

**Project Proposal 2017**



**Involving Local Religious Leaders in Conservation  
Communication Efforts**

**By**

**Shekhar Kolipaka**

## Title: Involving Local Religious Leaders in Conservation Communication Efforts

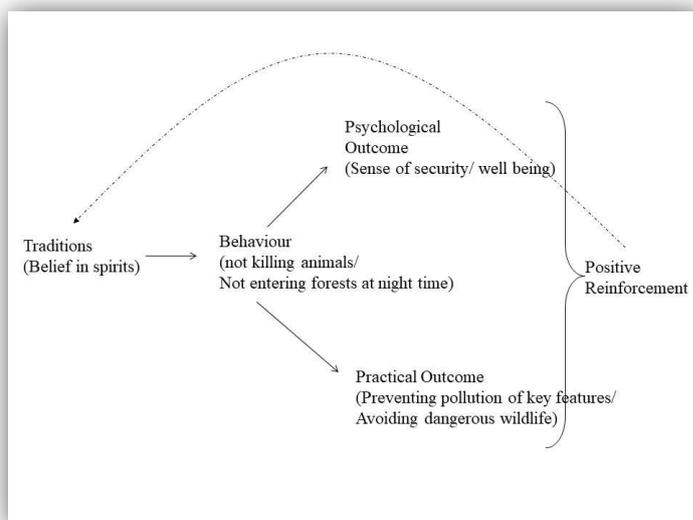
(This is an action research project that plans to engage local religious leaders and through them share my research findings on tigers in human-dominated landscapes with local villagers.)

**Project area:** Panna Tiger Reserve area and the surrounding multiple-use forests. The multiple use forests are in the districts of Panna, Satna, Chatterpur, Katni, Damoh and Sagar Districts of North Madhya Pradesh, India. The forests of this area are part of the northern Madhya Pradesh tiger landscape, and they are critical corridor forests for tigers moving between Western India and Central India.

**Project period:** 24 months with a review at the end of every 12 months.  
Project starting date: 1<sup>st</sup> January 2018 – Ending December 2019.

### Introduction

Faith in God is a powerful motivator for many people. In the Panna region of North Madhya Pradesh, India, rural villages believe that benevolent protector spirits dwell in forests. They make pacts with such spirits and seek protection for themselves and their livestock while they move in the woods. For example, they believe that powerful forces in the form of animals, in streams, in old trees, in rocks and boulders exist in forests. They view that these benevolent forces out of their sheer strength and power are capable of causing humans harm. For instance, a dislodged boulder could crush everything in its way. Similarly, a flash flood could wipe away everything in its path. A tiger or a wolf could scare away or kill domestic livestock. To protect themselves from these natural forces in the forests people make pacts with their spirit protectors and request protection from the effects. In return for protection, people adhere to certain norms while in the forests. Such norms include tolerating



animals, not polluting palaces where the spirits dwell and avoiding forests after dark and others. My studies in Panna showed that these norms had several advantages for people (practical and intrinsic) and also had benefits for local carnivores (Kolipaka *et al.*, 2015)

**Figure 1:** Schematic diagram showing the links between beliefs, behaviour, outcomes of the action and reinforcement of ideas. © S.S.Kolipaka

A spirit intermediary, through rituals, helps people make contact with their spirit protectors. During such contact, people make special requests or get explanations for events that transpired. For example, on occasions when people experience attacks from tigers or livestock losses, they see the outcome as a supernatural manifestation of which they have no control. Through the spirit intermediaries, they contact the spirits and try to find a solution/explanation for their problems. I studied local people and their relationship with the forest spirits and discovered that people's belief in forest spirits positively influenced the tolerance that people showed towards wild animals like the tiger (Kolipaka et al., 2015).

Sometimes local practices are entwined in religious beliefs and could have adverse outcomes for people. My study in Panna showed that local prohibitions on the sale of cows to abattoirs indirectly and in an interconnected way reduced the commercial value of local native varieties of cows. Next, the prohibitions revived age-old local practices such as *Anna Pratha* and people abandoned greater numbers of unwanted and untenable cows into the forests (Santoshi 2016). Such unwanted animals became ready and available prey to large carnivores in the area including the tiger (Kolipaka et al., 2017). While the current situation certainly benefits the local carnivores, it creates complications for local people through increased carnivore attacks on cattle and sometimes loss of valuable animals. Next, people lost precious opportunities to earn incomes from an abundantly available local resource (cows) which is now underutilised and allowed to roam feral. Finally, the negative impact of overgrazing on local vegetation by thousands of unwanted cows is also concerning. Local people found it hard to solve these complex problems and tolerated livestock losses, and at the same time, they expected the wildlife authorities (government) to address the issues. The International Union recognised such complexness in the management of landscapes for conservation for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the World Conservation Congress (WCC). They passed Resolution 33, which states that “effective and equitable approaches to the design, governance and management of protected or conserved areas need to be grounded not only in science but also in cultures, religions, worldviews and co-existing customary practices relating to nature.”<sup>1</sup>

