

Opinion

Would Breast-beating Lead us Anywhere ?

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I was recently invited to a crisis-generated meeting in Delhi organised by a leading wildlife conservation NGO in the country. The auditorium was full of wildlife activists and enthusiasts who ought to have known better. The crisis ostensibly related to news items highlighting the fact that tigers had not been spotted in Sariska Tiger Reserve for the last few months and some well documented tigers were also not to be seen in Ranthambore. In short the wildlife set up in Rajasthan was at the receiving end of pretty vocal members of the civil society. Unfortunately there was no representative from the Rajasthan forest bureaucracy, despite their having been invited to the meet by the organisers, to present their side of the story, if any.

Several agitated participants came up with suggestions on several drastic steps ranging from approaching the Supreme Court for urgent directives to the powers that be to a call for participants to commit collective *hari kari* on their failure to avert a disaster that seemed to have overtaken the wildlife parks, yet again, in Rajasthan. It is notable that there was at least one past Secretary MOEF, three past Chiefs of the wildlife establishment in the country and one past Director of Project Tiger in the gathering. The title of this piece originates from the comment from one of them made, in a spirit of exasperation, saying "while you (meaning the civil society) breast-beat here, the forest establishment breast-beats there with respective good reasons". The only humble voice in the gathering seemed to be that of the present Addl. DG (WL) in the MOEF who in any case was only few weeks into his new position.

The fact that the wildlife establishments all over the country are currently unable to prove themselves up to the task at hand is not disputed. Professionalism is at a very high premium and good, efficient and knowledgeable field functionaries are conspicuous by their absence. The reasons for this sad state of affairs is not far to seek. Lack of any well-considered cadre-management policy or an effort towards that end for forest officials from the IFS to ranger has been an unfortunate fact which is now getting reflected in the state's inability to find and post the right people at the right place at the right time. Political interference, bureaucratic ineptness and lopsided grooming of youngsters is for all to see and lament.

On the other hand the members of the civil society interested in this field have not exactly covered themselves with any glory. Personal agendas, inter-personal bickering and lack of any clear-cut direction seems to rule the roost amongst them. That the majority lack true competence, experience or ability to provide sensible leadership in any crisis or other situation, is also a sad fact of life. As a result, the most that they can do is to jump to conclusions, run to the media, rabble rouse and attract personal attention and glory in the name of the poor tiger or any of its commensal species. It is unfortunate that there is hardly any non-governmental institution in the country with a track record that means serious business, good science, or sound achievements.

No wonder the recipe is ready for a solution that brooks no further sliding down. If we really wish to salvage the situation from a stage of nearly no return then we need to look and act beyond breast-beating. And since we cannot, of course, commit mass *hari kari*, we need to begin by doing a simple thing which unfortunately requires a great amount of effort. To talk *to* one another and not *behind* one another. To talk in a spirit of mutual understanding and with an agenda that secures the long-term security of wild nature in this blessed country of ours.

Can one hope that the MOEF in conjunction with the Wildlife Institute of India at Dehradun, which has a natural mandate in this field and has been the cradle of most budding wildlifers in this country and still boasts of the most capable resource in human terms, rise to the occasion and lead this revival through well-meaning dialogue facilitation and long and short term action planning?

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