



PHOTO: ASAD RAHMANI



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ORPHANS IN THE WILD

Project Elephant, the government's second largest species-specific scheme, got only one-tenth of the funds allocated to Project Tiger last year. A total of 15 other threatened species - including the forest owl, great Indian bustard, snow leopard and dolphin - are all clubbed together and given about half the funding that Project Tiger gets. Threatened insects like certain types of beetle and the tarantula, both vital to certain ecosystems, get virtually no funding at all. HT FILE PHOTOS

OUR OVERWHELMING FOCUS on the big cat comes at the cost of several other threatened species in the plant and animal kingdoms, argue conservationists. Many favour a bio-diversity approach that recognises the interdependence between species

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Black, eight-legged and a regular in horror movies, the tarantula is hardly likely to be gracing any posters for conservation.

But eight species of this hairy spider, all of which are found in India, have silently made it to the International Union for Conservation of Nature's most recent list of threatened species.

Governments, conservationists and researchers universally recognise this body as the arbiter of species facing threats. And conservationists say less celebrated members of the animal kingdom, not to mention the entire plant world, are not getting their due because the tiger hogs publicity and funds. The result: People tend to forget that it is just one of India's many threatened species.

"Tiger-wallahs have hijacked India's conservation agenda and the bulk of the limited funding," says Asad Rahmani, director of the Bombay Natural

History Society (BNHS), an NGO working in the field of conservation research.

Over the past year, the big cat has benefited from blitzkrieg publicity campaigns launched by World Wildlife Fund, a non-profit group, and cellphone service provider Aircel.

The tiger gets a disproportionate share of government funding too. The Ministry of Environment & Forests had a budget of Rs 197.24 crore for Project Tiger for 2009-10.

Project Elephant, the ministry's second largest species-specific scheme, got just over a tenth of this (Rs 21.5 crore).

And only Rs 70 crore was allocated to the protection of 15 other threatened species, including the snow leopard, Gangetic dolphin and whale shark. This money was to suffice for the "integrated development of wildlife and forest habitats" across 450

national parks and reserves.

Most arguments defending the focus on the tiger are based on the flagship approach to conservation. Here, conservationists identify the animal at the top of the food chain, generally the largest mammal in the area, and focus on this because they believe saving its habitat will automatically protect those lower down on the chain.

Thus it's the tiger and the dolphin, whale and elephant, that become the pin-ups that draw in the funding, the research papers and the media spotlight.

There is another reason for this: The more human the creatures seem, the more they seem worth saving.

"One of the most important factors underlying willingness to pay for species conservation around the world is the size of the eyes. People prefer species with big eyes," says Berta Martin-

López, whose 2008 paper studied the motivations dominating conservation funding. "When more scientific attention is paid to charismatic, attractive or useful species; more public support and conservation funding are likely to occur. Unfortunately, this feedback mechanism seriously threatens the majority of the species vital to a functional ecosystem."

Indeed, conservationists say that the tiger's usefulness as a symbol drowns out several other species and habitats. After all, not every sensitive habitat is home to a big, beautiful animal.

"A flagship makes the idea of conservation popular, but what about areas that may not have such species?" asks Priyadarsanan Rajan, a researcher at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment in Bangalore.

Rahmani of the BNHS agrees: "I acknowledge that many threatened and not-so-threatened species get protection under Project Tiger, but there are hundreds that do not and should be given attention on priority."

The forest owl, for one, thought to be extinct, was sighted again in 1997.

"The owl represents a healthy teak forest, without which the Narmada River

THE RIGHT TERMS

"Threatened" is the term conservationists use for species that need our attention. The sub-categories under this are "critically endangered", "endangered", "vulnerable" and "near-threatened", depending on the degree of threat they face.

THE LAW

India's Wildlife Protection Act came into force in 1972 to protect wildlife and control poaching, smuggling and illegal wildlife trade. It lists species under six schedules.

would shrink," says Girish Jathar, a researcher at the Centre for Environment Education, Ahmedabad, who has been studying the bird for several years.

Insects get a particularly raw deal, despite their contribution to the environment through the pollination of forests and crops. "We have 80,000 species of beetle, but not close to as much research or funding," says Anand Pendharkar, founder of Mumbai-based environmental organisation Sprouts.

In addition to inequities within the animal kingdom is the relative neglect of the plant world. "Everywhere in the world, fauna dominates flora," says Suprabha Seshan, director of Gurukula Botanical Sanctuary in Kerala. "But flora is the basis of everything. The interdependence between flora and fauna doesn't get enough attention."

Perhaps in this, the international year of biodiversity, we need more than ever to readjust the spotlight.

A narrow, species approach to conservation means that smaller habitats, corridors between protected areas and those areas without charismatic megafauna might be lost. "A major casualty of the species-based approach has been the loss of smaller habitats," says Rajan. "The focus should be on conserving heterogeneity rather than running after a few mammals."

A species focus also crucially loses out on the relationships they share. "We need to understand the complex inter-linkages within the biosphere," says Pendharkar. "You cannot protect just the tenth floor in isolation and expect the rest of the structure to take care of itself."

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