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A case for reconsidering the conservation status of former Closed Areas in arid landscapes of western India

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Wildlife Protection Act (WPA) of 1972 prohibits hunting within the Protected Areas (PA), while diverse populations of wildlife exist outside them, as well. In the 1980s, the State Government of Rajasthan declared wildlife-rich areas (14690 km²) located outside PA, as Closed Areas (CA) to prohibit hunting activities. In 2002, due to an amendment of the WPA of 1972, these CA lost their PA status, thus putting into question, the future of these endangered species-rich ecosystems. To inform future management decisions, a rapid biodiversity assessment was conducted across seven former CA in the arid landscapes of western Rajasthan. Furthermore, the dynamics of biodiversity and conservation practices over time was also assessed through interviews of 3357 adults from 2470 households in the region. Due to the natural low productivity of arid regions, the mean tree density (5.2 ± 0.8 individual ha⁻¹) was found significantly lower ($P = 0.001$) than the mean shrub density (114.4 ± 31.4 individual ha⁻¹) particularly where human interferences were recorded, while species richness and diversity (Sobs

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