

A Study of the Causes and Challenges of Wildlife and Forest Crime in India

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ABSTRACT

India has strong laws to protect its wildlife and forests. However, it is still a major center for the illegal wildlife trade. This is a critical problem for the country's conservation efforts. Several factors cause this crime. Poverty, illiteracy, and cultural beliefs play a big role. These issues are tied to a high demand for illegal products both in India and worldwide. The system also has problems. Enforcement agencies do not have enough staff or money. This makes it hard to stop criminals. There are also many pending court cases, which delays justice. Some laws are also not consistent with each other. This crime hurts more than just the environment. It also affects the people who live near forests and depend on them. It can also create new dangers to public health. To fix this, a new plan is needed. We must improve our institutions and use more technology. Most importantly, we need to help and involve local communities. They must become partners in conservation efforts.

KEYWORD: India, Wildlife, Forest, Crime, Environment

INTRODUCTION

India is very important for global conservation. It is a country with large variety of plants and animals. About 8% of all wildlife on Earth lives there. This rich biodiversity also makes India a major target for criminals. The illegal trade of wild animals is a very large business. It is worth billions of dollars. In fact, it is the fourth largest illegal trade in the world. It harms animal populations. It also damages ecosystems. It can even affect food supplies and hurt the people who live in rural areas.

India is a key part of this illegal market because it is where wild animals are taken from, moved through, and sold. Traffickers use many routes. They use India's long, open borders, especially in the Northeast. They also use major airports in cities like Chennai and Mumbai. This article explains the problem in detail. It looks at why this crime happens and what allows it to continue. The researcher had collected the information and data from many places which include laws, government reports, research papers, and news articles. The objective of this article is to help create better policies and plans to stop wildlife and forest Crimes in India.

WILDLIFE AND FOREST CRIME: AN OVERVIEW

Wildlife and forest crime is a crime that includes the illegal use of wild animals and plants, hunting of wild animals, cutting down trees and illegal trading of forest products and animals. This activity breaks both national and international laws. It is a serious environmental crime. Wildlife and forest crime includes many illegal actions. These actions are often broken down into specific types.

- **Poaching:** Poaching means illegal hunting, capturing, or killing of wild animals. Poachers sell the animals as exotic pets. They also sell valuable body parts, like elephant tusks, rhino horns, or tiger skin.
- **Illegal logging:** Illegal logging is the unlawful harvesting, moving, or selling of timber. It is a main cause of deforestation and loss of animal habitats.
- **Trafficking:** Trafficking is the organized smuggling and illegal trade of wild animals and plants. This trade also includes products made from them. These items are sold for high prices on the black market. For instance, pangolin scales are often traded for use in traditional medicine.

These crimes are very harmful. It causes species to die out. It also damages ecosystems. These crimes mainly hurt people who live near forests and depend on them. These crimes are also linked to other major crimes which include money laundering, corruption, and arms trafficking, making it a complex issue for law enforcement to tackle. The illegal wildlife trade is a very large business. It is worth billions of dollars. It is also one of the world's biggest organized crimes.

UNDERSTANDING THE WILDLIFE AND FOREST CRIME: DRIVERS AND DYNAMICS

The illegal trade of wild animals, plants and forest products is a complicated problem. It's driven by many different factors, from people needing to survive at a local level to organized crime groups seeking high profits globally.

Socio-Economic and Cultural Factors

At the local level, several factors drive wildlife and forest crime. Poverty, lack of education, and joblessness are major issues, especially for people in rural areas who rely on natural resources. Without other ways to make money, some turn to illegal activities like poaching or logging just to survive. Cultural traditions also fuel the demand for animal products. People use animal parts in traditional medicine, believe they have special properties, or want exotic pets for practices like Feng Shui.

The Wildlife Protection Act¹ 1972 made things worse for some communities. It was meant to protect animals, but it banned traditional livelihoods for groups like the Kalandar community, who used to rely on dancing sloth bears. This left them without income, jobs, or education. The law meant to help animals actually made these people more vulnerable. A better approach to conservation needs to help both people and animals by providing sustainable ways for people to make a living.

