



PROFILES IN SCIENCE ENGAGEMENT WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

Shekhar KOLIPAKA

Shekhar Kolipaka is a biosocial researcher and a conservation practitioner. He researchers the human-dimension aspects of conservation and is affiliated as a guest researcher to the Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology, Leiden University, The Netherlands. His conservation interests include implementing solutions for carnivore survival outside protected areas, which he pursues as a Board member of the Leo Foundation, The Netherlands. We spoke with him about his approach to encouraging tiger conservation behavior in local Indian villages. All photos courtesy S. Kolipaka except where noted.

You're a biosocial conservation researcher and practitioner. What do you do, and how did you get there?

I am from India and I live in the Netherlands with my family. I continue to work a lot in the Indian subcontinent. I bring together elements of the social sciences through anthropological methods and animal behavioral sciences and I try to understand human-animal interactions and relationships. That's how I approach conservation as well, looking from both of these perspectives together. I did not begin my career with this particular approach; I studied wildlife from a natural resource management perspective.

In 2000, I was studying small cats in central India, Madhya Pradesh, in Panna. The region has a high diversity of carnivores like wildcats, mongoose, canid species and others. Over the years, I was lucky to find a lot of local patronage, and local groups started supporting my work and allowing me to work in that area. India is a very socially structured country with many different social groups. In spite of that diversity, I've never heard any group say that they don't like nature, or living with animals, even with potentially dangerous animals living alongside them. This fascinated me.

Between 2006 and 2008, tigers went locally extinct in the Panna region of Madhya Pradesh, primarily because of human factors. This negatively impacted the local communities, both financially because of lost tourism revenue, and also culturally and religiously. Rural villages in the area believe in protector spirits that live in different forms in the forest, and as I spoke to the people, I could feel a sense of a tragedy. Upon realizing that their forests are tigerless, they felt that the powerful protector spirit of the forest was gone.

In 2009, the local state government and forest departments started a very ambitious reintroduction program in the Panna Tiger Reserve. I knew a friendly government forest officer who was posted to Panna Tiger Reserve as a director to oversee the tiger reintroduction and asked if he'd like my help. I had a huge network of people from local communities and people I'd worked with for a decade, and I thought I could discuss the program with them and ask if they were willing to work with me and support the government effort. The director accepted my offer. One of my local supporters, a conservation advocate, Mr. Shyamendra Singh, told me to look at the human aspects of the issues as well, and not just prioritize the animal side. That was an eye-opener for me, that the locals wanted me to look at their issues also. But I wasn't sure how to bring 30 different local caste and ethnic groups and their differing world views to the same table to piece out a common agenda, so I looked for someone to help me understand.

My search led me to Dr. Mark Dent, who was working with the University of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa and managing a lot of stakeholders and water issues. I approached him and joined the University of KwaZulu-Natal, and we took up this project together in 2009. We decided to start by focusing on the groups which wanted to support the program because we did not have the power and the energy to deal with those who were resisting the program. The full set of stakeholders included religious leaders, local politicians,

the local tourism industry, the government, mining barons (because they were a powerful force), and local villagers.

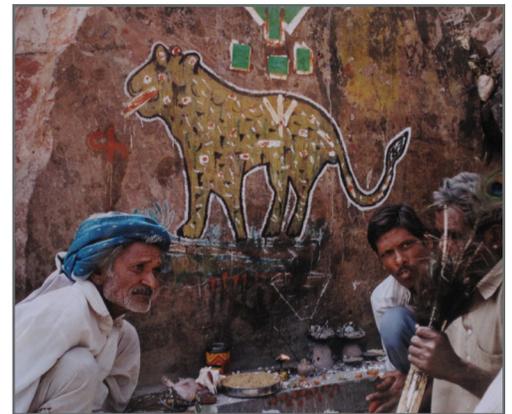
How did you approach working with the local communities, particularly the religious leaders?

The first step was to bring all the stakeholders together and start listening to them. Then, we needed to identify who are the right people to talk to in the villages, and finally, we needed to figure out how to approach and engage those people we identified. In the local [animistic] belief system there are spirit intercessors who are the mediums between the spirit world and the local communities, and then others who control the spirits.; They are chosen by the spirits themselves, so they perform a social service. As a team, they orchestrate ceremonies to speak with the spirits, which involves inviting all the members in the community to gather in a household. Everybody sits in an arranged format; there's a lot of singing, dancing, very happy music. The intensity builds up before the spirit comes, and when it comes to one of the mediums, the controller ensures that the people can pose their questions.

