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Animals caught in the headlights

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Roadkill: "Speeding vehicles plying on highways that pass through forests cause the deaths of thousands of animals every year." Picture shows an Indian bison crossing the road near Mudumalai National Park in Tamil Nadu.

Sophisticated mapping technology can ensure that roads steer clear of wildlife areas, but the government has been reluctant to address the issue.

Thousands of grand old trees flanked most of our highways ten to 15 years ago, but succumbed to the axe when two-lane highways were upgraded to four-lane or six-lane ones. Now, in a bid to bring back lost green cover, the government has announced a 'Green Highways Policy', with the stated objective of developing "eco friendly National Highways."

Dismayingly, however, the policy is silent on a critical issue — that of highway stretches passing through forests, particularly, our sanctuaries and national parks. Speeding vehicles plying on these roads cause the deaths of thousands of animals, large and small, every year. Many of the casualties are highly endangered species, which the same government spends much money and effort to conserve.

The fact is, in this era of high-speed vehicles, any road through a natural habitat poses a grave danger to animals trying to get across from one side to the other. Four or six-lane highways, with a median in between, present an almost insurmountable barrier for wildlife, particularly, animals with cubs or calves. A study in 2010 reported that 1,035 roadkills of wildlife were recorded in 430 days on a 9.2 km stretch of the Nagpur-Jabalpur Highway (NH 7) that passes through the Pench Tiger Reserve. So, even just from a compassionate viewpoint, it behoves us as a civilised nation to take all steps necessary to minimise the impact of roads on wildlife.

However, there is also an ecological imperative. Highway stretches passing through forests cause severe fragmentation of habitats. This disruption of ecological connectivity curtails or restricts gene flow that is crucial for sustaining healthy wildlife populations and ecosystems. Additionally, highways create new edges that are highly vulnerable to fire and incursion by pernicious weeds, attract ancillary developmental activities, and provide easy access to the forest for poachers and timber smugglers.

Bypassing forests

In recognition of the extremely deleterious impacts that roads have on forests and wildlife, a sub-committee constituted in June 2013 by the National Board for Wildlife reiterated the recommendation contained in the National Wildlife Action Plan 2002-2016 (NWAP) released by the then Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee. The NWAP is emphatic that the Ministry of Surface Transport must plan roads, highways and expressways in such a manner that all national parks and sanctuaries are bypassed and wildlife corridors avoided.

Bypasses are commonly resorted to for circumventing cities and towns. So it is logical to extend the concept to forest areas. If we are willing to think afresh on urban development by way of designing 'Smart Cities', why not 'Smart Highways' that will traverse the country with the least disturbance to our last remaining natural habitats? In the past, when the concept of land use planning was still nascent, highways metamorphosed from roads that were once footpaths or cart tracks. But the smart highways of tomorrow need not follow such alignments. By making use of all the sophisticated mapping technology at our disposal today, it is possible to ensure that roads steer clear of wildlife areas. The extra cost or effort in creating a few detours is a small price to pay for safeguarding our priceless wildlife heritage, and must be built into the budgets of road projects. Unfortunately, so far, the government has shown an unseemly reluctance to address the issue of highway stretches passing through forests, and has only deigned to even discuss it in instances where there has been enormous public pressure, or when a case has been filed.

As for existing highways through forests, particularly those for which bypasses are absolutely not feasible, we need to retrofit them with state-of-the-art, science-based solutions for minimising roadkills. Carefully conceived underpasses, overpasses, flyovers and canopy bridges, which

take animal behaviour and traditional wildlife movement patterns into consideration, can help provide a safe passage for animals. In this context, policymakers ought to have studied successful examples from around the world, including the exemplary work done on the Trans-Canada Highway passing through Banff National Park, where an 80 per cent reduction in large mammal deaths has reportedly been achieved, thanks to an extensive system of wildlife underpasses and overpasses. Given that India intends to add thousands of kilometres of new highways in the coming years, it is disappointing that the Green Highways Policy does not even touch on this issue.

Supreme Court caution

It is relevant to recall a significant observation made by the Supreme Court in another conservation-related matter. In a judgment delivered on February 13, 2012, the apex court held that our approach to development should be eco-centric, rather than focussing only on what is good for humans. We humans, the judgment observes, have obligations to the non-human inhabitants of the earth. Perhaps it is also sensible to remind ourselves, from time to time, that it these very non-human inhabitants that make the earth habitable, and that nature is the very foundation for our ecological security.

While no one questions the need for modern highways in order to achieve the economic growth we aspire for as a nation, to build them with scant regard for the enormous collateral damage to wildlife is shortsighted and callous.

With many developed countries having already shown the way, we have no excuse to lag behind. Indeed, as the land of the Buddha, Mahavira and Mahatma Gandhi, the three greatest proponents of ahimsa, we have an even greater moral imperative to do right by our wildlife.

It's time to walk the talk, not only by heeding the values enshrined in our Constitution and cultural ethos, but also by incorporating the best practices of eco-centric highways. Planting trees by the roadside is very welcome, but to be truly green or eco friendly, the new highways policy has to do much more.

(Shekar Dattatri and Praveen Bhargav are former members of the National Board for Wildlife).
