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Pioneering Female Zoologists in India: Contributions to Wildlife Conservation and Advocacy

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Abstract: ***India, with its rich biodiversity and diverse ecosystems, has been a hub for wildlife enthusiasts and conservationists for centuries. This rich biodiversity is the result of the tireless efforts of both male and female zoologists, who dedicate their lives to the study and conservation of the country's unique fauna. Among the individuals dedicated to the study and preservation women zoologists have played a vital and often underestimated role. Despite facing societal challenges and gender biases, these remarkable women have made significant contributions to the field of zoology and wildlife conservation in India. This article includes the passion, perseverance, and achievements of a few notable women zoologists in India who have demonstrated that they possess the same dedication, passion, and expertise as their male counterparts. The achievements of these women wild lifers are not available in any print media and in one place so this article is an effort to enlighten the work of these women conservationists.***

Keywords: Women zoologists, India, biodiversity conservation, wildlife research, inspirational role models

Dr. Latika Nath:

Dr. Latika Nath, widely recognized as India's "Tiger Princess," stands as a pioneering wildlife biologist and conservationist with a profound impact on big cat research, particularly tigers and leopards. As the first Indian woman to hold a doctorate focused on tigers, her journey into the realm of wildlife has been both adventurous and challenging. After earning an undergraduate degree in Environmental Science from Maitreyi College at Delhi University, Dr. Nath secured a scholarship to the School of Forestry at the University of Wales. Originally intending to study hangul and bears in Dachigam National Park, she shifted her focus to the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, due to the escalating terrorism in Kashmir. Later, she was invited to the University of Oxford for research under the guidance of renowned biologist David Macdonald, where she obtained her Ph.D.

Dr. Nath has been a key figure in tiger conservation in India for many years, renowned for her groundbreaking research on tracking and studying tigers in the wild. Her work has provided invaluable insights into tiger behavior, ecology, and habitat requirements, essential for effective conservation strategies. Beyond tigers, she has conducted extensive research on leopards, contributing significantly to our understanding of leopard populations in India and informing conservation strategies. Her expertise extends to wildlife corridors in eastern Madhya Pradesh, where she used satellite image analysis and geographical information systems for population estimations and sampling. This research provided recommendations for addressing human-wildlife conflict and landscape ecology issues in Bandhavgarh National Park. Drawing on her comprehensive knowledge of the Kanha forest ecosystem, Dr. Nath founded Wild India Resorts (Kanha) Pvt. Ltd., aiming to establish model eco-resorts nationwide. Her commitment to conservation also extends to educating children, as evidenced by her book "Takdir, the Tiger Cub, "translated into 28 languages internationally, encompassing wildlife education.

Dr. Nath's illustrious career exemplifies the crucial role scientists and conservationists play in preserving India's rich biodiversity. Her contributions to tiger and leopard research have not only expanded our understanding of these species but have also significantly contributed to their conservation. Through her work and dedication, she continues to inspire future generations of wildlife enthusiasts and researchers to protect India's precious wildlife and their habitats.

Dr. Vidya Athreya:

Dr. Vidya Athreya has dedicated her research to understanding and mitigating human-wildlife conflict, particularly in the context of leopard conservation. Her groundbreaking work has played a pivotal role in finding innovative solutions to address conflicts between leopards and local communities, prioritizing the safety of both humans and wildlife. Dr. Athreya's commitment to fostering coexistence between humans and leopards stands as an inspirational model for conservationists globally. With a Master's degree in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from the University of Pondicherry and Iowa, Dr. Athreya is currently associated with the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) - India program in Bangalore. She has been recognized for her contributions with the Kaplan Graduate Award and has received extensive support from grants provided by the Rufford Foundation U.K. and the Royal Norwegian Embassy to India.

Dr. Athreya's primary focus involves collaborating with local Forest Department officials to reduce human-leopard conflicts, particularly incidents involving attacks on humans. As a member of the IUCN Cat Specialist Group, she contributes her expertise to the broader field of cat conservation.Her recent research has significantly advanced our understanding of leopard ecology in agricultural landscapes where they coexist with humans. Dr. Athreya's work delves into the complex interplay between socio-political factors in conflict and the role of cultural tolerance towards wildlife in India. Challenging established paradigms, she contends that the persistence of large

carnivores is closely linked to the acceptance of these species by local communities.

