

# **WILDLIFE FIRST**

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NO. 1235, 1<sup>st</sup> FLOOR,  
26<sup>th</sup> 'A' MAIN,  
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04/07/2005

Smt. Sonia Gandhi  
Chairperson  
National Advisory Council  
10, Janpath, New Delhi-110 011

Madam,

## **A Win-Win solution to the issue of tribal rights and forests**

The recently proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill will, in our opinion, have devastating and irreversible consequences for India's remaining wildlife and natural heritage, without really empowering forest dwelling people to move forward in life. If implemented in its present form it will undo the decades of protection given to forests under the enlightened tenures of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, and pave the way for the further destruction of our biodiversity and crucial water catchments.

While it is undeniable that forest dwelling scheduled tribes have suffered historical injustices, we believe that their life, livelihood and welfare can be taken care of fully in several ways, without destroying the very resources that India needs for its long-term sustainability. *Site-specific* solutions, such as those successfully demonstrated in the **Rajiv Gandhi National Park** (Nagarahole) and the **Bhadra Tiger Reserve** in Karnataka, hold the key to a permanent and satisfactory resolution to this issue. We urge you to kindly go through the attached note and Video CD, as they provide strong evidence that, good schemes, when implemented sincerely, can result in a win-win solution for both people and forests.

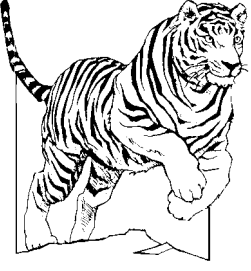
Given the long-term ecological ramifications of the proposed bill for the entire nation, we request the NAC to ensure that it is not rushed through Parliament and that enough time is set aside to evolve an ecologically sound and socially just solution on which the Bill needs to be recast. We would be grateful for an opportunity to make a detailed presentation on the issue and suggest pragmatic solutions that work.

Sincerely

K.M. Chinnappa / Praveen Bhargav  
Trustees

Copies to: All members of the National Advisory Council

*Wildlife First is a science driven conservation organization that has been actively working for over a decade in Karnataka. Wildlife First also networks with several local organizations in the Western Ghats to evolve site specific solutions to human-wildlife conflicts.*



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## **A win-win solution from Karnataka**

Our experience of working with forest dwelling communities has shown that many of them aspire to move out of forests if they can get proper assistance to restart their life in lands outside Protected Areas. They now clearly realize that this is the only way by which their children can enter mainstream society instead of being condemned to a marginalized, forgotten existence.

Two case studies in Karnataka show the way forward for providing true social justice to forest dwelling communities, while safeguarding India's ecological integrity.

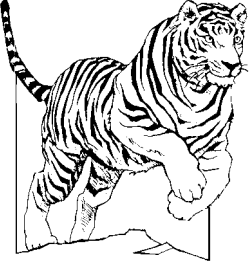
1550 impoverished tribal families used to live in the Rajiv Gandhi National Park (Nagarahole) in Karnataka. In 1997 some tribal families petitioned the government and voluntarily demanded resettlement outside the Park. The government offered them an equitable resettlement package consisting of cultivable land outside the reserve, housing, tube wells and other assistance. Till date, 250 tribal families have availed of the offer. The scheme was implemented sincerely by the government, in partnership with several conservation and tribal welfare NGO's, and proved such a success, that many of the remaining 1300 families have actively petitioned the government to give them the same opportunity to resettle outside the forest. Using the land and resources allotted to them, the 250 resettled families are working enthusiastically to improve their quality of life.

A similar scheme in the Bhadra Tiger Reserve, also in Karnataka, has been equally successful. With people having relocated **voluntarily** from the reserve to lands outside, the forest is slowly returning to a pristine state. The people themselves are enjoying greater crop yields, free from wild animal depredation. They are also able to enjoy the fruits of modern society, such as roads and transport, schools for their children, markets for their agricultural produce, and hospitals for their health and well being.

These two projects have proved that, with proper planning and sincere implementation, we can ensure a win-win solution for people and forests. We strongly believe that these successes can be replicated in other parts of the country, and that such approaches must first be sincerely tried out before trying to bring in new legislations.

## **Problems with the proposed bill**

There are many serious problems with the proposed bill. Even its basic premise is flawed. Its assertion that 'They (the tribals) are integral to the very survival and sustainability of forest ecosystems, including wildlife' has no scientific basis whatsoever. In fact, the opposite is true. Forest



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ecosystems truly thrive in those areas of the world where there is little or no human intrusion. There has *never* been a symbiotic relationship between humans and forests. It has always been one sided. While it is true that humans cannot survive without forests, it is crucial to understand that forests and wildlife do not need humans for their survival. The more they are left alone, the better they thrive.

In historic times, forest dwelling people inhabited very large tracts of forest in very low densities. They exploited the resources of the forest purely for their own subsistence, and the forests could withstand this limited exploitation. The situation today is drastically different. There are now large numbers of people living in relatively small, and rapidly shrinking, forest areas. What is more, present day forest dwellers, by and large, no longer collect forest produce for just their own subsistence, but also to earn cash incomes by supplying various commercial non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to vast and bottomless national and international markets and industries. This is neither sustainable nor in the interests of the nation.

## **Present day scenario**

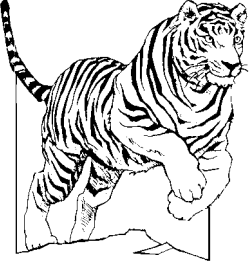
The majority of forest dwellers in India today are not bark-cloth wearing, grub and tuber eating, primitive cave dwelling peoples as in the Amazon or the heartland of Borneo. Most of them, whether they are the Kaanis of Tamilnadu, the Kadars of the Kerala forests or the Jenu Kurubas of Nagarahole are already straddling two worlds – the forests which they exploit, and the towns and cities where they sell their produce. They are well aware of life in the outside world and have all the same aspirations as the rest of us in modern human society. Therefore they must be provided true choices and opportunities.

