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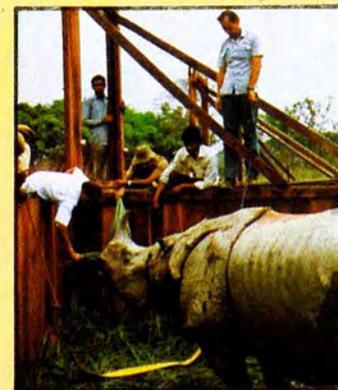
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contrived to destroy the tribals' equilibrium. Charitable bodies and governments eventually have to undertake their upkeep and maintenance where once these masters in the art of survival thrived using their intricate knowledge of Nature's gifts.

Tragically, there seems to be no possible solution in sight other than to absorb as many such people as possible into our country's conservation programmes. Their value as guides, forest protection staff or even as labourers for fire-fighting and road-building is unquestionable. The problem is that here too our 'street-wise' forest officials often cheat the gullible tribals by misappropriating their wages or the funds set aside for their welfare. In the battle of survival of the fittest, the tribals seem destined to doom.

Manas madness

Having saved the lion-tailed macaque and a host of other tropical life forms from the jaws of extinction in Silent Valley, the focus of conservationists is shifting to Manas, a Tiger Reserve nestled in the north-eastern Himalayas. Here the 'progress' lobby is engaged in a furious struggle to pass plans for the construction of a hydel reservoir that will inundate vast tracts of virgin jungle. The golden langur, hispid hare, pygmy hog, florican, rhino, wild buffalo, clouded leopard and tiger are among the endangered species likely to be affected. In addition, a number of less glamorous life forms are threatened by this ill-conceived development plan.

Organised pressure groups are digging their heels in, anticipating a long-drawn battle, but it is unfortunate that such hare-brained schemes keep cropping up in spite of the all too obvious drawbacks. The Manas river is already working overtime maintaining the various habitat types that support as many as 19 endangered species, some of which were mentioned above. The river is a living thing. Its power and fury during the monsoon is awesome to behold. Taming this river may appear to be an irresistible challenge to some, but in the end the river will win anyway. Silta-

tion of the reservoir will bring to naught all the imaginary benefits of the scheme decades before the 'optimistic' planners promise. Soon after man dams the river, the river will damn man.

Myths and man-eaters

No one quite knows why an animal as powerful as the tiger should be afraid of man. That it gives humans a wide berth, however, can be confirmed by almost anyone who has entered tigerland.

Why then do we constantly hear spine-chilling stories of man-eating tigers? Such aberrancies cannot be denied, but they need to be viewed in their proper perspective.

The tiger is an animal that lives by its instincts. It is governed by the laws of Nature and not by the laws of man. There is no tiger habitat in India that has not been invaded and degraded by humans and we must therefore accept that such forced proximity between man and beast is likely to produce conflicts from time to time. Nevertheless, every human death is a tragedy and ways must be found to allow man and animal to co-exist.

There are two places in India where the man-eating problem is acute—the Sunderbans in West Bengal and Dudhwa in Uttar Pradesh. In the Sunderbans the victims are, most often, fishermen, honey trappers or villagers who enter the protected jungle to gather wood. If we truly place the value of human life as high as we claim we do, we would look for ways to offer such people alternative sources of income so as to *prevent* or at least reduce their need to enter the tigers' domain. After all, man is NOT the natural prey of the tiger. This relatively simple, albeit inconvenient exercise might therefore bring man-eating incidents to a dead halt in the Sunderbans.

In Dudhwa, the lands adjoining the forest have been planted with sugarcane. Such fields provide ideal cover for pregnant tigresses to lay their litters. When a man enters such a field to harvest his crop, the protective mother

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responds in the only way she knows, to save her young cubs. Often the poor man is not discovered for several hours, by which time another tiger comes upon the carcass and begins consuming it. Such instances are not at all uncommon. There is no 'search and find' involved here. The tiger is a scavenger and an opportunist—he will not desist from consuming a human body because man's laws prohibit it. Billy Arjan Singh has been crying himself hoarse for years now to ban the planting of sugarcane on the periphery of Dudhwa, but the sugar lobby, petty politicians and local toughs, who could effectively help influence the illiterate farmers, pay no heed to his sane advice. The upshot? Man-tiger conflicts.

The health of farmland is directly dependent on the survival of forestland and forests in turn are dependent on the myriad life forms, including tigers, that dwell within them. Confirmed man-eaters, (not accidental man-killers) must, of course, be shot without delay, but the tendency to condemn the species for the aberrant acts of a few animals must be resisted. And we should remember that the onus of maintaining harmony in tigerland rests not with the tiger but with man.

Rhino rumpus

It's such an old cliché that its truth hits you with quiet, uncontested authority—"a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." In Assam, a state where tempers rarely, if ever, come down below simmering point these days, almost everyone believes that the rhino translocation to Dudhwa in U.P. was an exercise designed to erode Assam's tourist trade.

As things stand, the few translocated rhinos are securely ensconced in the swampy Dudhwa National Park, but if the Assamese people feel 'cheated' how are we going to augment this tiny population so as to create a viable breeding herd? (Sexually mature rhino females generally breed only once in three years.) Unless they too share the vision of an ecologically secure sub-continent, how can

any long-term conservation project involving 'their' state animal be implemented? As one wildlife expert put it, "if this experiment works it will change the concept of wildlife management in the region." So say all of us, but success, we may point out, is not merely dependent on securing for the animals an alternative eco-niche, it also means communicating the wisdom of such action to the people of the 'donor' state. The alternative is clear. Misunderstanding, opposition, hurt sensibilities and eventually either violence or the abandonment of an eminently worthwhile exercise.

Divided we fall

At least three separate groups of persons or institutions are planning to undertake high altitude field studies to gather information on the status of the highly endangered snow leopard. Such programmes involve considerable effort and resources and it's a pity that no central body seems to be co-ordinating plans between the groups as there is bound to be duplication of effort and perhaps even conflict. One of the major drawbacks of the conservation movement in India is the apparent inability of various bodies to work together. The forest department is a law unto itself. Newly appointed wildlife departments have effectively isolated themselves from the mainstream and are running foul of almost every other government department concerned with forests. As for the WWF—India and the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), their efforts, though genuine, are dismissed by most 'field workers' as being of little or no significance to the 'real' task of habitat protection and management. Individual wildlife photographers, experts and authors are critical of almost any action taken by *anyone* else if they themselves are not either 'consulted' or at least informed in advance of plans. One suspects egos are at stake here. It's time conservationists closed their ranks. The breach is already visible to all perceptive persons and it promises to widen with each passing moment. Meanwhile, an opportunistic tribe of vultures waits patiently on the sidelines for us 'amateurs' to exhaust