Dr. Vidya Athreya's pioneering efforts contribute not only to the scientific understanding of human-leopard dynamics but also provide practical solutions for fostering harmony between wildlife and people. Her work reflects a holistic approach that combines ecological research with cultural and social considerations, demonstrating the importance of community engagement in successful conservation strategies.

Dr. Aparajita Datta:
Dr. Aparajita Datta is at the forefront of The Nature Conservation Foundation's Eastern Himalaya program, where she has spearheaded research and community-based conservation initiatives for over two decades, with a particular focus on hornbills. Her expertise in hornbill biology and seed dispersal, culminating in her Ph.D. in 2000, laid the foundation for extensive work across the North East on various hornbill-related projects.

Her research has delved into diverse aspects of hornbill ecology, including breeding, roosting, and diet biology in North East India. Using telemetry, she has explored hornbill movement and seed dispersal, while also monitoring tree phenology, assessing hunting and logging impacts, discovering new mammal species in Arunachal Pradesh, and studying seed dispersal and predation. Additionally, Dr. Datta has initiated community-based conservation interventions with tribal communities, addressing health, education, rural energy, and conservation education. One noteworthy initiative is the Hornbill Nest Adoption Program, established in 2011, which safeguards hornbill nests outside protected areas, providing both conservation benefits and income to local communities. Dr. Datta's commitment to engaging with tribal communities, promoting conservation education, and fostering citizen science initiatives reflects her holistic approach to preserving biodiversity and fostering sustainable coexistence between humans and wildlife. She regularly shares her insights on conservation and nature through speaking engagements and written contributions.

Dr. Datta and her team's efforts have been recognized with several prestigious awards, including the National Geographic Emerging Explorer award (2010), the Whitley Fund for Nature award (2013), and the Women in Discovery award. As an advocate for conservation, she serves as the Co-Chair (Asia) for the IUCN SSC Hornbill Specialist Group.

Dr. Sunita Narain:
Dr. Sunita Narain, the former General of the Center for Science and Environment (CSE), a prominent environmental think tank and research organization in India, is recognized for her substantial contributions to environmental conservation and sustainable development. While not primarily associated with wildlife biology, She has played a pivotal role in addressing a broad spectrum of environmental issues, encompassing wildlife conservation, habitat protection, and biodiversity. As a vocal advocate for environmental protection and sustainable development in India, Dr. Narain has raised awareness about diverse challenges, including those linked to wildlife conservation and habitat degradation. Under her leadership, the Center for Science and Environment conducted extensive research on environmental issues, exploring the impact of development projects on ecosystems and wildlife habitats. The organization's research and policy recommendations have significantly influenced government decisions and environmental policies.

Despite her focus not solely being on wildlife, Dr. Narain has emphasized the critical importance of biodiversity conservation within the broader context of environmental sustainability. She underscores the need to strike a balance between economic development and the preservation of ecosystems and wildlife. Dr. Narain has been a staunch advocate for sustainable and environmentally friendly practices across various sectors, including agriculture, industry, and transportation. Her work consistently promotes the idea that conservation and sustainable development are interconnected. Recognized both nationally and internationally, Dr. Narain has received numerous awards and honors for her significant contributions to environmental conservation. Her multifaceted work in the field of environmental conservation has left an indelible mark on India's environmental movement, influencing policies and practices aimed at safeguarding the country's natural heritage, including wildlife and conservation.

Dr Neha Sinha:
Dr. Neha Sinha is a prominent wildlife biologist in India, renowned for her substantial contributions to wildlife conservation and environmental protection. Actively engaged in research, advocacy, and policy initiatives, she has dedicated her career to preserving wildlife and habitats. Dr. Sinha's work encompasses various facets of conservation, including wildlife protection, habitat connectivity, and environmental policy.