## **People and wildlife – the reality**

There is a strong tendency among those who live in cities to romanticize the life of indigenous people living in the forests of India, and to perpetuate the myth of tribal people living contented lives in peaceful and harmonious coexistence with nature. This naïve assumption has done immense damage to the cause of tribal welfare, leading to the present proposed bill.

The truth of the matter is that our indigenous forest dwellers live a tough, hand to mouth existence. Most are today forced to indiscriminately and unsustainably collect forest produce for rapacious middlemen, who pay them a pittance.

They live in flimsy and leaky shelters with little or no access to roads, electricity, schools or hospitals.



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Their attempts at cultivating crops or raising livestock inside forest areas inhabited by elephants, tigers and other animals usually fail because of depredation by the wildlife. In fact, rather than the 'harmonious coexistence' that is often painted by ignorant or self-serving social activists, there is constant conflict between humans and wildlife when both try to share the same habitat.

The quick-fix solutions that are usually proposed as a solution to these problems include regularization of forest landholdings, the provision of electric fencing, crop protection guns, roads, schools, hospitals and employment opportunities in the middle of fragile forest areas. This is very much akin to putting band-aids on a festering, potentially gangrenous wound. It doesn't do the patient any good. And it will certainly not do India's forests – our common 'green capital' – any good.

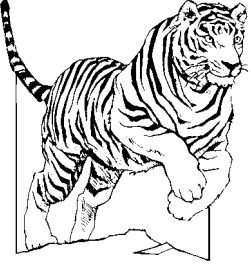
## **Sanctity of Protected Areas must be preserved**

The proposed bill does not even recognize the sanctity of Protected Areas such as National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries, which today occupy less than 4% of India's landscape. Nor does it respect the Wildlife (Protection) Act and the Forest Conservation Act – visionary legislations that were ushered in by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and strengthened by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. These leaders understood that the survival of India's ever increasing population is dependent upon the well being of our forests, and they set aside areas that were meant to remain inviolate.

## **The value of intact ecosystems**

The true value of forests is still not widely understood in this country. An intact forest ecosystem is like a vast library, in which most of the books haven't even been catalogued, let alone read and understood. Parcelling away pieces of land within forest ecosystems to meet the short-term needs of one section of society is like burning unread books in a fireplace to keep a few librarians warm!

We cannot hope or expect to wish away long-standing problems with one stroke of a pen. Poverty in India cannot be eliminated by opening up the coffers of the Reserve Bank and handing out wads of cash to poor people. That, the economists would say, would be insane and serve no purpose in the long run. And they would be absolutely right. No one has yet suggested that the Taj Mahal be demolished and its land be made available for the homeless in Agra. That too would be considered insane and not an answer to the long-term housing problems of the homeless. But when it comes to handing out forestland, the issue is dealt with summarily, and unscientific assumptions and rhetoric are the order of the day.



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## **Forests ensure food and water security for the nation**

The bottom line is that India's forest cover is already inadequate and highly fragmented. Any more destruction will pave the way for an irreversible ecological crisis. Most of the rivers in this country originate from the forests, or are augmented by the water harvested by them. The survival of our agrarian society is inextricably linked to the survival of our forests.

Moreover, our National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and larger blocks of Reserve Forests are priceless treasure troves of unexplored genetic materials - of food crops, enzymes, fibres, designs and chemicals. We have not even begun to understand their potential and yet, we are rushing ahead to destroy them.

Only forests can ensure the water and food security of India for all time. Any hasty actions motivated by ideological or political compulsions of the day will have serious consequences that cannot be remedied. The proposed Bill has tremendous ramifications for the survival of every Indian citizen - urban or rural, rich or poor - and not just for the Forest Dwelling Scheduled Tribes. Forests and wildlife continue to be destroyed because they do not have a voice or a vote. But in destroying them we are slaying the proverbial goose that lays the golden eggs for all of us. Destroying forests is like slaughtering Kamadhenu.

## **Conclusion**

There is a very real danger that the proposed bill will almost certainly result in one of the biggest land scams that this country has ever witnessed. Huge tracts of forests will be taken over and destroyed by powerful land grabbers and mining mafias in the name of the tribals. The so-called safeguards in the proposed bill will remain merely on paper, as is usually the case, while the forests are plundered. There are innumerable instances of resources allocated to tribals being blatantly usurped and ruthlessly exploited by others. The Janmam lands in Tamil Nadu, the Malik Makbuja timber scam in Bastar and the saw mills operating in the North East, are just three striking examples.

Real justice to present day forest dwellers will only have been delivered when they are empowered enough to **choose** whether they want their children to toil in the forest collecting honey, bark, fruits and nuts, or receive the education and training that will enable them to join the mainstream of society and work as software engineers, doctors, lawyers or government employees. Merely regularizing their land holdings within forest areas and giving them unsustainable rights to forest produce, as is



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now proposed, will only condemn them and their children to continue eking out a meagre and uncertain existence, with no prospect of improvement in their lives. It is utterly unjust to stipulate that tens of thousands of tribal people must survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century only by collecting forest products and acting as jungle tour-guides, while other empowered communities take advantage of all the good agricultural land and employment opportunities outside.

As we have shown, there are innovative and proven ways by which real social justice can be delivered to forest dwelling communities without jeopardizing our dwindling forest resources. We therefore appeal for recasting the Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Bill to ensure that our natural biodiversity heritage that remains in National parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries and large blocks of forests is fully protected and site specific incentive driven voluntary resettlement schemes of land, housing etc., are offered outside PAs to people presently marooned inside.