that 'ecosystem people', or people dependent upon their local ecosystems for survival, needed to be included in any planning for preserving nature in protected areas.³⁴ This did not mean that the biosphere reserve proposal supported national parks with people included throughout, but rather proposed a carefully managed buffer zone with human uses allowed surrounding a sacrosanct core area.

After years of planning, thousands of rupees spent on research, and the formal designation by the Government of India of fourteen areas (centred on

national parks) as biosphere reserves, the programme has not resulted in any substantive changes in park management in India. For all of the idealism of the planning documents, national parks that are biosphere reserves simply have one more title to their name.³⁵ The biosphere idea was popular among scientists and some environmentalists in India, though, and national parks and tiger reserves were thought to be insufficient.

The IUCN, UNESCO and the UNEP, as well as many scientists, invested a tremendous amount of energy in proposing this new category of protected area – a new type of national park. T. N. Khoshoo, a Secretary of the Indian Ministry of Environment and Forests, summarized their rationale when he explained that biosphere reserves were needed in India because of their greater size, their lack of tourism and other human disturbances, and most especially biosphere reserves' scientific selection based upon ecosystem concerns, not species conservation or national landmarks.³⁶ The other factor that Khoshoo did not mention but that is apparent in the many MAB documents was that biosphere reserves were explicitly international in focus – this was a global initiative, not a nationalist one.

Scientists and scientific organizations like the IUCN were the leading advocates for the MAB programme. It was much more carefully based on science than other protected area programmes. The national park model had been born of different concerns, as mentioned with Yellowstone above, often selecting unique, bizarre or spectacular landscapes of national interest and significance. That iteration of the national park model was predicated upon a pre-ecological worldview. Another early iteration, the early game parks in the colonial world, was based upon fears about game depletion, but again was not based upon an ecosystem approach. But by the early 1970s, with the full bloom of the ecological sciences, there was a push for a park system that preserved land selected on a scientific basis as representative ecosystems of different biomes – that was the biosphere reserve system. Biosphere reserves also deemphasized tourism (allowed only in special exterior zones). Scientists also ensured that biosphere reserves were meant to be huge. Based upon island biogeography and population ecology, many scientists were convinced that existing national parks (or tiger reserves, for that matter) were going to prove to be too small for preserving large mammal species and for allowing evolutionary forces to continue to unfold and shape natural systems.

This notion of parks that would be large enough to allow scientists to watch evolution unfold without human intervention or management was key for many scientists. MAB explicitly called for long-term ecological monitoring and research in biosphere reserves. The Indian MAB committee praised India's 'scientific base', but also suggested that even more scientific expertise would have to be developed: 'In the long run, a strong cadre of trained scientists to undertake environmental research in the Biosphere Reserve areas

will have to be developed for which the international organizations like IUCN and UNESCO will have to play a key role in terms of arranging training programmes.³⁷ As the Indian MAB committee began their work, their budgets were almost exclusively devoted to funding for scientific research. Again, this differed from existing national parks, where the budgets were used for any number of management or tourism objectives. But, ironically, as biosphere reserves ended up using national parks as their core areas, the insistence of scientists upon devoting funds to pure research did not endear MAB to government foresters or bureaucrats in charge of managing the national parks. To the contrary, the complicated management zones of biosphere reserves seemed like a headache both to foresters and local peoples.

Some government officials in India also felt ambivalent about the ramifications of biosphere reserves. MAB was explicitly international. The FAO, UNEP, UNESCO and the IUCN supported MAB. These four organizations ran the conferences for biosphere reserves, oversaw the international network and provided the voluminous written rationales for their use. The IUCN, in detailing the special features of biosphere reserves, wrote, "They form an international network in which the international character is ensured by an exchange of information and personnel [apparently scientists]."³⁸ This was the protected area equivalent of a move towards global governance – but a global governance run by scientists. Naming was important – these were not national parks, but biosphere parks. Rather than nationalized nature, this was internationalized nature, preserved not by or for the nation, but in the interest of global humanity. And this rubbed some Indians the wrong way. In the mid-1980s T. N. Seshan (then the Secretary of the Environment) decided not to register India's first biosphere reserves in the UNESCO network and stopped scientists who had begun this paperwork.³⁹ Seshan wanted to explicitly maintain biosphere reserves as an initiative of the Government of India, not an international collaboration. Further, foresters had little interest in ceding funding and authority to scientists while being asked to manage a larger and more complex protected area. And the scientists and international organizations proposing the biosphere reserve idea could do very little to get the Indian government to join them. India would not finally join the international MAB network until the first decade of the twenty-first century, and by then Indian biosphere reserves had a solid institutional history of irrelevancy.

