

From Conflict to Coexistence: Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception on Human Wildlife Interactions



The ClimateRISE Alliance, as part of our narrative building efforts on Human Wildlife Interaction, hosted a media roundtable titled 'From **Conflict to Coexistence: Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception** on Human-Wildlife Interaction (HWI)' in Lucknow. The discussion was organised in response to the recent alleged wolf incidents in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh and the outpour of media reportage on the society, academia, from civil issue. Experts community representatives and media professionals gathered to discuss the complexities and nuances of HWI - how interactions with wildlife are perceived, the myths that shape public perception and role of media in addressing these issues. Journalists from prominent national and regional publications like Dainik Jagran, Amar Ujala, The Pioneer, Rashtriya Sahara, Aaj, Spast Awaaz, Bhoomi TV and 15 other publications participated in the discussion.

# PANELISTS



**Devvrat Singh** 

Wildlife Institute of India & DICE

Wildlife conservationist with over 7 years of field experience across human-wildlife interactions, crocodile ecology, and big-cat behavior.



**Dabeer Hassan** World Wildlife Fund, India Works with local communities in the Terai Arc Landscape to address human-wildlife interactions and mitigate conflicts.



#### **Rohit Jha**

Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy

Programme Manager for Conservation Data & Policy, at Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy, works with a focus on inclusive policy processes. His research includes Bengal Florican ecology and river-island nesting birds, with over 20 publications.



**Dr. Sougata Khan** Bhartiya Vidyapeeth University Ecologist with expertise in bioacoustics, radio telemetry, and wildlife population estimation. He has led research on Indian wolves and worked extensively on the All-India Tiger Estimation.



**Sunil Harsana** The Coexistence Consortium

Grassroots conservationist known for protecting Mangar Bani Forest and promoting human-leopard coexistence in South Haryana's Aravalli hills.



**Vishaka George** People's Archive of Rural India (PARI)

Senior Editor at PARI, managing social media and storytelling workshops, and author of two young adult novels.

# **KEY THEMES & INSIGHTS**

#### Shift the narrative now: From conflict to interaction

Dr. Sougata began the discussion by advocating for a shift in terminology, suggesting the use of "interaction" instead of "conflict." He explained that terms like "conflict" carry a negative connotation, casting both affected people and animals in an unfavorable light and detracting from the need for a more balanced and pragmatic dialogue.

With recent developmental imperatives, such as road construction in forests, significantly increasing human-wildlife interactions, Dr. Sougata underscored the urgent need for careful planning. He cited the Nagpur-Mumbai highway as an example, where development required forest areas to be cut to create a flyover for animals, which led to concerns about balancing infrastructure and conservation. He proposed using data and technology to map areas of high human-wildlife interactions for more informed decision-making.

"We don't need more negativity. These interactions have been happening for a long time. We need roads, we need development, but we also need data to plan this better. The goal is to reduce interactions by identifying high-risk zones before projects are executed."

said Dr. Sougata Sadhukhan



#### Dispelling Myths through awareness and sensitisation

Devvrat Singh, Wildlife Conservationist, addressed the deep-rooted myths surrounding human-wildlife interactions, particularly regarding wolves. He dismissed the idea that animals attack out of vengeance, citing the Bahraich wolf incidents, where the concept of "revenge" was often perpetuated by the media.

Drawing parallels with snakebite cases, he noted that similar myths persist across India. Communities often ascribe human emotions like revenge to animals, a phenomenon known as anthropomorphism. In the case of Bahraich, it was suggested that one or few wolves may have been responsible for the attacks, yet the incident was generalized to all wolves in the area which caused a negative perception that wolves predate humans.

> "Wolves avoid human interaction as much as possible. The notion of them attacking humans for revenge is anthropomorphism—we're projecting human emotions onto animals."

> > said Devvrat Singh



This underscores the vital role of media and local NGOs in sharing accurate information. Without them, myths can spread unchecked, leading to panic and biased reporting that fosters hostility toward wildlife.

#### **Perception of HWI- Shaped by Culture & Context**

Sunil offered a layered perspective, highlighting that perceptions of human-wildlife interactions vary significantly based on regional and cultural context. In some indigenous communities, coexistence with wildlife is viewed as normal, while urban areas often frame these interactions as conflicts. He illustrated this with examples from various regions, showing how attitudes can differ even toward the same species. For instance, a farmer near a tiger reserve recounted how his father regarded a tiger's presence as a sign of good fortune, as it deterred smaller animals from damaging crops. In contrast, in an urban area, the same tiger evokes fear, frequently prompting calls for intervention from wildlife authorities.

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"In some places, a leopard sleeping on a hut is normal, while in others, the same sight creates panic. It's all about how people perceive their environment."

said Sunil Harsana



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## Media's Role in Responsible Reporting

The media's impact on public perception was discussed several times. Rohit and Sougata urged reporters to handle human-wildlife interaction incidents with care, ensuring both sides of the story are represented. They stressed the importance of balanced reporting, particularly avoiding sensationalism and emotionally charged language. Such sensationalism, they argued, exacerbates the situation by increasing fear and misunderstanding.