Demand of Illegal Animal Products and Exotic Pets

Wildlife crime is a big business both domestically and internationally because people are willing to pay a lot of money for illegal animal products. People want them for traditional medicines, as exotic pets, and for expensive items. Tigers, rhinos, and pangolins are major targets. People buy tiger parts like skin and bones for medicine and jewelry. Rhino horns are extremely valuable, even more than gold. The Indian pangolin is a good example. Its meat and scales are in high demand because people wrongly think they have healing powers. This demand has made pangolin trafficking a major crime. A kilogram of pangolin meat can sell for up to Rs 30,000 in some markets. This high demand has changed local hunting into a profitable business. The illegal trade also includes marine animals like sea cucumbers and tortoises. These are sold as exotic pets.

The Rise of Organized Crime Networks

Wildlife trafficking is a serious and complex crime. It's no longer just simple poaching, rather it has evolved into a sophisticated, high-profit, and low-risk transnational crime. Criminal groups are now involved. These criminals make a lot of money and face little risk. They use illegal routes and bribe officials to move animals. India's long borders with Nepal, Myanmar, and Bangladesh are the main smuggling paths. Traffickers also use airports. Major airports in Chennai and Mumbai are used to illegally transport reptiles like the Indian Star Tortoise and red-eared slider turtles. They also traffic exotic animals like kangaroos and monkeys. The criminal groups involved might not be traditional, large gangs with a single leader. Instead, they might be made up of many smaller, connected groups. This makes it very difficult for law enforcement to catch them. Therefore, the police need new strategies. They need to be more flexible and work together with other national and international groups. The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)² is trying to do this. They want to create a central database and coordinate efforts among different agencies to fight this crime.

CHALLENGES IN COMBATING THE CRIME

The fight against wildlife and forest crime is difficult. Laws and officials are committed to stop these crimes. However, the system has many problems. The fight against wildlife and forest crime is much hampered by a range of systemic challenges, primarily related to institutional, logistical, and judicial deficiencies.

The Enforcement and Institutional Shortfall

Manpower, Training, and Equipment Shortages

India's forest departments don't have enough resources. They lack the necessary staff. Some states have a 45% shortage of forest workers. This shortage forces officials to cover large, unmanageable areas, making the forests exceptionally vulnerable to poaching and illegal logging. A range officer or guard, who should

ideally patrol a 25 sq km area, is often forced to cover a jurisdiction of at least 30 sq km which makes their patrol less effective.

Forest staff also lack training and equipment. Many forest officials have only a stick and a billhook. They don't get regular training on how to use weapons. They also don't have enough knowledge about wildlife laws. This puts them at a major disadvantage against organized and well-armed poachers.

Logistical and Operational Barriers

The Forest departments have limited personnel and are further strained by logistical issues. They spend a lot of time and resources investigating false complaints, which are often filed out of personal grudges. A senior forest official reported that almost 99% of cruelty complaints from residential areas are false. However, official procedures require that every complaint be followed up. This wastes time and resources that could be used to address real issues like poaching and illegal logging. This highlights a systemic operational inefficiency that compromises the department's ability to respond to critical situations in a timely and effective manner.

The problem of under-resourcing is a national issue. The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau also faces significant limitations. The bureau, which is responsible for combating organized wildlife crime and gathering intelligence, operates with limited financial and human resources. This shows that the country is failing to adequately invest in conservation and law enforcement at all levels, from the field to the highest levels of intelligence.

Judicial and Legal Barriers

India's legal system creates a major problem for fighting wildlife crime. Even when criminals are caught, the judicial process is slow. The conviction rate for these crimes is very less. This is due to long legal procedures, a large backlog of cases, and a lack of priority for these crimes in the legal system.

The Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) has strong laws and severe penalties for crimes like poaching. But these laws don't work well if criminals are not convicted. When the risk of punishment is low, the penalties lose their power to stop crime, and this low risk allows the illegal trade to continue.

There have been some important Supreme Court rulings that have helped protect the environment, like the T.N. Godavarman case³. However, these are rare. The general pattern is a slow and overworked legal system. Low conviction rates and delays allow criminal networks to operate without much fear of punishment.

THE IMPACTS OF WILDLIFE AND FOREST CRIME

Wildlife and forest crime has many serious consequences. It causes devastating and often irreversible harm to India's ecosystems, communities, and global public health.