The IUCN wrestled with this issue when debating whether to encourage national governments to pass biosphere reserve laws. They decided against this, for to have a series of national laws governing biosphere reserves would have ultimately nationalized the system and given management authority to the various nation-states rather than the shared international coordinating bodies. As the chairman of the Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas for the IUCN wrote, 'Indeed it is probably better, in general, that there should

not be new legislation specifically for biosphere reserves, because this is likely to harden the definition of the term “biosphere reserve” and it would then be likely to assume different forms in different countries, each with the sanctity of law. This has happened, for example, to the term national park.³⁴⁰ Yet, in the absence of national laws, not just in India, but also around the globe, biosphere reserves have been largely toothless. With rare exceptions, biosphere reserves are designations with little to no impact on management.

Conclusion

This brief consideration of a particularly active period in Indian environmentalism suggests a few key themes relevant to the larger discussion of the transnational spread of national parks. First, by the late 1960s, the ‘national park idea’ was unmoored from the nineteenth-century history of national parks and more predicated upon scientific debates about species conservation and management, ideas that would find their culmination in the biosphere reserve model. While the United States continued to play a key role in this process, it was more through scientists such as A. Starker Leopold and his role in national park management than through John Muir or the original U.S. national parks. Second, as has been pointed out in many other historical studies, large, charismatic megafauna are an effective tool of nationalized nature, providing national parks oriented around species such as tigers as a counterpart to more traditional nationalized landscape or historical features. Third, the biosphere reserve story suggests that a nonnationalized protected area system, a truly global system of parks, is still difficult to implement in a world in which each individual park will still be local and still territory claimed by a nation-state (with the exception of maritime or Antarctic spaces). The partial failure of biosphere reserves in India perhaps speaks to the greater power of nationalized nature to effect conservation initiatives and the difficulty of imagining an effective global governance of protected areas.

While the early 1970s were the most eventful period of the twentieth century in the rise of global environmentalism, these examples suggest that the various national environmental initiatives and movements (from clean air acts to new national parks), as they embraced nationalism and nation-state governance, were more successful than the corresponding attempts at truly international environmental initiatives. And this, finally, brings us back to Indira Gandhi. Perhaps the most striking thing about all three of India’s protected area initiatives from this formative period is how limited their successes have been. While national parks and tiger reserves exist both on paper and on the ground, as pointed out above, their implementation has been far short of what was imagined in 1972, and biosphere reserves have been even less effective.

Some scholars have seen in this incomplete implementation a ‘cunning state, playing on its own presumed weakness,’ that escapes accountability from the same national environmentalists and international organizations that pushed so hard for a national park act and tiger reserves in the early 1970s. In this sense, the incompletely implemented WLP Act was always intended to be only partially implemented. The Government of India has even argued before its own Supreme Court that it did not have the necessary resources to enforce the WLP Act throughout the country. Presumably, this then allows the state both to have laws that placate international environmentalists and that allow severe action when the state wants to do so, while still allowing many of the state’s poorest citizens to continue to live in, and use, the forest.⁴¹ This ‘cunning state,’ however, simultaneously overestimates the unity of the Indian government, with its diverse state governments and vast bureaucracy, and underestimates the real commitment of many bureaucrats and politicians – including Gandhi – to the policies represented by the WLP Act, Project Tiger and even biosphere reserves. True, the Indian state is capable of displacing people and enforcing laws, even violently, when its leaders decide to do so. However, India’s leaders – and by extension, the state – are simply not sure of which policy to pursue. Rather than a cunning state, perhaps the more apt metaphor is the *uncertain* state. There is ample evidence that Gandhi both sympathized with impoverished forest dwellers, and was also concerned that (in keeping with what her conservation advisors would argue) forest dwellers might endanger highly threatened species. Gandhi understood that the national park, with its roots in colonialism, was problematic, but her government never succeeded in developing a viable alternative before her assassination in 1984. Ultimately, of course, it was not Gandhi, nor the government bureaucrats such as Ranjitsinh, who decided the degree of success or failure of these three initiatives, but rather the complex interplay between laws, administrators, local people, international and national NGOs, scientists and historical contingencies. And while her rhetoric at Stockholm soared in positing a new global human-centred environmental ethic, an ethic that was seemingly much closer to biosphere reserves than Project Tiger or national parks, it was her support of nationalist nature parks that has proven most enduring thus far.

