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Law of the jungle in a different conflict zone

BY GAUTAMAN BHASKARAN on FEBRUARY 17, 2016 in [ASIA TIMES NEWS & FEATURES](#), [INDIA](#)

Man-animal conflict is on the rise the world over as population growth forces humans to clear forests for land, food and shelter. As forest cover shrinks and corridors of natural movements of animals are gradually encroached upon, they are forced to enter villages leading to loss of lives, destruction of crops and property. A poisoned tiger in the wild or an electrocuted elephant near a field point to man's own failure to find a solution to this age-old conflict

One of my earliest memories of man-animal conflict goes back to the 1960s. A baby elephant in the John Wayne film, *Hatari*, escapes from its enclosure and runs amok in a small town — pushing people into panic.

But of course, unlike in the movie where the calf does very little harm and the scene itself is shot in a light vein to a hauntingly beautiful musical score, man-animal conflict the world over has often been dangerous and disastrous. And it has been happening since time immemorial.

Man-elephant conflict in Africa is as old as agriculture itself. San or Bushman rock art in the continent frequently portrays people fleeing large animals like elephants. Early 19th century historians have spoken about elephant invasions and crop destructions and how these have led to loss of homes and food shortages. All these continue to happen till this day.

Crocodiles still kill humans in the Lake Nasser area in Egypt and in Mozambique, leopards still attack people around Cape Town, and lions still maul men on the outskirts of Nairobi. Besides this, the animals prey on livestock — leading to economic losses.

In an highly populous country like India, man-animal conflict has been getting more and more common with forests being cleared for farming (or being plundered for timber by poachers) and



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with human settlements encroaching into wildlife territories. Ideally, forest peripheries must be free of men, but they do go there and beyond to gather honey or with their sheep, cows and buffalos for them to graze.

Or people go to fish — like in the Sundarbans, eastern India. Tigers regularly attack men on boats waiting in the riverine estuary for their daily catch.

Human-elephant conflict has been most worrying in India. There are about 30,000 wild elephants, and their confrontation with men has been leaving 350 or so people dead year after year. And crops worth Rs 150 million are damaged annually. Also, some 50 elephants are killed every year (this figure is highly conservative) by angry villagers in connivance with poachers. Sometimes, forests are illegally cleared in the mistaken belief that elephants will stay away.

They do not, as we saw recently in Siliguri on the foothills of the Himalayas — where an elephant, enraged over lack of food, entered the town and caused havoc. Vehicles were destroyed, houses were damaged and people froze in fright as the mammoth beast stomped along.

Also recently, a leopard, blind in one eye and with a missing canine, walked into a posh school in Bengaluru in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. Mercifully, the animal chose a day when children were enjoying a holiday, and it took many hours of clumsy handling by wildlife officials to tranquilize the leopard.

And after all this high drama that could have seen men dead, the leopard escaped from an enclosure.

Leopards have also been sighted on the suburbs of Mumbai, and obviously they have been driven into highly populated areas by lack of food in their own habitats, where shrinking vegetation causes a depletion in deer population.

Man-animal conflict in India has a sub-plot which is equally disturbing. Villagers livid over cattle losses and men being eaten up by tigers (which begin their journey into human settlements by first attacking domestic cattle and turn man-eaters later) become willing accomplices of poachers — who pay good money for a dead tiger.

The other day, a tiger was found dead in Kodaikanal, a hill resort in southern India. A post-mortem revealed that it was poisoned. In last November alone, 22 big cats were killed by poachers across India.

Elephants are also poached for their ivory, and the simple folks who reside in rural India are often at a loss to find an answer to marauding elephants which, peeved over disappearing forest cover and migratory paths, go on the rampage.

Although, the solution to man-animal conflict is no rocket science, it is still not easy to implement it. India's exploding population needs more food and shelter, and additional land has to be carved out of forests — which in turn makes animals homeless. The spark for a conflict.

Gautaman Bhaskaran is an author, commentator and movie critic, who has worked with The Statesman in Kolkata and The Hindu in Chennai for 35 years. He now writes for the Hindustan Times, the Gulf Times and The Seoul Times.

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