

CASE STUDY

Rajasthan, India

1000

Pastoralists re-establish traditional ecosystems and customary grazing rights

More than 600 Gujjar agro-pastoralist families - due for relocation from the vicinity of the Sariska Tiger Reserve Protected Area in the Alwar district - took the lead in engaging with state actors to claim their grazing and traditional water harvesting rights and preserve the *Oran* - a traditional ecosystem unique to the forest communities of Rajasthan. With the support of KRPAVIS, villagers demonstrated that community management of biodiversity is a better approach to wildlife conservation than the removal and resettlement of forest-dependent communities from their habitat.

PRINCIPAL ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED

Natural Justice

Krishi Avam Paristhitiki Vikas Sansthan (KRPAVIS)

LOCATION

Villages Kalikhol, Bakhtpura, Bera, Loj-Nathusar and Bina, Sariska Tiger Reserve, Alwar district, Rajasthan, India

TIMELINE

2014-2015

TARGET AUDIENCE

Practitioners, researchers, forest rights advocates, agro-pastoralist communities

KEYWORDS

Sustainable livelihoods, community management, community forest rights, traditional water harvesting, biodiversity

GOOD PRACTICES

Towards making land governance more people-centred

This case study is part of the ILC's Database of Good Practices, an initiative that documents and systematises ILC members and partners' experience in promoting **people-centred land governance**, as defined in the Antigua Declaration of the ILC Assembly of Members. Further information at www.landcoalition.org/what-we-do

This case study supports people-centred land governance as it contributes to:

Commitment 5 Respect and protect the inherent land and territorial rights of indigenous peoples

Commitment 6 Enable the role of local land users in territorial and ecosystem management

Case description

Background issues

The issue of displacement and rehabilitation of people in protected areas is a recurrent and central theme in the context of biodiversity and wildlife conservation in India. Displacement carried out to enhance natural reserves has mostly resulted in impoverishment and marginalisation of the dispossessed forest dependent tribal and pastoral communities.

The Sariska Tiger Reserve (STR), Alwar district, Rajasthan, was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1959 under the Wild Life (Protection) Act 1972, severely restricting the customary rights of the local agro-pastoralist Gujjar communities living within its vicinity. The residents of over 26 villages within the sanctuary have for centuries been the traditional custodians of the *Oran* - a sacred forest ecosystem comprising of grassland, medicinal trees, shrubs and '*Oran talaab*' (waterways) that is unique to Rajasthan. The *Orans* are a part of the 'Siliserh Chhind' - the intricate system of grazing lands and arid forests located within and around the tiger reserve. They are the main source of livelihood for the Gujjar community.

Historically the *Orans* were managed by the local communities with women playing a significant role in the preservation of wildlife and biodiversity. With changes in legislation the 866 km² of land in Sariska were appropriated by the government. The shift in ownership and management from the community to the Forest Department led to gradual deterioration of the *Orans*.

Pastoralist rights are not recognised under the Forest Rights Act 2006, even though the rights of forest dwellers are a critical part of the legislation. Forest communities cannot collect minor forest produce or have their livestock graze in this area. They must pay hefty fines if caught by authorities using the forests. Until the intervention by KRAPAVIS,

the state forest policy did not recognise the existence of the *Orans* as a self-sustaining ecosystem and it treated the socio-religious practices of the forest tribes with mistrust.

The ill-planned process of relocation and rehabilitation of 6000 odd villagers was marred by bureaucratic processes, leading to delays and conflict within communities. The promised compensation in money or plots of land to minimise the adverse effects on livelihoods was not received in most cases. Loss of traditional customary rights and diminishing wildlife, water resources and grazing lands of the *Orans* are affecting the livelihoods of Gujjars from the *Charai* (a traditional seasonal migration undertaken for grazing) to the *Jadu-banti* (a customary ethno-veterinary system based on the use of medicinal trees and plants in the reserve).

Solution

Community management of *Orans* is the most sustainable way to conserve wildlife and biodiversity in the Sarika Tiger Reserve. *Orans* are not an officially recognised category of common land. However, they are the most important common property resource in rural areas and continue to be of cultural and economic importance as sacred groves.

