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Role of cultural norms and local context in high valued resource conservation - a case study of tigers and timber from Northeast India

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Conflict between conservation interests and local livelihoods has become a common experience around the world arising from the exclusive protected areas (PAs) paradigm rooted in Western ideas of separating nature and humanity. Criticism of this protectionist ideology led to 'co-existence' approaches (e.g. CBNRM) aiming to provide dual benefits of human welfare and biodiversity conservation by increasing community participation in PA governance. However, CBNRM projects have had limited success. They are commonly implemented through standardized prescriptions with little attention to local socio-cultural systems, often replacing existing resource use regulatory mechanisms with external structures such as weak and corrupt forest departments. Although cases of local conservation behaviour have been documented, the focus has now shifted from labeling indigenous people as guardians or exploiters to identifying social, cultural and political factors leading to local conservation within the broader national/regional context.

This study seeks an empirical understanding of the role of culture and local institutions in conserving two threatened yet high valued resources, tigers and timber, within the context of India's environmental and development policies. The research is based in a mountainous region in Northeast India that spans 12000 km² and is the traditional homeland of the animic Idu people. Typical Idu lifestyle involves small-scale swidden agriculture supplemented with hunting and gathering, and occasional aid from state agencies. In Idu customs, large trees and large-bodied animals are harvested under a strict system of taboos linked to the notion of cosmic retribution. Idu cosmology places the tiger in close kinship with humans and prohibits its killing. The government has created a wildlife sanctuary and commissioned 14 mega-hydropower projects (exceeding 15000MW) in the Idu area.

We combine ecological (camera trapping, hunting surveys) and anthropological (ethnography, policy research) methods to test how effective local practices are in protecting forest and wildlife. Our study finds that community forests support more species and in higher abundance, including more tigers, than does the PA. Resources with no cultural restrictions such as musk deer and medicinal plants, valued highly in Asian markets, are harvested in accordance with optimal foraging theory predictions. Culturally restricted resources like tigers, other large-bodied animals, large trees and spiritual groves are underexploited even though people are aware of their monetary value. The poorest depend most intimately on forest resources whilst also strictly following cultural prohibitions on their extraction. Meanwhile, non-transparent governance means that local and regional elites (politicians, senior government officials) who argue for cultural change, land grabs and dams tend to benefit most from such interventions.

India has the world's largest tiger conservation program, elaborate laws and international agreements on climate change, forest conservation and indigenous rights. Yet the interests of local people and tigers are subordinate to industry-led development agenda that will cause forest loss, displacement of local livelihoods and sudden cultural change. This research has implications for unbroken forests extending from Northeast India to Southeast Asia. Though split between several nations and peripheral within each, this forest zone exhibits generalizable regularities in social, cultural and national development policies.