



World Animal Day: Our future generations deserve the chance to see tigers in their natural habitats

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By Pradip Shah,

As we continue to erect bigger structures and encroach on forests for purposes that only benefit mankind, wildlife appears to be bearing the brunt of the consequences. Loss of natural habitats, man-animal conflict, and the threat of extinction are just a few grave consequences of deforestation and land degradation. Deforestation occurs in many forms- forest fires, clear-cutting for agriculture, development activities, unsustainable logging for timber, and degradation because of climate change. This has a direct impact on the livelihoods of rural communities and threatens our biodiversity as well.

Wildlife in India is a beautiful gift of nature, with a vast array of diverse flora and fauna ranging from the languid yet endearing Red Panda in Sikkim to the vigilant Hangul found in Kashmir. It is a well-known fact that India is home to 16 percent of the world's population. However, it is a lesser-known fact that 411 species of mammals, 1,232 birds, 456 reptiles, 219 amphibians, 2,546 fish, and 83,436 kinds of invertebrates, and over 50,000 plant

species also inhabit this vast yet diverse subcontinent.



Considering that traditional and indigenous communities depend on forests for a plethora of natural resources, protecting natural habitats is critical to their survival.

World Animal Day is an attempt to refocus our attention on our wildlife and the role it plays in the development of healthy ecosystems across the world. The cumulative effect of degraded natural ecosystems and rampant illicit activities has resulted in declining wildlife populations, endangered species, and increased man-animal conflicts.

An ecosystem is made up of a group of organisms and the environment in which they live, which functions as an ecological unit. Every single animal in the ecosystem plays an important part in the planet's health. If one species goes extinct as a result of an imbalance, it can have far-reaching consequences for the remainder of the chain. For instance, even a tiny bee plays a significant role in nature's scheme of events. Plants, flowers, and grasses would not bloom if pollen was not carried by them. In certain situations, even man's capacity to cultivate particular crops is influenced by the presence or absence of bees. When the bee population declines, individuals have to rent out hives and place them on sites to help with pollination.

Plants are important in sustaining the health and well-being of our environment, but we cannot overlook the role of animals in our ecosystems. While herbivores control the population of many plant species by dispersal of seeds or pollination, predators help control the pressure on the plants by limiting the number of herbivores. When animals die, decomposers begin to break them down, releasing nutrients into the soil, which plants require for growth.

The protection of our animals will also result in the protection of our forests. For instance, the presence of a rich tiger population encourages governments to introduce several policies and programs that can assist in the protection of forests. Trees are essential for sequestering carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping greenhouse gas that contributes to global warming. As a result, safeguarding tiger and other animal habitats will aid in the preservation of our forests, which are critical for carbon storage.

Hundreds of millions of people rely on water from areas where tigers and other animals can be found. Forests that are protected provide cleaner water and limit the quantity of silt that reaches rivers, streams, and reservoirs. They also play an important function in water flow regulation. Protecting wildlife also entails safeguarding critical freshwater supplies and functions. The variety of culture, language, and society is vanishing at the same rate as its biodiversity. WWF also found out that traditional and indigenous people living with tigers as close neighbors, many of whom rely on forests for their livelihoods and survival, speak over a quarter of the endangered languages assessed to date across the tiger range. Considering that traditional and indigenous communities depend on forests for a plethora of natural resources, protecting natural habitats is critical to their survival.

Animals and marine creatures are just as essential as people in maintaining a healthy ecological balance on the planet. Each organism on our planet occupies a distinct position in the food chain, contributing to the environment in a unique way. The ecosystem is made up of interactions between species that are linked via food webs and food chains. Even if a single animal species vanishes from the ecosystem, it may disrupt the whole food chain, resulting in devastating consequences.

According to the WWF's Living Planet Report 2020, worldwide population numbers of amphibians, birds, fish mammals, and reptiles decreased by 68 percent between 1970 and 2016. WWF states that all six priority species of India, which live in the many landscapes and forests of our vast nation, are classified as "threatened" by the IUCN. The Red Panda, Bengal Tiger, Ganges River Dolphin, and Asian Elephant are all endangered species, while the Snow Leopard and Greater One-Horned Rhinoceros are vulnerable.

Grow-Trees.com initiated afforestation programs in 23 Indian states in response to the dire situation of our country's wildlife. While each project aims to improve a region's environmental conditions to maintain animals' natural habitats and improve the living condition of rural and tribal communities, certain initiatives such as Trees for Tigers, Trees for Red Pandas, Trees for Elephants and Trees for Giant Flying Squirrels are dedicated to the protection of endangered or lesser-known species.

Planting trees and turning degraded land into forest land is one of the most effective strategies to address the majority of today's environmental issues. Human encroachment into formerly protected habitats poses a hazard to animals, depriving them of their home and driving them to seek refuge in human settlements. Wildlife will thrive when natural habitats are restored, but the ecological balance of nature will be restored as well.

Our future generations deserve the chance to see a tiger on the Ranthambore Safari or spot a rhinoceros in Kaziranga. Living in harmony with nature will not seem so far-fetched if we recognize our duty to the environment and animals, and build a world where man-animal cohabitation is not an alien concept.