



**JIM CORBETT'S CONSERVATIONIST'S APPROACH TOWARDS  
THE WILDLIFE OF INDIA**

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India is gifted with beautiful natural landscapes and dense forests. Till the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century deep forests covered major part of the country. The history of the forests in India is related to the history of civilization.

In the story of Indian civilization, the awareness of wild life is as old as the rocks; the myths and legends, the epics and scriptures, the sculptor and architecture, all suggest an appreciation of these humble denizens of the forest. The Indus valley people immortalized some animals on their seals. In the ancient Hindu texts, the inhabitants of the forest were recognized in the form of Jatayu, the golden deer and the 'Vanars' (monkeys) of the *Ramayana*. The Buddhist Jatakas refer to the various births of Buddha. The fact that Buddha appeared as an animal in his previous incarnations shows the importance attached to animal life in Buddhist thought. This finds expression in the stone railings around the Sanchi Stupa. During the time of the Mauryas, animals appear in treatises on statecraft and in fables. In Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, severe punishment is prescribed for trapping, killing or molesting deer, bison, birds and fish in protected areas. The great Mauryan emperor Ashoka, in his fifth pillar edict, emphasizes the same theme i.e. giving protection to fish, forests and animals. It was during the Gupta period i.e. in the first half of the first millennium, that animals were introduced as characters in stories—the famous *Panchatan-tra*. This same awareness is conveyed in some works of Kali-dasa, who too belonged to the same period.

But with the establishment of the British Raj in India, understanding of wildlife took an entirely different dimension. The 'Shikari,' the hunter with his gun, did the greatest damage to the wild heritage of the country. 'Shikar' expeditions incidentally happened to be one of the greatest attractions of the colonial era. Ceremonial, royal shikars for big game trophies were arranged to celebrate vice-regal visits. Although certain laws were passed to protect wild life, the damage done

was considerable. However, it was not all that bad, the importance of wild life from the scientific point of view was recognised along with an appreciation of its richness as conveyed by men like Jim Corbett.

Corbett becomes very sensitive in the matters of conservation in his mid-fifties. He started a campaign to save wildlife in the country. In 1944, Jim Corbett, born and brought up in Naini Tal, created bestseller out of his adventures with the *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*: stories about how he tracked and shot man-eaters in the Garhwall hills during the early years of the last century. Corbett's "Jungle Lore," deals quite simply with the close relationship he shared with Nature. He learnt from big brother Tom how to handle and fire a gun. He set himself, even as a young boy, to gain an intimacy with the jungle and developed a rare understanding of the sights and sounds of the forest. He also acquired that unique combination of speed and accuracy with the rifle.

Corbett however reached a turning point in the 1930s, when having taken three officers out for a duck shoot, he was 'sickened by the senseless slaughter of 300 birds. ("Introduction, *Jim Corbett's India*, 6) Reminiscent of King Ashoka at the Battle of Kalinga where after he resolved never again to shoot an animal except for food or if it was a 'dangerous' beast.

Corbett had a great compassion for the animals that he shot. He understood why tigers became man-eaters. In his 'Author's Note' to *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, he defines a man-eater as a tiger that has been compelled through stress of circumstances beyond its control, to adopt a diet alien to it. (9) The stress of the circumstances is mostly wounds and, sometimes, old age. The wound that has caused a particular tiger to take to man-eating might be the result of the tiger having lost his temper when killing a porcupine or the result of a carelessly fired shot and failure to recover the wounded animal.

Leopards, however, Corbett says, become man-eaters for entirely different reasons. Although very beautiful, they are scavengers and will eat any dead thing they find in the forest. During epidemics, when the number of dead waiting to be disposed off rises sharply, the hill people simply place a live coal in the mouth of the deceased and cast the body into the valley below. It is extremely easy for a leopard to acquire a taste for human flesh in such circumstances, particularly when his natural food is scarce.