Rohit suggested that journalists need to approach such incidents with a threefold focus: understanding what happened, why it happened, and how the issue can be resolved. This would bring clarity to complex situations and prevent unnecessary alarmism. Devvrat built on this thought by stressing on the need for collaboration between media and scientific bodies to provide accurate information. He noted the importance of headline framing, as it often shapes public perception more than the content of an article.

In a recent case, a major newspaper in Delhi published a headline, "Man-Eating Tiger on the Loose," only for it to be later corrected to describe a sick, elderly tiger that posed little threat to human life. Headlines, as several speakers emphasised, play a significant role in framing public perceptions and can either escalate or de-escalate situations.



"We should never export human emotions like revenge or vengeance to animals. Our job as media is to explain what happened, why it happened, and how we can solve it, not to fuel hysteria."

said Rohit Jha



### Leveraging Technology for Conflict Mitigation

Technology has emerged as a critical tool for managing HWI, particularly in areas like Bahraich where agricultural land intersect with wildlife habitats. Dabeer and Sougata, described the use of technologies such as camera traps and thermal drones to monitor wildlife movement, which had been crucial in identifying the number and location of wolves during the Bahraich incident. Traditional methods like analyzing pugmarks also remain effective in understanding which animals are frequenting human settlements.

Mr. Hassan added how installing Enider systems were employed in elephant corridors. This system uses sensors that trigger alarms when elephants approach villages, helping to prevent confrontations and allowing communities to take early action. In some communities, the use of mobile apps allows villagers to report animal sightings directly to forest officers, creating a decentralized system of monitoring HWI. This empowers local communities to participate actively in mitigating wildlife interactions.

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Thermal drones have been instrumental in spotting wolves in sugarcane fields, where visibility is low. These drones help us make informed decisions about when and how to intervene."

said Dabeer Hassan

## Generational Disconnect & Vanishing Traditional Knowledge

A recurring theme was the growing disconnect between younger generations in rural areas and their traditional knowledge about wildlife. Sunil mentioned how village elders often have a deep understanding of the jungle and its inhabitants, a knowledge passed down orally through generations. However, this connection is weakening as younger generations are increasingly disconnected from these ecosystems, leading to more frequent HWI and less tolerance toward wildlife.

For instance, in one village in Jharkhand, elders recalled how they had lived alongside wolves for generations without significant issues. They were accustomed to coexisting with the predators, understanding their behavior and boundaries. But with younger generations moving away from agriculture and traditional practices, their knowledge and ability to coexist with wildlife are diminishing, increasing the likelihood of negative encounters.

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"The younger generation doesn't understand the practices of the past. This gap in knowledge and perception is leading to more conflict than we have seen in the past."

said Sunil Harsana



#### Social Media's Role in Spreading Misinformation

The panel also touched on the impact of social media in shaping perceptions around HWI. Devvrat expressed concern about the viral spread of misinformation through platforms like WhatsApp, where exaggerated or false stories can escalate quickly. In the Bahraich case, social media played a significant role in spreading fear, with inaccurate reports of widespread wolf attacks. Devvrat stressed on the need for multi-stakeholder participation including the administrative and scientific bodies and the media. Ultimately, HWI management relies heavily on public sensitization and fostering tolerance toward wildlife—areas where media holds considerable influence. Conservation efforts, therefore, must engage media effectively to support accurate and balanced narratives.

"There needs to be a more immediate response from authorities to prevent misinformation from going viral. A framework should be developed to ensure that the right facts reach people as quickly as possible."

said Devvrat Singh

# RECOMMENDATIONS

# FOR THE MEDIA





# BALANCED REPORTING

Avoid sensationalism and anthropomorphism when covering HWI and ensure that both the sides of the story are told.



## ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Reporters should focus on the "what, why, and how" to create solutionsoriented stories.



#### LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY

Use available technologies like camera traps and thermal drones to inform stories with accurate data.



## **ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS**

Involve scientific bodies and experts in HWI stories to enhance credibility and counter misinformation.



## **BE MINDFUL OF HEADLINES**

Ensure headlines are factual and not emotionally charged to prevent unnecessary fear mongering.

This comprehensive approach can contribute to a more informed public discourse on human-wildlife interactions, fostering coexistence and mutual respect between humans and the natural world.



The media roundtable on human-wildlife interactions provided a platform for diverse stakeholders to share insights and practical strategies, emphasising the need for a balanced narrative that integrates scientific knowledge, traditional wisdom, and community perspectives. The discussion highlighted the complexities of these interactions, particularly in the wake of the Bahraich incidents, and moved beyond the binary idea of "conflict" to explore the long-standing coexistence between rural communities and wildlife. However, with rapid urbanization, societal changes, and the spread of misinformation through media and social platforms, these interactions are increasingly fraught with fear and misunderstanding.

The conversation underscored the importance of collaboration between media, conservationists, local communities, and government authorities to foster informed and compassionate reporting. Emphasizing data-driven approaches and the integration of technology, participants discussed ways to enhance conservation efforts while addressing development needs and promoting coexistence.