



## Diverging viewpoints on tiger conservation: A Q-method study and survey of conservation professionals in India



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### ABSTRACT

Biodiversity conservation often involves contentious and complex decision-making dilemmas that do not have clear solutions yet need urgent attention. Such problems typically involve stakeholders with divergent viewpoints and interests, leading to disagreement, controversy and political dispute. In these situations it becomes critical for conservation managers and policy-makers to distinguish the worldviews driving the debate. Focusing on the case of tiger conservation in India, we combined the Q-method with a traditional survey instrument to explore the diverse viewpoints of conservationists in India. The results indicate five dominant viewpoints: (1) community-centered; (2) tiger-centered; (3) science and tourism-led; (4) instrumental approach; and (5) moral-centered. Based on these findings we identify the predictable points of disagreement and potential areas of consensus, and discuss the implications of the findings for addressing complex socio-ecological conservation challenges. Overall, our research suggests that despite 'tiger-tribal' issues often overwhelming conservation debates in India, there are important areas of overlap within the tiger-centered and community-centered viewpoints, and with other independent (albeit rarely evident) viewpoints. To help foster consensus, we suggest the need to avoid framing conservation policy discussions along the tiger-tribal debate and instead focus on existing areas of agreement. Creating a discourse around these views can help organize conservation professionals into a more coherent and united body, crucial for effective participation in policy advocacy, design and implementation.

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### 1. Introduction

Biodiversity conservation often involves contentious and complex decision-making dilemmas that do not have clear solutions yet need urgent attention (Ludwig et al., 2001). Such problems typically involve stakeholders with divergent viewpoints and interests, leading to disagreement, controversy and political dispute (Grimble and Wellard, 1997). During political disputes on environmental issues, the competing arguments do not necessarily rest on the merits of scientific evidence, but on the divergent worldviews and belief systems of the various participants (Bengtsson and Tillman, 2004; Hickey, 2009; Sarewitz, 2004). In these situations it becomes critical for conservation managers and policy-makers to distinguish the worldviews driving the debate (Sarewitz, 2004).

Take the example of tiger conservation in India, an urgent conservation issue of global concern. Despite a large-scale global effort to conserve the tiger (*Panthera tigris*), its population continues to

decline. The wild population of tigers now comprises approximately 4000 individuals in 13 countries in Asia, of which India holds the majority of individuals and genetic diversity (Chundawat et al., 2011; Mondol et al., 2009).

India initiated formal policies to save the tiger in the 1970s (Lewis, 2003), with the promulgation of the *Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972*, the establishment of many protected areas, and the launching of a national-level 'Project Tiger' (Lewis, 2005). These measures utilized the 'exclusionary model' of conservation (Rastogi et al., 2012), later criticized because this approach did not prescribe a strong role for local communities, fueling ongoing debate among conservation professionals (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Guha, 1989). This debate around the precise role of communities in conservation has often been named the 'tiger-tribal' debate and can be likened to the "parks vs. people" or "conservation-development" viewpoints of conservation (Miller et al., 2011; Minter and Miller, 2011). In India, this debate has generally dominated the discourse on tiger conservation, particularly over the last decade (Karanth, 2005; Karanth and Madhusudan, 1997; Madhusudan, 2005; Project Tiger, 2005; Saberwal, 1997). For example, the debate resurfaced when tigers disappeared from two protected areas in India over the last decade, and the Prime Minister's Tiger Task Force was established to assess the situation. Although the subsequent report

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addressed many key issues, including the implementation of laws and the integration of modern scientific methods in estimating tiger populations, the issue that received widest attention was the role of local communities in tiger conservation (Karanth, 2005; Project Tiger, 2005; Vasani, 2005). Dramatically, a member of the Tiger Task Force subsequently resigned, criticizing the Task Force for focusing too much on inequity and social justice, and adding – “the interests of the tiger’s survival has been relegated and lost sight of” (Project Tiger, 2005). Indeed, more recent scientific discourse has been divided by the debate. A recent study considered the possibility for “co-existence” between tiger and humans (Carter et al., 2012). This study was rebutted by at least three groups of scientists (Goswami et al., 2013; Harihar et al., 2013; Karanth et al., 2013) (also refer, Carter et al. (2013)). Separately, one of these groups had previously proposed a model of tourism (Karanth and Karanth, 2012), which was critiqued by others (Rai, 2012) citing Carter et al. (2012). Through such a complex dialogue, it is evident that to date, a workable reconciliation has not been achieved, and a coherent and broadly acceptable approach to tiger conservation remains elusive (Karanth et al., 2008). With a general lack of consensus among conservation professionals on the best way forward, the meaningful input of highly knowledgeable and experienced actors in the policy process becomes jeopardized (Noss et al., 2012). Further, the ‘tiger-tribal’ debate often overwhelms other conservation debates in India, reducing the potential for other initiatives and viewpoints to inform and progress sustainable conservation policy and management (Karanth et al., 2008; Rastogi et al., 2012).