Realising the adverse impact of restrictive conservation policies - based on the concept of pristine wilderness - on local forest communities and their habitat, KRAPAVIS began engaging the Gujjar community in the restoration and rejuvenation of the *Orans* and *Oran Talaab*. The Gujjar community and KRAPAVIS negotiated with the authorities for restoring waterways and plant diversity by using traditional ecosystem management.

KRAPAVIS promoted the integration of wildlife conservation (i.e. the preservation of the tiger population) with traditional ecosystem management and the pastoralists' economic needs. This approach takes into account agro- pastoralists' dependency on the *Orans* for livestock grazing, water, firewood, medicinal plants, nuts and fruits, material for housing and other produce. Its success proves that communities and forests can co- exist.

Activities

KRAPAVIS is a voluntary organisation which, since 1992, has successfully engaged with communities to revive, restore and document the traditional knowledge and practices linked with dryland biodiversity management. KRAPAVIS has operated on three levels:

- The community level - to involve the people in reviving the *Orans* and re-establish their inclusive, livelihood-promoting character;
- The society level - to bring attention to the case of the *Orans* at the national level and change the discourse around socio-ecological and livelihood issues; and
- The political level - to advocate for policy change and for a legislation that recognises communities' right to control and manage the *Orans*.

KRAPAVIS undertook the following activities with the Gujjar and other forest-dependent communities to reclaim the community management of the *Orans* and other sacred groves.

Revival of the *Orans*

KRAPAVIS focused on reviving the *Orans* - both physically and conceptually - with community participation by:

- Aiding in the construction and repair of *Oran taalaabs* (or ponds) - water harvesting structures and trenching units on the forest land.
- Raising and maintaining tree nurseries for tree plantation in the *Orans* and in common lands.
- Working to enhance the capacity of community members, especially women, to manage and maintain the *Orans*.
- Helping the community develop context-sensitive regulation and enforcement systems, and establish linkages with Panchayati Raj Institutions (village level institutions) with an emphasis on women's participation.
- Identifying key motivators from the village and providing opportunities for them to offer their services as trainers, consultants or advisors for *Oran* management in different areas.
- Reducing the demand for fuel wood by installing solar lights, thus helping to conserve and maintain the vegetation cover.
- Conducting research and surveys on the *Orans* in Rajasthan to maintain a database that currently includes over 1000 *Orans*.

Advocacy and campaigning

- Creating information flyers and education material on the *Orans*.
- Publishing a quarterly newsletter "*Devbani Re Baat*" ("*Conversations about Devbani*" - the sacred groves), case studies and articles.
- Campaigning for the recognition of *Orans* as vital socio-economic resources for the rural poor.
- Inviting government officials to attend training programs and workshops.
- Networking and campaigning with other institutes and non-governmental organisations working on related issues.
- Acting as an intermediary between government groups and the communities, and among the communities themselves to resolve conflict.
- Exploring avenues for legal action to bring about a reclassification of the *Orans*.
- Establishing the "*Oran Forum*" to build a movement for legal action.

Legal support and Self Help Groups (SHGs)

- Facilitating and helping communities in claiming community forest and grazing rights.
- Establishing self-help groups, Joint Forest Management Committees, *Van Samitis* or Forest Committees, Forest Right Committees (FRCs), Biodiversity Management Committees, Animal Health Workers' cadres that have contributed significantly to socio-economic empowerment in the region's rural communities.
- Facilitating community-based and community-led conservation of the forest ecosystem for sustainable pastoralism.
- Engaging in the initiative 'Documentation-Coalition-Lobbying' for the rights of pastoralists and drawing widespread attention to the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006.

