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"Small actions rejuvenated the ecosystem."

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Bit by bit, reclaiming a forest for its wildlife

With increasing human population and targeted increase of all wildlife, it is becoming more and more difficult to find the required land to do both of these.

Written by William Asquith | Updated: February 23, 2020 10:56:48 am

A tigresses at a safari in Ludhiana. (Express photo by Gurmeet Singh)

With speculation that the coronavirus outbreak may have travelled to humans from exotic animals, worldwide efforts to conserve wildlife from poaching and illegal trafficking have got a boost. Over the years, India has dedicated much efforts to securing its national parks and sanctuaries from human encroachment and poaching. While I was working in Rajasthan, the state opened a new sanctuary, Mukundara Hills Tiger Reserve, and successfully translocated a tiger to its core area of 417 sq km. The aim now is to create a safe and accessible corridor network that connects the greater Ranthambore National Park to this tiger sanctuary.

Although hugely important, it is easy to focus too much on creating safe corridors on a macro-scale by designating large tracts of land solely for wildlife passage and habitation. With increasing human population and targeted increase of all wildlife, it is becoming more and more difficult to find the required land to do both of these. Most of the land earmarked for protecting wild animals will be under severe competition from humans, who would want to use it for own economic benefit.

A plausible and effective answer to this comes from a unique area in Rajasthan. For two years, I was a ranger at SUJÁN, one of the most successful safari camps based in a little-known area called Jawai. There was a resident population of farmers and shepherds living in small villages surrounded by large granite outcrops. Nominally, this area fell within the Aravalli mountain range, but in reality the rock composition and location made it distinct.

Within these towering granite outcrops, there was a high population of Indian leopards who also regarded Jawai their home. It must also be said that the relationship between the villagers and their spotted neighbours was totally harmonious. Those who worked at SUJÁN had a priority: to re-wild the area in whatever way they could. They understood that small steps can make a huge

mustard used to be.

There were times we had to get our hands dirty to rectify past human interference. There were areas we ourselves had to sow grass seeds. Most important, however, was combating the invasive plant species: Prosopis juliflora or mesquite. Large areas of Rajasthan and even in and around Delhi have been overrun by the thorny intruder. There are many reasons why they are so damaging to the environment, including the fact that they are one of the most drought-hardened trees and grow very quickly, pushing out the slower-growing native species such as Acacia nilotica or babul, and that they deplete the water table faster than endemic flora.

Delhi has made massive efforts to reduce these trees originating from Mexico by using known vines that suffocate them. We acted mostly just before and after the monsoon, going out and removing as many of the alien trees as we could. We would then use the debris for brush packing. Brush packing is a very simple way to regenerate the small flora growing on the ground by layering the cut branches or sometimes trunks over the bare ground. This action creates almost a small ecosystem for grasses and seedlings to grow by protecting the space from further deterioration from soil erosion. Local villagers too know that these trees are foreign and serve no purpose as regards their own livelihood: their goats don't eat their leaves and prefer depleting babul trees, or farmers find small sprouts of mesquite growing in their fields stealing the ground's nutrients from their crops. They then chop down these trees and use the larger logs for firewood and the thorny spindles for fencing their land boundary.

In the two years I was there, the results were striking. With all our efforts, those small actions rejuvenated the ecosystem. The water table gradually lifted and natural watering holes appeared after the monsoon stayed around for longer. As for the trees, there were more acacias to be seen, which prompted a more diverse bird life to nest in their branches. For instance, the blue-cheeked bee-eater became a regular sight, having been sighted there for the first time in my last year. More and more scrub hares were seen in the area, prospering from a ground more concealed from vegetation. Nilgais were seen more often.

With a more diverse and balanced ecosystem, the Jawai leopards had more wild prey to hunt, and thus we saw a decline of livestock predation. The areas SUJÁN re-wilded were specific areas that became corridors for leopards to move undetected from one granite hill to another. Eventually what we saw was what we call transient leopards, ones that did not take up residence in the area but used Jawai as a passage from one area to another.

A majority of the land in Jawai is still farmland; however, the small unproductive areas that SUJÁN leased, seemingly fragmented from one another, with small efforts aimed at returning them to their natural state, eventually created a network of small corridors, that in turn became a regenerated ecosystem with a stronger biodiversity.

The writer is a wildlife consultant