Ecological and Environmental Effect

Wildlife crime directly leads to a rapid loss of biodiversity. It pushes endangered species toward extinction. Poaching has caused a sharp decline in species like the tiger and rhino. Their body parts are sold illegally on the black market. For example, a 2019 report showed that 5,772 pangolins were seized from 2009 to 2017.⁴ This shows the great pressure on this species.

Illegal logging and human encroachment also destroy and fragment habitats. This destruction disrupts entire ecosystems. It leads to a breakdown of vital services and a loss of biodiversity. Deforestation adds to climate change by releasing carbon dioxide, and it also leads to more soil erosion and messes up the water cycle. These changes make ecosystems more vulnerable to natural disasters like floods and wildfires.

Socio-Economic and Public Health Effect

Wildlife and forest crime harms more than just the environment; it also harms people. Millions of people in rural areas rely on forests for their lives. When illegal activities destroy forests, these people lose their food, income, and homes. This loss of natural resources can make poverty and inequality worse. People with no other options might have to move or even join in the illegal activities to survive.

People are moving closer to forests, which leads to more conflict between humans and wildlife. In rural India, this is a serious problem because humans and animals compete for space and food. This conflict destroys crops and livestock and can even cost human lives.

The illegal trade of animals is also a threat to global health. When humans have close, unregulated contact with wildlife, diseases can spread. This often happens in places like wet markets. Diseases like SARS and COVID-19 are believed to have started in these markets. This shows the danger of the illegal wildlife trade.

Environmental damage from illegal activities makes local communities poorer. The law punish people for their traditional ways of life without offering them other options. This poverty and lack of alternatives can push people to commit illegal acts to survive. These acts then cause more environmental damage, which continues the cycle. To stop this cycle, we need more than just law enforcement. We need a complete approach that helps people and improves their well-being while also protecting nature.

LAWS AND POLICIES FOR FOREST AND WILDLIFE PROTECTION

India has strong laws to protect its wildlife and forests. These laws are good in theory. However, they are not always effective because of problems with how they are put into practice and because some of the laws conflict with each other.

The Legislative Backbone: The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 is India's most important law for protecting wildlife. Its main goal is to protect wild animals, birds, and plants and to stop poaching, smuggling, and illegal trade. The WPA is a comprehensive law with 66 sections and six schedules, which are lists of species that get different levels of legal protection.

This law gives the central government the power to create Sanctuaries and National Parks, which are special protected zones for conservation. The WPA completely bans the hunting of protected animals. Breaking this law can lead to severe penalties, including a prison sentence of three to seven years and large fines.

Amendments made in 2003 and other planned changes are designed to make these punishments even tougher. The WPA is also strengthened by India's commitment to international agreements, like the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). This global convention helps India fight wildlife trafficking on a worldwide scale.⁵

Safeguarding Habitats: The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980

The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (FCA) works alongside the Wildlife (Protection) Act. Its main job is to stop India's forest lands from being used for things that aren't related to forests. The FCA makes it a rule that a state government can't use forest land for a "non-forest purpose" unless it gets permission from the Central Government first. The term "non-forest purpose" is defined broadly to include activities like farming, mining, and clearing land for gardens. The law acts as a critical control on new development and industrial projects that could harm natural habitats. This rule applies to any plan to change the use of forest land, no matter who owns it.⁶

The Indian Forest Act, 1927: This older law provides the main rules for managing forests in India. It empowers state governments to declare different types of forests, namely "reserved forests," "protected forests," and "village forests," with varying levels of restrictions on use and access.⁷

Other Important Laws and Policies:

- **The Biological Diversity Act, 2002:** The Biological Diversity Act of 2002 was passed to protect India's biodiversity. It makes sure that biological resources are used sustainably and that benefits from their use are shared reasonably. The law created the National Biodiversity Authority and various State Biodiversity Boards.
 - **The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986:** The Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 gives the government power to protect and improve the environment. This helps in conserving wildlife and forests. The law also helps different environmental agencies work together.
 - **National Forest Policy, 1988:** This policy aims to maintain one-third of India's total land area under forest cover. It also focuses on protecting the rights of tribal and poor communities who live near these forests, while still prioritizing forest conservation for the country's benefit.
 - **Sections 428 and 429 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) 1860,** enacted during the British period, do offer some protection to animals, but they are limited in scope and primarily address acts of mischief against animals with monetary value. They do not specifically focus on wildlife conservation or protection.⁸
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- The **42nd Amendment to the Constitution, 1976**, was a big step. It moved "Forests and Protection of Wild Animals and Birds" to a list where both central and state governments could make laws.
 - **Article 48A** tells the state to "try to protect and make better the environment and to save the forests and wild life of the country." (This is a guiding principle for the government).
 - **Article 51A (g)** says every citizen has a basic duty "to protect and make better the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wild life, and to have compassion for living creatures."⁹

