

# Ulterior logic of conservation

Biodiversity protection should be based on anthropocentric utilitarianism, writes Debal Deb

A vast corpus of literature, ranging from scientific treatise to news features and media campaigns, concertedly warns us everyday about the shrinking diversity of life forms, the world over. A large number of people have been involved, for the past some time, with various movements for conserving nature's horde of plants and animals. Biodiversity conservation, it is argued, is an essential prerequisite for our existence.

All items of our food, industrial materials and medicines are obtained from a spectrum of biodiversity. Vegetables, fruits, spices, beverages, cotton, wool, rayon, silk, flax, rubber, paper, timber, gum, shellac and thousands of drugs come from the immense biodiversity around. In fact, of all the material we consume and use everyday, only a minuscule fraction is derived from non-living sources.

Therefore, disappearance of several animals and plants will deprive us of many indispensable resources. Notwithstanding their value, these resources are either being exhausted by indiscreet commercial extraction or destroyed through use and abuse of technology. Conservation of nature is the only logical solution to save our own souls — at least until we are able to manufacture every single subsistence material artificially, to make good for the lost bio-resources.

But this economic reasoning is only one line of argument for conserving species of plants and animals. Another line construes what may be called an "ethical argument," and says all living beings have the right to exist. In fact, this was pro-

pounded long ago by Buddhism and Jainism, and the latter preached an extreme form of non-violence towards all creatures. The Jains exercise special care so as not to trample any worm or breathe in any tiny insect inadvertently.

Indeed, the world views of Buddhism and Jainism constitute the oldest conservationism, albeit to achieve *Nirvana*. Its modern ethical expression, however, does not invoke religion to preach conservation: "We must conserve the tiger and the lion and the rhino, because they have biological rights to live," they argue, "and we have no right to push them towards extinction."

There are various nuances of this school of conservationism, including vegetarianism, neo-Buddhism and animal-rights activism. Often they refer to evolutionary logic: "Man should not upset the fruits of evolution. Wildlife has evolved with humans. Therefore, man must not exterminate the wild biota."

How far is this reverence for the intrinsic value of wildlife tenable? One wonders if any of these wildlife lovers are prepared to die, without any medical treatment, of pneumonia, malaria, cholera, small pox, or leprosy, which are caused by the respective "wild" micro-organisms.

The viruses, bacteria, protozoa and all parasites have a long evolutionary history, and many of them have co-evolved with humans. If that is enough reason for their conservation, should not the ethicists raise their voices against the use of medicines to eradicate the microbes? If nobody has yet denounced medicine for the sake of (micro)-biodiversity conservation, it clearly betrays a fal-

lacy of the ethical argument for conservation.

Our ethics regarding the way we ought to treat other beings are essentially built on the anthropocentric principles of utility. Examples are galore: If someone destroys an electronic calculator, we are bound to think that he has committed an error, not because the calculator is hurt, but because he has deprived someone else of the use of the machine. Similarly, if someone tortures a goat for sadistic pleasure, the act is definitely condemnable but if the goat is killed for meat there is nothing wrong with it. Even killing your pet dog is not wrong, if it has become rabid.

We also translate ecological principles into anthropocentric terms. Even the seemingly value-free ecological functions of the forest are implicitly assessed vis-a-vis long term human needs: production of oxygen, reducing the levels of greenhouse gases, providing the base of food webs, preventing soil erosion. All these are important because they ensure our own existence as well as better living conditions.

Some conservationists also put forward an "aesthetic argument," that wild creatures are beautiful, and therefore, ought to be preserved. This is often the covert reason behind creating most nature parks to house such beautiful animals as the leopard, the tiger, the spotted deer, the peacock, and so on. Underlying this aesthetic argument, again is a benign anthropocentrism. Anything that bears an aesthetic value has a utility, which may justify its protection.

The same anthropocentric and utilitarian considerations dictate whether certain plants or animals or eco-

systems ought to be conserved. When the value of a species is not immediately clear to us, we often extrapolate from experience to its potential uses. For example, the extinction of the gastric breeding frog (so named because the females brooded their eggs in the stomach) of Australia is now considered as a tremendous loss to medicine. The mother frog secreted a chemical in her stomach that stopped gastric acid secretion as soon as she swallowed the eggs. If the chemical could have been extracted, it would have been a great remedy for gastric ulcers. It is also likely that the herb we made extinct yesterday was a potential remedy for cancer.

Thus we see that the ultimate reason for conservation of any species or ecosystem is the long-term well-being of humans — not of any particular individuals, but our entire species. As long as the awareness of this "self-interest" is absent, humans will not find it worthwhile to conserve anything.

This is not to say that we ought to protect those species that have some actual or potential utility to ourselves; objectively, an endangered species might serve only to stabilise a remote ecosystem, in conceptual, mathematical terms.

Yet, the very recognition of the ecological role played by the species in question feeds back to anthropocentric calculations in indirect ways, for example, by satiating our thirst for knowledge, which is a human prerogative. Thus, in the final analysis, all conservationist agenda is predicted on one or the other anthropocentric calculation. Ignoring this while talking of conservation is tantamount to suppressing the fact.