Notes

1. Indira Gandhi, ‘Man and His Environment’, reproduced as Appendix VI, in *Project Tiger: A Planning Proposal for Preservation of Tiger (Panthera tigris tigris Linn.) in India*, ed. Task Force: Indian Board for Wild Life (Delhi, 1972), 109. For contemporary reactions, see Robert Bendiner, ‘Third World Ecology: At Stockholm: On Balance an Awareness that Early Concern for the Environment Is Cheaper and Saner’, *New York Times*, 26 June 1972, 33.

2. Gandhi, 'Man and His Environment', 113–14.
3. Indira Gandhi, 'Inaugural Address', *Inaugural Function of the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination* (New Delhi, 1972), 4.
4. Mahesh Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History* (Delhi, 2001).
5. Interview by author with M. K. Ranjitsinh, WWF–India office in New Delhi, 13 July 1998. Transcript on file with author.
6. Ashish Kothari, Pratibhi Pande, Shekhar Singh and Dilnavaz Varisna, *Management of National Parks and Sanctuaries in India: A Status Report* (New Delhi, 1989), 79.
7. 'Biosphere Reserves: Indian Approach', in *First International Biosphere Reserve Congress at Minsk (USSR)* (New Delhi, 1983), 6.
8. 'How it Began', in *First World Conference on National Parks, Seattle, Washington, June 30–July 7, 1962*, ed. Alexander Adams (Washington, DC, 1962), xxxii.
9. E. P. Gee, 'The Management of India's Wild Life Sanctuaries and National Parks', *JBNHS* 64, no. 2 (1967): 340.
10. Michael Lewis, ed, *American Wilderness: A New History* (New York, 2007).
11. A. Starker Leopold, *Wildlife Management in the National Parks* (Washington, DC, 1963); Richard Sellars, *Preserving Nature in the National Parks: A History* (New Haven, 1997).
12. William Sontag, *National Park Service: The First 75 Years* (Washington, DC, 1990).
13. Hugh Elliott, ed., *Second World Conference on National Parks: Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, USA, September 18–27, 1972* (Morges, 1974).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Shekhar Singh, 'Biodiversity Conservation through Ecodevelopment Planning and Implementation Lessons from India', Working Papers no. 21, South-South Cooperation Programme on Environmentally Sound Socio-Economic Development in the Humid Tropics, UNESCO, 1997, 6.
16. J. S. Kathayat, 'List of Protected Areas', National Wildlife Database Cell, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, June 2008. http://www.wii.gov.in/nwdc/pa_list.pdf, accessed 20 April 2009.
17. Singh, 'Biodiversity Conservation', 9.
18. Tejaswini Apte and Ashish Kothari, *Joint Protected Area Management: A Simple Guide to How It Will Benefit Wildlife and Humans* (Pune, 2000).
19. Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History*, 114; Michael Lewis, *Inventing Global Ecology* (Athens, OH, 2004); Ross Mallick, 'Refugee Resettlement in Forest Reserves: West Bengal Policy Reversal and the Marichjhapi Massacre', *Journal of Asian Studies* 58, no. 1 (1999): 103–25.
20. Task Force, 'Project Tiger', 14.
21. *Ibid.*, 25.
22. Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History*, 98–105.
23. Task Force, 'Project Tiger', 7.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Ibid.*, 28.
26. *Ibid.*, 26.
27. Mahesh Rangarajan, 'From Princely Symbol to Conservation Icon: A Political History of the Lion in India', in *The Unfinished Agenda: Nation Building in South Asia*, ed. M. Hasan and N. Nakazato (New Delhi, 2001), 399–442.

28. Task Force, 'Project Tiger', 8.
29. Ibid., foreword and 5.
30. Michael Lewis, 'Indian Science for Indian Tigers', *Journal of the History of Biology* 38 no. 2 (Summer 2005): 185–207.
31. See Benson, this volume.
32. Rangarajan, *India's Wildlife History*, 104.
33. C. Subramaniam, 'Introductory Speech', *Inaugural Function of the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination* (New Delhi, 1972), 3.
34. Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, *Ecology and Equity* (Delhi, 1995).
35. Lewis, *Inventing Global Ecology*.
36. T. N. Khoshoo, *Environmental Concerns and Strategies* (New Delhi, 1988), 586–87.
37. 'Biosphere Reserves: Indian Approach', 14.
38. Harold K. Eidsvik, *The Biosphere Reserve and Its Relation to Other Protected Areas* (Gland, 1979), 4.
39. Interview by author with R. Sukumar, CES, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, 12 and 15 June 1998. Transcript on file with author.
40. Eidsvik, *Biosphere Reserve*, 11.
41. Shalina Randeria, 'Global Designs and Local Lifeworlds', *Interventions* 9, no. 1 (2007): 25.