

Challenges, Responses and Governance in the Conservation of Forest and Wildlife: The Case of the Aravali Ranges, Delhi NCR

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Abstract : This paper presents an overview of issues pertaining to the conservation of the natural environment and factors affecting the coexistence of the forest, wildlife and people. As forests and wildlife together create the basis for economic, cultural and recreational spaces for overall well-being and life-support systems, the adverse impacts of increasing consumerism are only too evident. The IUCN predicts extinction of 41% of all amphibians and 26% of mammals. The major causes behind this threatened extinction are Deforestation, Dysfunctional governance, Climate Change, Pollution and Cataclysmic phenomena. Thus the intrinsic relationship between natural resources and wildlife needs to be understood in totality, not only for the eco-system but for humanity at large. To demonstrate this, forest areas in the Aravalis- the oldest mountain ranges of Asia—falling in the States of Haryana and Rajasthan, have been taken up for study. The Aravalis are characterized by extreme climatic conditions and dry deciduous forest cover on intermittent scattered hills. Extending across the districts of Gurgaon, Faridabad, Mewat, Mahendergarh, Rewari and Bhiwani, these ranges - with village common land on which the entire economy of the rural settlements depends - fall in the state of Haryana. Aravali ranges with diverse fauna and flora near Alwar town of state of Rajasthan also form part of NCR. Once, rich in biodiversity, the Aravalis played an important role in the sustainable co-existence of forest and people. However, with the advent of industrialization and unregulated urbanization, these ranges are facing deforestation, degradation and denudation. The causes are twofold, i.e. the need of the poor and the greed of the rich. People living in and around the Aravalis are mainly poor and eke out a living by rearing live-stock. With shrinking commons, they depend entirely upon these hills for grazing, fuel, NTFP, medicinal plants and even drinking water. But at the same time, the pressure of indiscriminate urbanization and industrialization in these hills fulfils the demands of the rich and powerful in collusion with Government agencies. The functionaries of federal and State Governments play largely a negative role supporting commercial interests. Additionally, planting of a non- indigenous species like *prosopis juliflora* across the ranges has resulted in the extinction of almost all the indigenous species. The wildlife in the area is also threatened because of the lack of safe corridors and suitable habitat. In this scenario, the participatory role of different stakeholders such as NGOs, civil society and local community in the management of forests becomes crucial not only for conservation but also for the economic wellbeing of the local people. Exclusion of villagers from protection and conservation efforts - be it designing, implementing or monitoring and evaluating could prove counterproductive. A strategy needs to be evolved, wherein Government agencies be made responsible by putting relevant legislation in place along with nurturing and promoting the traditional wisdom and ethics of local communities in the protection and conservation of forests and wild life in the Aravali ranges of States of Haryana and Rajasthan of the National Capital Region, Delhi.

Keywords : deforestation, ecosystem, governance, urbanization

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