Supporting Pastoralism and livestock development

- Enhancing the capacity of communities to cultivate fodder through the introduction of a silvi-pasture and agro-forestry model, including i.e. the planting of fodder- fruit trees; the use of fodder conservation practices; the introduction of lopping and rotational grazing options; the implementation of efforts for reducing open grazing.
- Improving livestock breeding practices through selective breeding (i.e. of indigenous germplasm with buffalo-Murrah).
- Encouraging ethno-veterinary practices.
- Providing medical aid for animals; health, vaccination and infertility care.
- Organizing herders' meetings, orientation camps, competitions and trainings.
- Conducting annually a one-month training course with 10 youth coming from remote villages in order to develop a new cadre of Animal Health Workers.
- Creating networks to exchange and discuss issues on pastoralism and its development.

Importance of the case for people-centred land governance

The initiative to revive the *Orans* through KRAPAVIS' work with the Gujjar community has contributed to:

- Protecting the land rights of indigenous peoples by recognizing the knowledge and culture of the Gujjar communities and their importance for a sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the sacred groves *Orans* and *Debvanis*.
- Empowering local agro-pastoralist Gujjar communities in the Alwar district - the land users - who were enabled to negotiate with authorities to regain their rights on the *Orans*.

Changes

Baseline

There is limited availability of scientific documentation and biodiversity data with reference to the deterioration and restoration of the *Orans* prior to KRAPAVIS' interventions. However, in consultation with local communities, KRAPAVIS documented a gradual deterioration of the *Orans* after their management moved from the community to the Forest Department following the declaration of the Sariska Tiger Reserve as a critical wildlife sanctuary in 1972.

Achievements

A major achievement for the Gujjar community has been the recognition of the *Orans* and *Debvanis* under the Rajasthan State Forest Policy 2010 as living ecosystems that need to be preserved. The Policy acknowledges that *Orans* are “*islands of good forests and repositories of rich biodiversity that are an excellent example of people’s religious faith linked with conservation*” and assures that “*efforts will be made to provide necessary financial and legal support in consonance with the religious ethos of the local community*”.

The Policy has strengthened the agro pastoralists’ struggle to regain the customary rights and traditional practices in the management of the *Orans*. The biodiversity, livestock and watershed management efforts have led to:

- The restoration of around 125 *Orans*;
- The plantation of 598,000 indigenous trees; and
- The development of 100 water harvesting bodies and the restoration of existing rivulets, water springs and traditional *Oran Taalaabs* .

Global Giving USA evaluated the work of *Oran* preservation undertaken by the Gujjars and KRAPAVIS and found that re-establishing community management of the *Orans*

- Reduced greenhouse gas emissions, besides creating additional environmental benefits;
- Empowered and increased the self-sufficiency of the local community.

The success of partnership between the Gujjars and KRAPAVIS for the betterment of ecological, agricultural and livestock practices and the negotiation of sustainable livelihoods with authorities has received recognition at state and international levels.

Women Self Help Groups have been established and a cadre of around 300 women and youth has been trained to disseminate information related to preservation of the *Orans*. The process of *Oran* revival has opened up opportunities for employment and strengthened economic activity in the area. The revival and preservation of the *Oran Talaabs* using both traditional and modern watershed harvesting techniques have reduced water scarcity. This can potentially mitigate vulnerability to drought and famine for the poor agro-pastoralist communities.

Evidence

A 2014 study on traditional biodiversity management, sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Global Environment Fund found a marked improvement in the health of the sacred groves in Alwar after the re-establishment of the traditional community management of the *Orans*.

Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the *Orans* have regained their lost significance and value not only in Alwar but also in other parts of Rajasthan, as well as in the bordering arid regions of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh. Engagement of the Gujjar community in natural resources management enhanced awareness on biodiversity and instilled respect for the forests and the multiple uses of forest resources across Siliserh Chhind.

Lessons learned

Lessons for civil society

Local agro-pastoral communities are central to the regeneration of traditional ecosystems like the *Orans* as is demonstrated by the experience of KRAPAVIS, which through participatory approaches contributed to the revival of more than 125 *Orans* across the Alwar district. The involvement of the agro-pastoralists in the selection and planting of species based on current livestock needs is an example of co-adaptation between social systems and ecosystems.

Lessons for policy makers

Policy makers should consider conservation strategies that move away from the vision of an untouched wilderness and respond more to local contexts and cultural perceptions of nature. They should take into greater account the customary rights and traditional practices to ensure the sustainability of wildlife conservation.