The Gap between Law and Practice

India's laws for protecting wildlife and forests have a big problem. The Wild Life (Protection) Act has very strict punishments for killing an endangered animal. However, the Forest (Conservation) Act which is supposed to protect the forests where these animals live, has a very weak punishment—only up to 15 days in jail. This means the law values a single animal more than the entire forest it needs to survive. Punishing someone with just 15 days in jail for destroying a huge part of a forest is not a strong enough deterrent. This difference in punishment weakens all conservation efforts because animals can't be protected if their homes are destroyed.

To fix this, the penalties for destroying forests should be equal to the penalties for harming animals. This would make the laws work together and truly help protect both wildlife and their habitats.

The Way Forward: Recommendations and Emerging Strategies

Wildlife and forest crime in India is a major problem. It is a persistent and complex issue. A successful strategy must address the root causes, not just the symptoms. This strategy should have multiple parts. First, we need to strengthen our institutions. Second, we must use technology in a smart way. Finally, and most importantly, we need to give power to local communities. They must become active partners in conservation.

Strengthening the Institutional Framework

India's forest and law enforcement departments lack resources. The government must act quickly. The government should give more money to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. These funds must go to wildlife projects. The money should also fund anti-poaching efforts and scientific research. Many jobs in these departments are empty. About 30-45% of positions are not filled. Recruitment needs to be faster. Field workers need regular training. This training should cover new conservation methods and wildlife laws. The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)¹⁰ should be a powerful agency. It is the main group for intelligence and enforcement. The WCCB can create a central data bank. It can also coordinate with other groups. These groups include state governments, customs, and INTERPOL. This is important for fighting international crime. The WCCB needs more money and staff to do its job well.

Introducing and Using Technology for Conservation and Crime Prevention

Technology can help conservation. It can overcome the lack of staff. Drones were used successfully in Kaziranga National Park. They helped protect rhinos. Drones can watch large inaccessible areas from the air. This helps scare away poachers. They also help with rescues during disasters.

AI can also help fight crime. It can predict where poaching will happen. AI systems look at old data. They analyze past poaching events and environmental factors. They also look at human activity. This helps forest officials use their limited resources better. It helps them plan better patrol routes. This changes the approach from reactive to preventative. It makes anti-poaching efforts much more effective.

Empowering Local Communities

Long-term conservation needs a new approach. A long-term, sustainable solution must involve a fundamental shift from a top-down, punitive approach to an integrated, community-centric model. Local communities must be involved for conservation to succeed. Community-based projects show the way, for example the Bugun Liocichla Conservation Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh and the Khasi Hills project in Meghalaya. These projects show that involving local people helps the environment. It also creates new jobs for them.

Providing new, sustainable jobs is important. It helps break the link between poverty and crime. The Forest Rights Act of 2006 gives communities legal power. This gives them a real stake in conservation. It makes them feel a sense of ownership. By helping these communities, they can become guardians of India's natural heritage instead of criminals.

CONCLUSION

In this Article the researchers has tried to highlight why wildlife crime is a problem in India. While there are laws for wildlife protection, stricter laws are needed, and the existing ones are not enforced well. The lack of enforcement is due to issues with institutions, courts, and society, which allows criminals to operate. A comprehensive plan is needed to move forward. This plan must address the root causes of poverty and the demand for illegal wildlife products, as well as how to control this demand. It must also invest in modern equipment for law enforcement and, most importantly, empower local communities. They should become the primary protectors of India's wildlife. The focus must change. It should shift from just protecting animals to helping humans and wildlife live together. A good plan will combine stronger laws with new technology. It will also truly empower communities. This is the best way to protect India's biodiversity for the future.

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