Greater damage however has been done by the destruction of the very habitat of the tigers. Corbett is well aware that the felling of trees

and denudation of forests disorganized the normal life of the jungles. Extensive denudation of forests to meet the increasing demands for fuel wood and timber for domestic and industrial purposes, encroachments by mining and mineral exploration activities have led to a great loss of forest cover.

Corbett draws our attention not only to the indiscriminate felling of trees but also to the collection of minor forest produce which is responsible for the destruction of forests, In "Jungle Lore," Corbett describes the foothills of the Himalayas where the forests were "as Nature made it" for there was little timber of commercial value.

There were however, Shishum trees which provided the hill-men with the best timber for furniture and cartwheels. The red rani berries provided the kamala powder used for dyeing wool and also boiled in mustard oil was used to treat rheumatism. The khair trees in addition to providing the villagers with plough shares, also provided catechu and the dye known as khaki used for dyeing cloth and fishing nets. The dhak (*Butea Giondosa*) trees produce the ruby coloured gum used for dyeing silk. The sweet jelly found in the seed pods of the amaltas (*cassia fistula*) is used as a laxative. Kapoc, the white silk-cotton of the samal trees, is used in life belts.

The collection of these products in itself does not disrupt forest life greatly. It is the method employed, the thoughtless stripping and cutting down of branches. Sometimes whole trees, in an attempt to rake in as much in as little time as possible, has caused the damage. The forest is given no chance to regenerate itself.

In the "Thak Man-Eater," Corbett gives a vivid description of Thak village. This village had been gifted hundreds of years ago by the Chand Rajas of Kumaon to the priests who served the Purnagiri shrines. From a collection of grass huts, the village had grown into a very prosperous settlement. The land was fertile and the temples brought in considerable revenue.

Temples are still the most important source of employment for priests, temple owners and others worshipping the deity. Pilgrims and tourists constitute a major chunk of human traffic through the jungles. The economics of the region depends to a large extent upon them. Recent development like the promotion of tourism without adequate measures of conservation have led to the degradation and destruction of the environment.

In *Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag*, Corbett describes the beautiful pilgrim road, starting from Hardwar, through Rishikesh and across the Lachman Jhula over the Ganges to the age-old shrines of Kedarnath and Badrinath. The temples are popular and attract pilgrims and tourists from all over the world. They also provide the socio-economic cultural base of the people.

Corbett spent 32 years in regular pursuit of man-eaters. He killed the Rudraprayag leopard at the age of 52 and the Thak man-eater at 63. Neither his energy nor his courage had flagged over the years. By the year 1938, Corbett had renounced the gun in favour of the camera to shoot tigers. Only when he was convinced that the tiger was indeed killing human beings, not accidentally, or in anger, but for food, did Corbett agree to shoot it. He found far greater pleasure in taking a photograph than in acquiring a trophy. As he said, "while the photograph is of interest to all lovers of wild life, the trophy is only of interest to the individual who acquired it."

Corbett was an environmentalist long before it was recognized as a science. He is a conservationist when he appeals to the people of his village, Haldwani, 'not to betray the sacred trust that is a country's fauna.' (*Jim Corbett's India*, 212)

According to Corbett, more and more tigers are being killed each year due to the balance in nature being disturbed by unrestricted slaughter of game and due to the tigers being driven out of their natural habitats.

Today much of the forest, where Corbett roamed, is gone. The foothills of the Himalayas, the Shivaliks, are bare, denuded of trees, ravaged by erosion, almost empty and devoid of tigers as the most threatened ecosystems of the world

Corbett entreaties us to get to know, understand and use to mutual advantage the riches of our wild world. In language beautiful as the land he describes, Corbett lays before of Nature's bounty, exhorting us to protect and consent for future generations.

Corbett is a devoted conservator who wrote for the cause of wildlife. His lifelong experience of jungle life seems to be an outstanding achievement to write with an authority on wild animals.

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