

Traditional Practices of Conserving Biodiversity: A Case Study around Jim Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand, India

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Abstract : With the continued loss of global biodiversity despite the application of modern conservation techniques, it has become crucial to investigate non-conventional methods. Accelerated destruction of ecosystems due to altered land use, climate change, cultural and social change, necessitates the exploration of society-biodiversity attitudes and links. While the loss of species and their extinction is a well-known and well-documented process that attracts much-needed attention from researchers, academics, government and non-governmental organizations, the loss of traditional ecological knowledge and practices is more insidious and goes unnoticed. The growing availability of 'indirect experiences' such as the internet and media are leading to a disaffection towards nature and the 'Extinction of Experience'. Exacerbated by the lack of documentation of traditional practices and skills, there is the possibility for the 'extinction' of traditional practices and skills before they are fully recognized and captured. India, as a mega-biodiverse country, is also known for its historical conservation strategies entwined in traditional beliefs. Indigenous communities hold skillsets, knowledge, and traditions that have accumulated over multiple generations and may play an important role in conserving biodiversity today. This study explores the differences in knowledge and attitudes towards conserving biodiversity, of three different stakeholder groups living around Jim Corbett National Park, based on their age, traditions, and association with the protected area. A triangulation designed multi-strategy investigation collected qualitative and quantitative data through a questionnaire survey of village elders, the general public, and forest officers. Following an inductive approach to analyzing qualitative data, the thematic content analysis was followed. All coding and analysis were completed using NVivo 11. Although the village elders and some general public had vast amounts of traditional knowledge, most of it was related to animal husbandry and the medicinal value of plants. Village elders were unfamiliar with the concept of the term 'biodiversity' albeit their way of life and attitudes ensured that they care for the ecosystem without having the scientific basis underpinning biodiversity conservation. Inherently, village elders were keen to conserve nature; the superimposition of governmental policies without any tangible benefit or consultation was seen as detrimental. Alienating villagers and consequently the village elders who are the reservoirs of traditional knowledge would not only be damaging to the social network of the area but would also disdain years of tried and tested techniques held by the elders. Forest officers advocated for biodiversity and conservation education for women and children. Women, across all groups, when questioned about nature conservation, showed more interest in learning and participation. Biodiversity not only has an ethical and cultural value, but also plays a role in ecosystem function and, thus, provides ecosystem services and supports livelihoods. Therefore, underpinning and using traditional knowledge and incorporating them into programs of biodiversity conservation should be explored with a sense of urgency.

Keywords : biological diversity, mega-biodiverse countries, traditional ecological knowledge, society-biodiversity links

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