A typical question posed in an animal relations context is, "The leopard has been in my backyard four times this month and I've lost two goats. Why is the leopard so interested in my goats? Have I done something wrong? Are you trying to test me? Is there anything that I have not fulfilled so far?" Interestingly, whatever the response is, it is acceptable. So the ceremony is not just about [following] the belief system, but also it seems to have a functional value, which is bringing down the questioner's anxiety levels and anger at the unpredictable nature of the animal. That seems to be very satisfying to the local communities. I found it to be a very powerful coping mechanism within these communities who have so little. It held the community tight, in spite of all the unpredictability and dangerous animals and so much going on. And the spirit mediums and controllers are all volunteers trying to do good for their society; they are not paid. So, I thought if I could find ways to connect with that kind of community feeling, potentially I could find ways to make more friends for the tiger and for the forests.

People started narrating stories about spirits in the forest, the tigers. The tiger is a huge, powerful spirit and sometimes it so happens that you're just walking in the forest and you encounter it. Sometimes they also say, if you break the norms, allowed your cattle into the forest when they're not supposed to, especially in the dusk, after dusk, the spirits would eat it. Interestingly, none of them pointed the fingers at the tiger. They

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Spirit intercessors conducting a ceremony to appease the spirit leopard. Image credit: A. van Trigt.

would always reflect on themselves and try to question, "Have I done something wrong?" So it was not about blaming the tiger, but rather they were trying to look at, have they in any way broken a norm which would offend the tiger and the tiger would respond in that way?

So I found this a very fascinating and compelling story. I thought, "Wow, here we're looking at such a high level of tolerance in spite of these economically disadvantaged folks from these rural communities, even in spite of losing valuable cattle, they are... They still, many still, don't want to have the tiger off their land.

If you're familiar with the term paralegal, we created something similar here with what we called para-ecologists. I picked local people with good communication skills, who respected and understood the local cultures, and who could speak to a variety of audiences. I trained them between 2009 and 2011 on interviewing skills, data recording mechanisms, community interaction, and so on. Because they understood what I wanted and they understood the local community, they became an excellent bridge. As an outsider, for example, I had restrictions on when to meet people and what kind of people I could meet. But as locals, the para-ecologists had much more access.

Through these para-ecologists, we started engaging the local religious leaders. This was an action research project, so whatever we learned along the way, we immediately put into action to make sure that the tiger program was successful. And all this was happening in parallel with the government's tiger reintroduction.

Was the tiger reintroduction successful, and did your work help?

Yes, the reintroduction effort was successful. After the reintroduction program started in 2009, the tigers bred very quickly; by 2013, more and more tigers were born to the reintroduced animals. Some of them started leaving it, because it's a small reserve and it could only carry so much. And of course, when passing through human populated areas, the tigers would kill livestock to feed themselves.

There was an instance where a dispersing tiger was traveling away from the reserve but stayed in one village's area for a number of days. The local people became enraged,

rounded up on the tiger, and wanted to kill it. The forest director called me. Because of my knowledge of local culture, I was able to tell the forest director to approach a local religious man and ask him to intercede. That man said, "Stop, everyone! This tiger is part of the forest. You can't kill this tiger, because this is a very important precious gift of the forest. By doing this, you would unleash bad luck onto the local communities." And the mob listened and backed off. There were many other cases also where local people listened to their religious leaders when there were issues with the reintroduction program, and because of that, they didn't antagonize the tigers.

Between 2009 and 2020, almost 80 animals were born. Twenty or thirty are still in the reserve, and the rest of them disperse into the adjoining forests. And now the local tiger population is relatively stable.

How did your work grow after this success?

Once the reintroduction program was officially declared successful, the urgency was gone and the government slowly withdrew the support for the program. Areas outside the reserve like corridor forests and multiple use forests were not yet secured. For example, there was large-scale poaching, which happens at a very local level with a lot of secrecy. Next, human activities, some of which are not compatible with tiger conservation, in forests outside the reserves that are now corridor forests for dispersing tigers.

The tiger remains a very controversial animal locally. The government laws protecting the tigers also impose heavy sanctions on what local communities can do in shared forests. These sanctions are designed without consulting local communities or understanding their needs and aspirations. So, the tiger that the government wants to protect is also seen as a symbol of government heavy-handedness by many forest-dwelling communities. I wanted to come up with a way of addressing the cultural aspect of poaching animals and traditional forest use in a much more friendly way, rather than just trying to frighten people by bombarding them with laws that cannot realistically be implemented.

Aside from tigers, something else that was in this forest was a lot of ancient rock art. In this area, the rock art is found in unprotected lands in caves and escarpments, and these

locations are also important den sites for a lot of animals, including tigers. Lots of people go into the forest during the day to herd cattle or goats or for other reasons, and they would sit under these rock art sites and light a fire. Then these areas would get polluted and would have a lot of soot covering them, or graffiti, or chips taken out of these drawings that are thousands of years old.

