

**Review: Rewilding: India's Experiments in Saving Nature**  
By Bahar Dutt

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Dutt, B. *Rewilding: India's Experiments in Saving Nature*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020. 244 pp. ISBN: 9780199474110, hardcover, US\$35.00.

*Rewilding: India's Experiments in Saving Nature* by Bahar Dutt is an important contribution to the literature on attempts to reverse the well-documented loss of species. Dutt, an environmental journalist, focuses on small-scale projects in India that aim to 'rewild' areas that have lost their native species. While there is a wide and growing body of literature on environmental and ecological degradation and biodiversity loss, what sets this book apart is that the message at the end is a hopeful one—ending with solutions that can reverse global species loss. The projects described are small and localized, relating stories of people bringing back indigenous ecosystems in a range of communities.

While the concept of 'rewilding'—bringing back wilderness—is well-known and there are examples from Europe, North America, and South Africa of ambitious plans to reintroduce carnivores that have mostly disappeared, but also restore habitat and create wildlife corridors to permit natural migratory patterns. Dutt applies the concept to India to determine if it is possible to restore populations there through a series of fascinating case studies. While animals have been moved around in India since 1970s to repopulate depleted regions, the concept explored in this captivating book goes beyond that and looks at the potential for improving habitats or eliminating toxins that, in the case of vultures, for example, nearly brought them to extinction.

One chapter highlights the complex issues in plans to bring back the Bengal Tiger (Bagh in Hindi) in the Panna district of the Vindhya mountains of Madhya Pradesh. By 2009, Panna had lost all its tigers to poaching. Following media attention, the tigers were restocked from other reserves nearby and an elaborate tracking system established to monitor their well-being. The Panna is also home to the Pardhis—a traditional hunting community, with low levels of education among their children (a 2012

study found that 61% of Pardhi children never enrolled in school), that international wildlife-trafficking entities relied on due to their hunting prowess. But for tigers to be brought to Panna poaching had to be stopped, and that meant working with the Pardhis was vital. To this end, a school was set up as an attempt to create a relationship with the community beyond 'policing' and train the residents for work other than hunting. But is the answer to 'reform' these traditional communities or, as the author ponders, perhaps use their knowledge and tracking skills in the conservation goals for the region? Adding a further layer of complexity, the government has committed resources to the tiger project but at the same time has plans for a major dam project in the Panna Tiger Reserve to give dry regions access to water, but with the potential for destroying the tigers' habitat. As Dutt says, "The efforts to bring back Stripey in Panna may have been successful, but if the political will is inclined toward a dam at the cost of the tiger then even the best rewilding projects can get derailed" (p. 46).

Importantly, Dutt doesn't limit her case studies to the 'charismatic' species, such as the Bengal Tiger or the Indian one-horned rhinoceros but also describes projects to restore other critically endangered species such as Red-crowned roofed turtles, crocodiles, vultures, Big headed fish (Mahseer), vultures, and more, and discussed the threats that have brought these indigenous beings to near extinction. Threats include loss of habitat, including through land development for building projects, chemical contaminants; introduction of non-indigenous species, poaching, and overfishing, among others.

Success in rewilding depends on the support and involvement of the local community. For example, the author makes the point that urban projects can potentially save threatened species and "restore more diverse ecosystems than those represented by sidewalk cracks and abandoned parking lots" (p. 152). These efforts can create "a support group for green causes" and benefit children with active involvement in "citizen science, restoration ecology, and environmental monitoring" (p. 152). Near Delhi, in Gurugram, for example, local residents have rewilded a patch of forest that now includes a "water-conservation zone, an educational space to spread awareness about environmental issues—particularly among children—and a recreational space..." (p. 154). The project in this case first meant ridding the park of non-native species, and rewilding with local trees, shrubs, and herbs, with the result that diverse birds and animals are now thriving. A similar project was proposed in Bengaluru, where local citizens decided to remake a local lake into a diverse ecosystem. The ambitious project looked at the historical uses of an interconnected system of lakes which had been lost due to large-scale urbanization. The lake is now a well-used and loved region and is maintained by donations, with entry to the site free.

Failure to involve communities in a rewilding effort can result in failed projects. For example, a 1983 project under co-sponsorship with state and national governments and the United Nations, reintroduced crocodiles in the Neyyar River. But the local population

was hostile to the project as two years later the crocodiles began attacking people at the river's edge. The project had failed to develop plans with the community who made extensive use of the river—use that was not taken into consideration in developing the plan.

Dutt's book provides an important discussion of an array of threats to a diverse range of species and then highlights examples of local-scale rewilding experiments that both address species loss and promote reintroduction of the species. The book is hopeful yet realistic, as it discusses how easily the best-intentioned rewilding program can be derailed. We often think of rewilding as something that can only benefit the developed world, but Dutt reminds us that the rest of the world faces challenges from growth, critical habitat loss and poaching. Central to the stories she recounts is the importance of local, small-scale action and role of communities in the challenging work of restoring ecosystems that have been lost or degraded through various forms of human activity.

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