



A Disquisition on “Crimes involving Indian Wild Animals – A Veterinarian’s Perspectives”

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Abstract

Human race has always focused on betterment of the society and creating an environment for easy survival and growth on earth. This has resulted in both, positive and negative impacts on other fauna, flora and natural resources on earth. Wild animals and birds are also one of the victims of human interactions in their natural habitats. The constant activities of development and entertainment frequently increase the chances of contact/conflict between wild animals and humans which ultimately creates windows to perpetrate crimes. Crimes involving wild animals and birds have devastating effects on their survival and population. Veterinarians also play a crucial role in wild animal conservation. The present paper highlights a few important aspects of crimes involving wild animals.

Keywords: Wild animals, Crime, Veterinarians

Introduction

Wildlife refers to the flora and fauna, including those animals which are undomesticated and not introduced to humans but, plays an important role in the ecosystem since ‘stone age’ (Usher, 1986). At present, a large number these fauna species is facing threat of extinction due to direct or indirect effects of activities performed by and for humans.

India is enriched with biodiversity creating a perfect home for various species of wild mammals, birds, reptiles and insects. Indian fauna is also experiencing decline in population trends because of various

reasons such as deforestation, pollution and criminal activities.

Here, criminal activities such as taking, trading, importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consuming wild fauna and flora in contravention of national or international laws are termed as ‘Wildlife crimes’. Such crimes can be of local/domestic/regional level, state level, national level or international level.

Various acts/rules have been formulated and governing organizations/bodies have been constituted to monitor and mitigate such wildlife crimes throughout the world such as the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) in India, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) at international level. The present paper highlights some of the common crimes involving wild animals in India with an example of crimes in Gujarat state. Additionally, it also provides glimpse of different aspects such as steps to control or mitigate such crimes and role of veterinarians.

Crimes involving Wild Animals

Crimes involving wild animals can be either organized or unorganized. Professionals (e.g., poachers), opportunists (e.g., small-time criminals), little investigated groups (e.g., those residing in and around dense forest areas), common citizens and politicians may have direct or indirect involvement in such crimes. Crimes can be intentional (e.g., poaching wild animals for their products) or unintentional (e.g., getting a scheduled animal electrocuted in farm unintentionally but, intentionally throwing away its carcass to avoid legal actions is a crime).

The major crimes leading to devastating effects on wild animal populations worldwide include [a] poaching; [b] smuggling/trafficking; [c] cruelty; [d] introduction of invasive species; [e] destruction of habitat (e.g., cutting trees may end-up destroying nests of scheduled birds); [f] collection of products (e.g., feathers of scheduled birds, quills of porcupine etc.); [g] pollution in forest areas (e.g., excessive tourism activities); [h] willful/intentional fires; [i] intentional attacks or predation (e.g., use of furious dogs to hunt-down ungulates); [j] trophy hunting or taxidermy; [k] indirect crimes (e.g., live wires placed in field and meant to prevent crop-damage, but ending-up electrocuting scheduled animals; poisoned stray dogs unintentionally ending-up as diet of wild carnivores) etc. (Badola, 2020).

Out of all crimes involving wild animals the most common and frequent crimes reported in India are [a] illegal trafficking of live wild species (e.g., trafficking of live Indian star tortoises for meat/pet trade); [b] poaching of protected species by means of different harmful/lethal equipment (e.g., snares, iron traps, cage traps, net traps, pits, glue traps, stick traps,

harpooning, ballistic weapons/guns, poisons etc.); [c] trade of products (e.g., food, tusks, bones, flesh, feathers, horns, ambergris, nails/claws, fur/coat, reptile skin, bile of bears etc.); [d] trophy hunting or taxidermy and [e] exploitation of animals for entertainment (e.g., tranquilizing animals for photography, bird racing, bird fighting, circuses etc.) [Kurland *et al.* (2017); Badola (2020); Gomez *et al.* (2021)].

The existing state-wise extent of actual crimes carried out in field/forest is yet to be known and reported in India. As per a report based on National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), a total of 4066 wildlife crimes were reported in different states of India between 2014 and 2018. At present, the world is facing crisis due to COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in nation-wide lockdown in 2020 as well as 2021. This lockdown resulted in restriction of travel within the state, between states and between nations which reduced criminal activities involving some species; however, criminal activities involving some species were not affected by these restrictions as per the report of TRAFFIC (India office) (Badola, 2020). Out of all Indian states, Gujarat has also seen a series of wild animal related crimes in recent times. Some of the examples include [a] teasing of a caged Asiatic lion; [b] teasing of wild Asiatic lions using vehicles; [c] missing nails of Asiatic lion; [d] luring a wild Asiatic lion by use of live poultry bird; [e] stepping down a tourist vehicle and taking selfies with a pride of wild Asiatic lions; [f] killing of blackbuck, blue bull and peacock; [g] use of live snakes in traditional *Garbas* during *Navaratri*; [h] seizure of live tortoises; [i] taking selfies with Indian rock python; [j] killing of a Bengal monitor and feeding its meat to pregnant woman; [k] seizure of turtles and dead birds at animal rescuer's farm etc. Some of these are documented on the basis of news headlines or reports published in common local medias [Figure-1].



Figure-1: Examples of crimes involving wild mammals (e.g., lions, honey badger, blue bull), reptiles (e.g., snakes, turtles) and birds (e.g., peacocks, parrots) in Gujarat as published in local newspapers

Basic Fundamentals to Control or Mitigate Crimes

Every Indian citizen is entitled to play a role in conservation and nurturing of Indian wild fauna which will effectively result in timely notification of criminal activities and their mitigation. The major areas to control or mitigate such criminal activities include [I] prevention of crime (by increasing awareness), [II] detection (by formulating teams), [III] investigation of detected crimes (as per rules), [IV] identifying the linkage (local/state/national/international, organized/unorganized) and [v] case processing (by authorities using facts and all evidences). Guidelines have been established and authorities have also been appointed by the government to recognize and mitigate such crime; however, common citizens and concerned professionals (e.g., veterinarians) are required to be briefed about existence of such guidelines in the country.

Veterinarian's Involvement

Veterinarians play a crucial role in wild animal conservation process. For example, [a] healthcare and management of free-living and captive wild species; [b] conducting post-mortem examination of wild animals; [c] dealing with veterolegal cases involving wild animals; [d] practical implementation of forensic veterinary medicine etc. (Nala and Bhadesiya, 2020). Hence, a basic understanding of crimes involving wild animals is important for veterinarians.

Veterinarians also need to have basic knowledge about different national and international acts/rules, government organizations, statutory bodies etc. dealing with crimes against Indian wild animals. The role of educational institutes is very important in this regard. At present, Veterinary Ethics & Jurisprudence is incorporated with Veterinary Medicine subject which places special emphasis on legal aspects such as differentiation of ante-mortem and post-mortem wounds, types of wounds, dealing with veterolegal cases, common crimes and relevant sections for punishment etc. The Forensic Veterinary Medicine is equally important subject to be understood by veterinarians involved in wild animal conservation. The curriculum for Bachelor's and Master's or Doctorate degrees should be strengthened with evidence-based educational material to impart basic and advanced training to veterinarians of the country.

Conclusion

Veterinary Ethics & Jurisprudence are required to be explored on certain platforms including wildlife crime. Veterinarians should be encouraged to take part in large-scale surveys and analysis of existing status of such crimes. Veterinarians dealing with wild animals may also be encouraged to generate a strong record/teaching/training material based on the experience and findings which will strengthen research and teaching activities in academic institutes for veterinary students in future.

Conflict of Interest

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