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Intimate beasts : Exploring relationships between humans and large carnivores in western India.

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Abstract

This thesis explores the complex relationships between humans and large carnivores that emerge from their located histories and socio-biological processes. The aim of my research is to understand how these relationships are constituted by different actors and to highlight the reductionist tendencies of current conservation practices that are based on creating dichotomies, which marginalise humans and non-humans alike. I do this by using a theoretical framework that recognises agency in humans and non-humans, as an ability to act and influence the actions of other actors. Thus, social actors are hybrids of nature and society and can be humans and non-humans. The main fieldwork was carried out in western India and the discussion also draws on data from other areas in India and Norway for comparisons. One of my key findings is that current scientific knowledge on large felids in India is shaped by the dualistic ontological and epistemological framework within which conservation in India is located. The influence of this nature-society dichotomy is evident in the central focus on the biology of the large felids in protected areas, with little insight on their relationships with humans, other than antagonism. Another important finding is that concepts such as ‘nature’, ‘biodiversity’ and ‘conservation’ are not universally understood by everyone in the same way. Instead, they emerge from located histories of shared relations between different actors. Thus, even the framework of dichotomies that organises discourses of modernity and conservation is located in a specific time and place in history. Its application, however, is locally negotiated in the context of variable political, economic, social and biological processes. The thesis illustrates that these processes are not insular and that the resulting negotiations which take place when different ontological discourses interact, lead to varying outcomes including contestation, marginalisation and co option. Human-large carnivore relations are also influenced by the processes of negotiations between different human groups over the use and management of resources. The analysis suggests that if these processes are characterised by discontinuities and contestations, then the relationship between large carnivores and humans may get embedded in these conflicts.