

Book Review: At the feet of living things

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This collection of essays is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the day-to-day complexities, frustrations and joys of working on wildlife conservation

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We live in dangerous times, in the middle of the sixth great biodiversity extinction, with over one million species now at risk of loss. The last mass extinction (popularly known as the dinosaur extinction), which took place about 66 million years back, was most probably caused by an asteroid hitting the earth, wiping out 75 per cent of all species. But this is the first of the great extinction events caused by human activity – which means, conversely, that we can still save species at risk.

At The Feet of Living Things: Twenty - Five Years of Wildlife Research and Conservation in India, is a book of essays that chronicles the conservation efforts of the Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) - one of India's best-known, highly regarded conservation organisations. Working in mountain, forested, urban, coastal and marine habitats across India, the scientists of NCF have collaborated with local communities, government agencies, industries and corporate groups, experimenting with varied approaches to find ways for people to continue to live with biodiversity.

For centuries, the 'standard' approach to conservation has been to create protected areas as sanctuaries for 'wilderness', and to define these using fences, and protect them using guards, guns and laws that exclude and extrude local communities and indigenous tribes. As this book outlines, there are many limitations to such an approach.

It is unjust – the impacts of such exclusionary conservation are hardest on local communities that have been evicted from the habitats in which their ancestors lived for centuries. It is often limited in scope – the greater impacts on India's wildlife now come from economic exploitation of forests, and the expansion of roads, mines and railways, which continue to impact protected areas. Wildlife does not respect protected area boundaries, and the majority of wild species live in and move in and out of protected areas. And, finally, such an exclusionary approach is simply bad for conservation. It ignores the fact that the local communities who live cheek-by-jowl with nature, have an intimate knowledge of species interactions and ecological processes, and their knowledge and collaboration is critical for biodiversity to survive and thrive.

Conservation no easy task

Yet, on the ground, given the often bewildering multiplicity of local actors – community leaders, youth groups, politicians, hunters, spiritual leaders, tourist groups, industries, plantation owners, bureaucrats, fishers, farmers, migrant labourers – conservation action often involves one step ahead, and two steps back. As the editors – Aparajita Datta, Rohan Arthur and T.R. Shankar Raman – point out in their introductory chapter (whimsically titled ‘What Every Starfish Knows’), many ‘success stories’ of conservation that one often reads in India seem like straightforward journeys – seemingly requiring only knowledge, creativity and the will to succeed. But conservation is by no means an easy task – given the juggernaut of economic growth and the seemingly inexorable imperatives of development that drive us as a country, economy and society.

In contrast, the insightful essays in this book are realistic about their failures as well as triumphs – ultimately paying respect to the complexities of social *and* ecological processes, and recognising the importance of staying true to India’s democratic traditions of local governance, while working with diverse stakeholders for participatory conservation. In doing so, the book puts together content that will be useful for conservation education, in classrooms for students and teachers, and in real-life situations for practitioners of conservation, all of whom will find much to learn and ponder over in these chapters.

The book covers a broad and diverse range of habitats and themes, and species - iconic hornbills, charismatic snow leopards, majestic elephants, rambunctious macaques, phlegmatic dugongs, rapacious green turtles, and many more. It is loosely arranged into five broad sections - People and Parks (explicitly addressing the limitations of India’s almost exclusive reliance on protected areas for conservation); Among Wild Species (describing the importance of understanding wild species and their behaviour); Living With Wildlife (on co-existence, and approaches to address human-wildlife conflicts); the Fall and Revival of Nature (addressing NCF’s well-known restoration initiatives in terrestrial and marine habitats); and, finally, a section on Bringing People Together, which chronicles their education interventions across cities, mountains and rural regions of India.

Captivating writing

A range of experiences are collated within – with essays written by younger PhD students and new entrants, as well as perspectives from the early group of founders. As with all NCF publications, the quality of writing is captivating, especially clear in chapters where the natural history element dominates – close your eyes and you can almost feel you are walking alongside the authors, counting green turtles as they greedily devour and devastate entire swathes of sea grass landscapes, or tracking bonnet macaques for days on end, trying to understand their sense of selfhood.

Each of the essays is written by a few people, but describes the work of many. As the editors point out, because of constraints of space - given the number of chapters that can be covered in a single book – not all voices could be covered in this volume. Given the

diversity of new members, areas, habitats and themes now covered by NCF, it would be excellent if this book was the precursor for more chronicles of this nature in the years to come.

Twenty-five years is a long time for an institution to make its mark – the work of NCF has been inspiring for many ecologists across the country. This carefully curated collection of essays is a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the day-to-day complexities, frustrations – and the joys – of working on wildlife conservation.

(Harini Nagendra is a writer and professor of ecology at Azim Premji University).