Knowing that rock art is sacred to the local communities, I thought, "What if I use this rock art as a conversation starter, and then slowly bring in the tiger aspects at a later stage?" Because I know that starting the conversation with tigers and asking for help to save the tigers is not really going to start a positive relationship, because it is a controversial subject. The locals feel the government is very heavy-handed in managing the tigers, so there's a lot of reluctance to support such a program. So, I could use rock art to start the conversation. The Defries-Bajpai Foundation gave me a small grant in 2017 to pursue this and explore the effectiveness of involving religious leaders to increase pro-conservation attitudes within local communities.

How are you engaging with local religious leaders to continue to encourage pro-conservation behavior among villagers?

I documented a lot of this rock art and showed it to the religious leaders. They said, "Where on earth did you find these?" I said, "I found them in these forests. Do you think it's worth saving these drawings, or do we just let them erode the way they are at this stage?" They said, "No, no, no, no! This is our heritage. There's nothing in books; these are not documented. This is our local history and our age-old link to the land. Our people have lived in this local area for thousands of years. We need to preserve them, otherwise our children will just completely lose out on who we are and where we came from."

Three years into the project, I have a local team there of three para-ecologists, two full-time and one on and off. And they directly engage with the local religious leaders; we've re-engaged with 30 to 35 now. The para-ecologists start by using projectors to show the leaders slide pictures of the rock art and what is happening to it. And the para-ecologists ask, "Is there any way we can protect this art?" And the religious leaders say, "Yes! We have to," and then ask what they can do.

Storytelling is a common way to share information in this region. In the rock art were pictures of tigers and lots of spirits. Working with the religious leaders, we developed stories about what the rock art depicted, and asked the leaders to share those stories. The leaders suggested printed booklets of the pictures would help with the stories, so we designed and provided those. What a brilliant idea that was, but the idea came from them.

The minute that feedback started coming from them, I shut my mouth and I became a keen listener. And that's what I request my para-ecologists do—just pose a question, and just listen and let them tell you how to solve the problem.

Over time, we started creating small group events where all the religious leaders would meet and chat about the slides and these different topics. We used the rock art as a conversation starter, and slowly we started showing them slides on tigers, the poaching, and what could be done if you wanted more proactive conservation behavior from the local communities. We have come to a stage where religious leaders have started engaging with local people and telling stories even without our intervention. So, I don't have to go to the villages. They have become invaluable partners to us and to that local area.

And now we're trying to scale up even further, build some institutional structure and make this sustainable for the locals so

they can continue taking care of their own local wealth and property. All the findings and the observations that we're making right now, I started sharing this progress with the other local stakeholders living in the area like the tourism sector and the government people. Overall, I try to learn how things are functioning on the ground and how to make that entire process into a conservation-friendly landscape using the local skills and resources, and the power for local initiatives.

Any tips for a newcomer working with similar rural communities, or on human-animal interaction?

Don't be judgmental; keep your mind open to what is presented in front of you. Deep listening is very, very important because a lot of solutions come from the local communities themselves. Don't try to teach them the ethics or conservation interests of the larger world. Once you listen to them, then you start understanding what they find meaningful. Trust has to be built up. You have to have a deep understanding of the local way of thinking and their views and beliefs. I find that by doing this, you gain more acceptance into the local communities, rather than as somebody trying to preach something.

I would also suggest to network with people from different disciplines, because this area is multidisciplinary in nature. Sometimes having meetings with others and discussing these issues makes it much easier to understand the complex factors on the

ground. And keep in mind that religion can be very political.

Give the project time to show you how to measure its success. When you start the project, you may not have answers as to how it is going to go. Be open to the adaptive nature of the work. You'll start slowly seeing ways to measure progress and interact with people if something is not working. Some of my biggest challenges, for example, are in keeping the para-ecologists motivated. And I still have trouble, more often than I want to, raising travel grants to go in person and monitor the efforts.

These projects are not short-term in nature, and you should be prepared for that. But I would always say, when you start the project, also start thinking of the exit plan. Otherwise, you may just abruptly leave everything everywhere and create confusion for the person who's coming next.

The last point I have is to be very intentional about the scaling part of these efforts. Stand-alone, one-time experiments don't really matter. To have a much broader impact on the local landscape and the local people, you do have to scale up these efforts. How to do that is its own puzzle. I am taking the lessons from this project and implementing them in a huge forest restoration project in the state of Chhattisgarh. There too, I started building relationships with local religious leaders, and I am in the process of developing long term working relationships with them. ∞



Rock art in Panna, Madhya Pradesh, India. Local religious leaders developed stories about the images depicted. They use a booklet with this and other images to share the stories with local villagers and encourage behaviors that preserve the art.

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