

Umesh Srinivasan and Nandini Velho (Eds). *Conservation from the margins*. Orient Black Swan, Hyderabad, 2018, 278pp. Hard cover, INR 975, ISBN 978-93-5287-282-4.

### ***Conservation from the Margins***

Over the past two decades, a large number of books on nature conservation in India have emerged, incorporating academic work, advocating people's participation and joint management, using visual media for coffee tables, as directories and through folklore and fiction; as Mahesh Rangarajan rightly points out in his foreword, "conservation in India is at a crossroads". This book 'Conservation from the margins' coalesces social and ecological research conducted across landscapes and waterscapes, focussing on the need to engage with community much more than we often do.

The editors Umesh Srinivasan and Nandini Velho introduce the book stating up front that the complexity of nature conservation in India is layered by social, political and ecological processes, with management being a conundrum, both unifying and incongruous, and I add, dynamic as can be. Such complexity is further riddled by 'our' felt need to conserve, amidst a deluge of politics, contexts and priorities that change across locations. The eventual conduits of conservation formulae are local Forest Departments or non-governmental organisations that either chose to work with local people or they do not. In much of the sociological literature, these local communities are often referred to as subalterns, the marginalised, traditional/tribal or other epithets differentiating them from us. Those who try to conserve, those expected to conserve, and those who converse of conservation are very different sets of people; this is increasingly stratified and murky in a country like India. While this is true in only some ways, a number of researchers and conservationists are delving into local histories and culture to comprehend localised conservation issues. Often these efforts veer into looking for traditional mechanisms and methods of resource-use, familiar to local folk, to be infused in conservation effort. These mechanisms and methods attempt, and sometimes fail, to bring a positive change in conserving those resources and species that are exploited or threatened by mismanagement.

The 'margins' in the title of this book, I interpret, refers to not just people from various strata in India, but also regions and habitats that were marginalised, far removed from the consciousness of the conservation fraternity until recently. This has of course changed as this edited volume puts together the experiences, narratives and research done by primarily wildlife researchers and conservationists acknowledging, focussing on, and describing the human dimensions of conservation problems in some of the more marginalised landscapes and

waterscapes found in India, and importantly the influence of markets.

This book puts together nine chapters focussing on people situated within, close to, or are found around natural landscapes or species-conservation areas. Needless to say, dealing with changing economies, politics and the adaptive roles these local communities have had to play is centred within the complexity of conservation problems that some chapters lay bare. The chapters are translations of field research (and more) by all authors in their regions of fieldwork, spanning habitats ranging from the forests of central India; waters of rivers, estuaries and oceans; evergreen forests and grassland plains; and the trans-Himalayan regions. For long, many of these regions within India were shielded from the conservation lens for a variety of reasons. Though, over the past two decades, importance of these regions has been established as habitats in danger of exploitation and of importance to species conservation. This book brings us closer to understanding the dynamics of nature conservation in these marginalised landscapes, particularly the multitude of issues confronting local communities who today matter to make conservation efforts work on the field. It is this underlying theme that runs across the chapters of the book; be it the issues concerning traditional fishers of rivers or seas, pastoralists, hunters or forest dwelling communities caught in the crossfire of the State's apparatus, economic transformations and violent local resistance.

Unravelling the complexity of conservation problems, especially with a focus on community, nearly all chapters narrate the contestations that traditional and non-traditional livelihoods have in relation to the resources they depend on, and their complex navigation through social and bureaucratic mazes over time. Through all these constraints, in some cases, the methods of traditional resource-use are sometimes seen as a means to sustainable use and, therefore, of conservation value, without accounting for the complexities of demographic change and the relevance of traditional practices in changed social and economic systems. This is the trajectory many of us conservationists—traverse in attempting to understand the nuances of culture, habitat-use, and politics in looking for means towards conserving nature. This process is neither unfounded nor simply naïve, but as other chapters on hunting and wildlife trade in this book describe, are confounded with many sensibilities, value systems, developmental dichotomies and the nuances of Protected Area management in short spans of change and in the long term.

One of the longest reads in the book is a nuanced account of a little known but important nature reserve, the Palamau

Tiger Reserve in central India. The account is a gripping story, synthesising decades of administrative changes, social unrest and of governmentality hitting itself on its own feet. An amazing but sad story of resilience of a defiant Divisional Forest Officer in managing Palamau Tiger Reserve, the local forest dwelling community, and their continuing tryst with naxalism and governmentality. Similar well-researched and stark stories decoding traditional practices and their transformations that are used by local communities to justify identity, conservation compliance or otherwise among fisher-folks, hunters and pastoralists find space in the volume. Conserving species or habitats, as all authors point out, is deeply entrenched in working with local folk from the bottom up, infusing local knowledge and finding appropriate methods. A chapter on wildlife trade compliments the volume traversing communities and the dynamism of this silent but serious threat to ecosystems and species. This edited volume is not about sharing conservation success stories or failures, but about the nuances and historical processes that allay efforts of conserving species and habitats. Acknowledging the need to engage with challenges prevalent at each location is a central thread that ties each of the nine chapters in *Conservation from the margins*. Each chapter is annotated with explanatory notes and the entire book has extensive references useful for further research. While writing on the issues that confront conservation efforts from various parts of India, this book complements others of similar genre especially those on environmental histories within India published recently, providing more food for thought to conservationists.

The value of this book is in the details narrated in many chapters describing lesser known landscapes and those

communities that live around and use them, of problems that arise in their own socio-economic processes and through nature conservation. In a small way the book showcases the cultural and ecological diversity from within India, and thus, provides the diversity of conservation experience for us to learn and benefit. While social justice and environmental conservation may continue to be bad bed fellows, resolving their dilemmas can only be shaped by dogged persistence, careful research and, as the editors write, understanding “human cultures and fast vanishing ecosystems... peripheral to India’s public consciousness.”

**Manish Chandi**

Senior Researcher,  
Andaman and Nicobar Environmental Team, India  
E-mail: [manish.chandi@gmail.com](mailto:manish.chandi@gmail.com)

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