



Fifty Years of Project Tiger: Conservation, Conflict, Critique

A collaboration between Sheffield Animal Studies Research Centre
and the Indian Animal Studies Collective

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2023 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Project Tiger, India's nation-wide conservation programme to "save" its historically-depleted tiger populations. Launched by the Indira Gandhi government soon after it passed the Wild Life Protection Act of 1972, and funded and influenced by international conservation industry players like the WWF, Project Tiger has been frequently hailed as a success story of wildlife preservation, nation building and international environmental advocacy.

Yet Project Tiger has faced consistent criticisms: for deliberately inflating its census numbers, for denotifying once-protected lands for industrial development projects, and for ignoring the plight of other species like the great Indian bustard and the Jerdon's courser. More than this, Project Tiger stands as an emblem of a still-dominant protectionist model of fortress conservation that separates humans from nature. In Project Tiger's case, its apparent success in stabilising tiger numbers has relied on coercive measures against local communities. From Kuno to the Sundarbans, from the 1970s to now, local people – whether adivasis, subsistence farmers or refugees – have faced waves of eviction, relocation, proletarianisation and criminalisation. An example, then, of conservation by dispossession, Project Tiger has been rebuked for being undemocratic in principle as well as punitive and violent in practice.

The aim of this symposium, therefore, is to foster a critical and comprehensive investigation of Project Tiger. We want to bring together perspectives from across the disciplines in order to shed new light on what Project Tiger tells us about human–animal relations. We invite proposals that wrestle with any of the following topics:

Project Tiger's pasts and potential futures: What is the official history of Project Tiger? What is left out of this story, and which counter-histories need telling? How has the project transformed across the past half-century of shifting political economy – a period in which conservation practices have themselves mutated from militaristic to community-based to neoliberal models? How is conservation in India transforming anew under the Modi regime, especially as the focus shifts to the transcontinental relocation of cheetahs into India's national parks? To what extent is "Project Tiger" a coherent programme of action, and what is at stake in each of its local articulations?

Methodologies and multispecies justice: Project Tiger has justifiably provoked postcolonial critique that centres the programme's harmful impacts on subaltern, tribal and refugee communities. Yet these criticisms, when underpinned by humanist presuppositions, have often privileged social reparation and representation over the injustice of species extinctions. How, then, do we critically engage with Project Tiger in ways that recognise human dignity while also foregrounding the necessity of nonhuman preservation? Or, put in more radical terms, how do we analyse Project Tiger in such a way that upholds a mutual commitment to social justice and animal liberation? What other challenges does Project Tiger pose for our academic methodologies, and for the practice of writing itself?

Decolonizing conservation: The global conservation regime continues to face robust criticisms for both its inherited colonial logics and its neo-colonial practices of green imperialism. To what extent has Project Tiger been symptomatic of these tendencies? And what does the history of Project Tiger tell us about conservation more broadly: about the confluence between state politics and private interests, for example, or about the local interspecies conflicts between people and protected animals? What would it look like for Project Tiger to be decolonized, and what opportunities are there for making this a reality? Can Project Tiger be rethought along the lines of recent models like "convivial conservation", or are there ways in which Project Tiger reveals limits to these corrective attempts to reimagine conservation in the twenty-first century?

The tiger question: And where is the tiger in all of this? Can the tiger speak? The species logics of conservation – scientific, bureaucratic, diplomatic – tend to imagine the tiger in contradictory and spectacular ways: taxonomic object; charismatic poster species; victim of modernity that must be saved; but also a threatening "man-killer" that must be isolated from society. How do we explain, work through, and break away from these logics? Are there alternative ways of seeing those nonhuman animals who are impacted, for better and for worse, by Project Tiger? Amitav Ghosh's 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*, for example, famously depicted the human-tiger conflicts in the Sundarbans national park. But beyond this, how do other cultural works respond to Project Tiger and affiliated conservation programmes across the subcontinent? What other ways might we imagine the tiger lifeworlds that are subjected to conservation?

In order to accommodate different timezones the symposium will consist of online panel sessions held across December 2023. Participants will be expected to attend and contribute to all the panel discussions, not just their own.

Please send proposals (maximum 300 words) and short biographies for twenty-minute papers to Dominic O'Key, Anu Pande and Susan Haris at projecttiger50@gmail.com by **28th July 2023**.