Applying (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to the complex challenge of tiger conservation policy in India highlights that a number of policy subsystems are operating at various scales, comprising various actors concerned with tiger conservation. These actors include professionals working in government (e.g. involved with policy formulation, scientific research, and policy implementation) and also professionals working in the private, university and non-government organization (NGO) sectors (e.g. involved with generation, dissemination and evaluation of policy ideas (refer, Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993). According to Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1993), these actors are motivated by their beliefs to aggregate into advocacy coalitions – networks consisting of other people who share similar views and beliefs – to advance their own beliefs through policy advocacy, while resisting differing viewpoints. Recognizing the importance of these actors to the process of developing and implementing tiger conservation policy in India, there is a need to better understand the viewpoints of India’s conservation professionals.

A deeper understanding of the viewpoints held by conservation professionals will assist tiger conservation policy makers to better understand the various perspectives and motivations, with a view to building areas of consensus and creating opportunities for more sustainable policy interventions (Clark, 2002; Miller et al., 2011; Noss et al., 2012; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993; Weible, 2007). Improving our understanding of divergent viewpoints will also help actors to anticipate the actions of others in policy negotiation and devise better strategies for conservation advocacy; particularly when ecological decisions are socially wrenching and politically contentious (Lackey, 2006). This will better equip conservation practitioners to avoid the pitfalls of inadvertent advocacy (Lackey, 2007; Wilhere, 2012), reinforce their credibility and establish professional propriety (Barry and Oelschlaeger, 1996).

To date, most relevant studies have concerned themselves with determining and exploring certain viewpoints (Chamberlain et al., 2012; Mattson et al., 2006; Sandbrook et al., 2010) or with mapping pre-determined viewpoints to specific stakeholder groups (Bremner and Park, 2007; Karanth and Nepal, 2011; Karanth

et al., 2008). Very few conservation-related studies have bridged the two approaches, for example by combining the Q-method to explore viewpoints with a survey for validating such viewpoints among the respondents (Danielson, 2009). In this paper we present the results of an exploratory study into the viewpoints on tiger conservation among conservation professionals in India. We then identify the points of disagreement, and overlap between the viewpoints, and discuss the implications for addressing complex socio-ecological conservation challenges.

## 2. Methods

The viewpoints of conservation professionals were examined in two distinct, but linked, research steps. The first step involved exploring and determining the dominant viewpoints of tiger conservation professionals in India using the Q-method (Brown, 1980). The second step involved measuring the popular approval of these viewpoints across a larger sample of conservation professionals in India using an online survey. This coupled approach, combining the intellectual rigor of the Q-method and the grounded evidence of surveys, is considered especially helpful when seeking to overcome issues with deadlocks or intense debate (Danielson, 2009), and to uncover overlap between the viewpoints.

## 3. Research steps

### 3.1. Q-method study

The Q-method has recently been used by various researchers to understand subjectivities relevant to conservation (Malan, 2008; Mattson et al., 2006; Sandbrook et al., 2010). Q-method allows participants to express themselves without conforming to pre-assigned categories set by the researcher, yet reveals the implicit subjectivities of participants. This was particularly useful in the exploratory phase of our research, where we set out to determine *what* the viewpoints in tiger conservation in India were. The concepts underpinning Q-method are described in detail elsewhere (refer, for example, Brown, 1980; van Exel and de Graaf, 2005). To refrain from repetition, we will only describe the methodology in brief, adapting from other authors (Sexton et al., 1998):

*Step 1: Developing the Concourse:* The concourse is a set of statements that reflect the diversity and complexity of the current discourse around the issue under study, in this case, issues pertinent to tiger conservation. The concourse was developed through a detailed literature review conducted between October 2010 and January 2011 (refer Rastogi et al. (2012)), and brainstorming and discussions with stakeholder groups. The final concourse consisted of 36 statements, as required by our scheme of the Q-Sort distribution (Step 3). We made every effort to retain the original wording of the statements in order to capture the intent of the source (Cuppen et al., 2010).

*Step 2: Organizing the P-Sample:* The group of respondents is referred to as the P-Sample. For Q-method, the precise profile of the participant is not important to the response as long as a diverse representation of viewpoints is maintained, and this necessitated a purposive sampling strategy (Sexton et al., 1998). Conservation professionals working on tiger issues in India were subsequently recruited to ensure a representation across major groups (media, researchers, NGOs, Indian Forest Service), genders, ages and geographic regions. Participant emails were obtained through personal contact, institutional databases and online searches.

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