Formerly a senior reporter/environmental journalist for The Indian Express, Dr. Sinha transitioned to conservation after being selected for Oxford University’s Masters of Science in Biodiversity, Conservation, and Management on an INLAKS scholarship. Her journey led her to the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), where she played a pivotal role in policy and advocacy, providing valuable insights for amendments to key environmental laws such as the Wild Life Protection Act (1972), T.S.R. Subramanian High-level Committee to Review Environmental Laws (2015), Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act (2016), and Wetland Rules (2017).

A driving force behind various environmental projects, Dr. Sinha spearheaded the Campaign in Nagaland, recognized as one of the most significant conservation success stories. Her on-the-ground efforts in Nagaland and Manipur involve raising awareness and educating local communities. Simultaneously, she influences policy through advocacy and environmental education programs, specifically focusing on the conservation of Amur Falcon. With her expertise, eloquence, and fearless writing, Dr. Sinha has trained diverse audiences, including media, conservationists, citizens, forest guards, and Gond tribals, in biodiversity basics, policy, and advocacy. Her environmental articles are

regularly featured in publications like Economic and Political Weekly, The Hindu, and Daily O. Additionally, she serves as a Consulting Editor (Environment) for The Wire and a reviewer for Current Science. In recognition of her outstanding contributions, Dr. Neha Sinha was honored with the prestigious Wildlife Service Award in 2017.

Dr. Krithi K. Karanth:
Dr. Krithi K. Karanth holds the positions of Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director at the Centre for Wildlife Studies, and she serves as adjunct faculty at Duke and the National Centre for Biological Sciences. Her extensive research involves macro-level studies evaluating species distributions, wildlife tourism impacts, consequences of voluntary resettlement, land use changes, and human-wildlife interactions, focusing on the human dimensions of wildlife conservation.With numerous scientific and popular articles in English and Kannada, Dr. Karanth has contributed significantly to the field. She has also played pivotal roles on the editorial boards of prestigious publications like Frontiers in Ecology and Environment, Human Dimensions of Wildlife, Conservation Biology, and Conservation Letters. Dr. Karanth has mentored over two hundred and fifty young scientists from various countries and engaged seven hundred and fifty citizen science volunteers in her research and conservation initiatives.

In her role as a conservationist, she has designed programs such as Wild Seve, Wild Shaale, Wild Surakshe, and Adopt a PHC. Additionally, Dr. Karanth has collaborated with painters, illustrators, filmmakers, and photographers as a storyteller. Her conservation and research work has gained international recognition, featured in BBC Series like The Hunt, Big Cats, and Dynasties, as well as documentaries by CBC and PBS. She has co-produced documentaries such as Wild Seve, Humane Highways, Wild Shaale, Flying Elephants, and Wild Surakshe. Notably, she co-starred with Kevin Pietersen in the 2020 documentary Save This Rhino: India by Disney Hotstar and National Geographic. Dr. Karanth's bilingual children's book, created in collaboration with artist Raghava KK, is part of her multifaceted efforts, with ongoing collaborations with various artists. Her impactful work has been covered by over 300 media outlets, including Washington.

She has garnered over 40 accolades and honors, including the prestigious titles of World Economic Forum Young Global Leader, University of Florida's Outstanding Young Alumnus, INK Fellow, and India's Power Women by Femina. Additionally, she has been recognized as Women of the Year by Elle India, part of Vogue Women of the Year, and a recipient of the Seattle Zoo's Thrive Conservation Leadership Award. Notably, in 2019, she was honored with the WINGS Women of Discovery Award for Conservation, named GQ Man of the Year-Environmental Hero, and presented with the Rolex Award for Enterprise

Conclusion

Women zoologists in India have played a pivotal role in advancing our understanding of the country's rich biodiversity and promoting its conservation. Their research and dedication have not only contributed to scientific knowledge but have also inspired future generations to pursue careers in wildlife conservation and zoology. They have also faced numerous challenges along the way. Gender bias, limited access to resources and societal expectations have often hindered their progress. But these women serve as beacons of hope, proving that passion and perseverance can break down barriers and lead to significant contributions in the field of science and conservation. As we celebrate their achievements, it is crucial to support and encourage more women to ensuring their footsteps, ensuring a brighter future for India's wildlife and ecosystems.

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