

The 'Red Queen Effect' in Bannerghatta

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Tigers, leopards and elephants -- Bannerghatta National Park (BNP) contains several of the large, iconic wildlife species that are the focus of national conservation efforts and local tourism.



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Last Updated 11 February 2024, 03:27 IST

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Harini Nagendra the Azim Premji University Prof prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong

Protecting the urban environment is a losing battle. In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll's iconic sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice is hanging out with the Red Queen, when the queen grabs her hand and asks her to run, as fast as she can. After a hectic sprint, completely out of breath, Alice is dismayed to find that they are in exactly the same place where they started. So much effort for nothing? The Red Queen dismisses Alice's concerns, saying "...here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

The Red Queen would have fit right into the city of Bengaluru, where citizens are always running, engaged in battles to protect trees that may succeed -- but only for a short while. Soon, a new project will be announced, and a new struggle to save the trees will begin, all over again. Rinse, repeat, ad infinitum.

What's the latest battle on the city's hands? Conservationists, academics and civil society groups are up in arms about the National Highways Authority of India project to build a massive six-lane highway through the forest. The 8-km elevated road, part of the Satellite Township Ring Road, will impact over 27 acres in the sensitive park core and 14 acres in the buffer zone, felling at least 1,288 trees.

Tigers, leopards and elephants -- Bannerghatta National Park (BNP) contains several of the large, iconic wildlife species that are the focus of national conservation efforts and local tourism. But the park is a biodiversity refuge for many more species -- sambhar, gaur, spotted deer, sloth bear, slender loris, smaller mammals like the mongoose and black-naped hare, and over 128 species of trees. Bannerghatta acts as a corridor for elephants moving between Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary and the forests of Krishnagiri, and its dense vegetation is an important watershed for the Cauvery River. The park provides critical ecosystem services for the city and its fringes.

Yet, heedless of its importance, BNP has shrunk significantly over time. Most recently in 2020, the eco-sensitive zone around the park, an area of close to 270 sq km, was chopped down 30% to make way for more roads and enable urban development. The six-lane highway is only the latest in a series of challenges to the fragile biodiversity of the city's largest green lung.

The NHAI has promised to erect noise barriers -- but those of us who have ever lived or worked near a highway, or even tried to travel on one with car windows rolled down, know how noisy it is. Humans can pack up and leave a noisy location, change jobs and schools, sell homes and move cities. Animals are less fortunate. Imagine being a leopard or wild pig in a forest, suddenly confronted with a six-lane highway. The consequences are obvious -- greater wild animal stress and increased likelihood of human-animal conflicts. Protected areas like Bannerghatta also harbour a number of sensitive species of plants, birds, insects and mammals. Cutting the park in two because of an elevated highway will fragment the park, impacting its ability to fulfil its intended purpose of protecting endangered species.

Most importantly, why do we assume all ecological spaces like Bannerghatta to be 'waste' lands, areas that can be sacrificed for urban infrastructure development whenever we choose? It is this shortsighted vision of cities -- a vision that fails to acknowledge the ecosystem services that forests provide -- that needs to be combated. Unless we do, we will find that the Red Queen's vision of the world -- where we run frantically, constantly exhausting and depleting ourselves, just to stay in the same place -- will become the new normal, confining us to life in a grey and bleak city, devoid of all non-human life. And that would be a true tragedy.

(Published 11 February 2024, 03:27 IST)

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