Forest communities protecting the sacred groves *Oran* and *Debvani* are vegetarian and do not pose any threat to wildlife. However, they need to have access to forests for livelihoods. KRAPAVIS' work with Gujjars in the Sariska Tiger Reserve demonstrates that the way the villagers perceive conservation measures based on protective regulation is extremely important. Any threat to their survival can influence their willingness to respect them or not, especially in the absence of workable rehabilitation plans for resettlement of forest communities.

Challenges

Over the years KRAPAVIS has encountered a number of challenges in its effort for regeneration of the arid forests because of the legal loopholes and the mistrust between the forest authorities and the Gujjars.

Forest Rights Act (FRA)2006

Legally, the rights over Sariska forest land under the FRA have not yet been granted to the Gujjar communities. They are still in the process of being enacted. On the one hand, families are required to provide evidence of having resided in the forest for a minimum of 75 years, despite having lived there for centuries; on the other hand, villagers continue to be threatened with evictions. This affects the motivation of the community to collaborate.

The engagement of the community in Joint Forest Management (JFM) has been problematic because of the following factors:

- Lack of awareness, capacity and interest in the implementation of community forest rights by forest officials;
- Lack of awareness about community forest rights within pastoralist groups;
- Migratory requirements of pastoralists not being taken into consideration;

- Harsh penalties and extraction of bribes from the community members by authorities;
- Damage to biodiversity because of the proliferation of invasive species; and
- Procedural difficulties faced by tribal communities when claiming customary rights.

Caste structures

Another challenge faced by KRAPAVIS in implementing JFM is the presence of a complex caste structure within the Sariska villages. For example, norms regulating access to sacred groves and some resources are based on the caste system. This reinforces the structure of exclusion within the functioning of the Forest Rights Committees. The Committees have the primary responsibility of identifying the nature and extent of claims under the FRA. However, communities - traditionally prohibited from using the sacred groves - cannot make any valid claim for customary forest rights under the legislation. The resultant ongoing conflict needs to be addressed and resolved before new interventions.

Resettlement and compensation

The slow nature of administrative processes and lack of consistency between different administrative institutions has delayed resettlements. Currently, nearly all villagers in the Sariska Tiger Reserve are under threat of displacement by forest department. Attempts to move villagers from the reserve have been very problematic in the absence of due consultation and infrastructure development in relocation sites. This is an additional burden for the NGOs working with these communities, as they have to first provide for basic services for the communities prior to engaging them in participatory interventions.

Loss of traditional knowledge

Increasing tourism and commercial interest are resulting in displacement and loss of traditional knowledge and identity for the pastoralists. This makes it difficult to keep the communities interested in negotiating with the authorities for a greater role in the management of the *Orans*.

Little effort is being made by the concerned government agencies to avoid or reduce the adverse socio-cultural impact of conservation-related displacement on the communities.

Follow-up

The Gujjars, with the support of KRAPAVIS, will continue to negotiate with the forest authorities at the national and state levels for the agro-pastoralist and forest communities to regain the management of forest resources. The *Orans* are often the only surviving area of woodland in an otherwise denuded forest. They provide refuge for wildlife from encroaching development of housing, agriculture, mining and other commercial activities. Pastoral communities will continue to engage in local, state and national level advocacy efforts to preserve them.

Supporting material

References and further reading

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<https://issuu.com/agricultures/docs/leisa-india-sep-2014>

Photos, videos

Photos - State Environmental Atlas - Rajasthan,
http://www.rpcb.rajasthan.gov.in/SEARajasthan/map_gallery.aspx

Video - *Community Management System 'Oran' Conserves Biodiversity and Protects Rural Livelihoods* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2B3_w1HHLel

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Suggested citation: Kotnala S., Bhardwaj S. and Cherlet, J. (2016) *Pastoralists re-establish traditional ecosystems and customary rights*. Case study of the ILC Database of Good Practices. Rome: ILC.

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Last updated: April 2016. Printed on recycled/FSC paper.

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