Since the proposed tiger conservation landscapes in India encompass both protected areas and non-protected forest lands (territorial forests), effective ways to manage these aspects for the coexistence of people and wildlife are being explored by managers and conservationists. In India, the Hindu religion and tribal communities subscribe to animistic beliefs and have at their core an ethos of stewardship that values the natural world. Religious leaders and institutions have a unique voice in their communities to inspire social and behavioural change, and therefore their involvement in being part of the solution for coexistence is compelling. Conservation outside protected areas can significantly benefit by involving religious leaders from various traditions and by mobilising grassroots religious networks to promote the protection of forests and wildlife, resist illegal felling and poaching of wild animals. Likewise, their support can be invaluable to resolving wildlife conflicts about livestock losses.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://conbio.org/groups/working-groups/religion-and-conservation-biology/>

The proposed study is a first attempt to solicit individual support and build partnerships between religious leaders and conservation programs (privately governed or government implemented). The objective is to listen and to ask, to discuss and then see how partnerships might shape. Here the focus will be on both, what the faith leaders/intermediaries can do as well as what the partnerships might do. I intend to use an action research approach and involve local faith leaders and assess various parameters that transpire during the pre-engagement stage, during the actual engagement process and post-engagement and develop an understanding of the idea of involving faith leaders.

### **The approach:**

I completed a six-year study in Panna, India and examined “If tigers can survive in human-dominated landscapes of India?” The findings of this biosocial conservation research study are published in various journals, and a monograph is under preparation. I wish to use the findings from the study and share the results on human-tiger interactions with the resident villagers in my study area. My study areas had 43 villages with nearly 45,000 people living in the villages. Since resident villagers believe in the existence of forests spirits and the spirit of the tiger; I wish to involve local spirit intermediaries, explain my findings to them and with their help create folk stories of my finding. Since folk stories are the most common oral medium of sharing anecdotal information in the study area, I will involve the same intermediaries to communicate with the resident people the newly created folk stories on tigers and people and their interactions. This way I wish to both, share my research findings and also involve local faith leaders in conservation efforts. Next, each of the three stages, pre-engagement, during engagement and post-engagement will be documented, and then analysed to understand the idea of involving faith leaders in conservation.

Objective 1: To share my research findings on human-tiger interactions with 45,000 villagers living in 43 villages.

Objective 2: To analyse the idea of involving faith leaders in conservation while executing objective 1.

Some of the questions and sub-questions in this would be

### Pre-engagement question

1. What may be the different motivations for spirit intermediaries to support nature conservation?
2. What will it cost (financially, in time and workforce) to engage with these faith leaders?
3. What may be the best approach to engage in discussions with faith leaders/intermediaries and share my findings?
4. What may be the best way to create folk stories of the results?
5. What may be the best way to develop shared vision between the researcher and faith leader and next faith leader and the conservation organisation? How long will the process take?
6. How to identify a program for engaging the faith leaders?
7. What will be their role and responsibility in a identified program?
8. What is the communication strategy?
9. How to best monitor the communication between the faith leaders and people?

10. What may be best ways to monitor the shifts from changes in attitudes to the evolution in practices?

#### While engaging

1. Do people understand the folk story we designed?
2. Does the story explain the results I wish to share? What do people think?
3. What do faith leaders think of the folk stories?
4. How do faith leaders assess the effectiveness of the message delivered? Attendance numbers?/questions posted by the audience?
5. What do children think of the new folk stories?

#### Post-engagement

1. Testing re-calls of the folk stories.
2. How do people interpret the messages and what will be their perception of the benefit of the message in the folk stories?

*Why is this question important for understanding and managing the landscape to balance needs for wildlife, people, and development?*

The concept of involving faith leaders to support conservation is relatively new. There are few known and many unknown aspects to engaging with faith leaders. I am part of a group of people involved in designing guidelines for Society for Conservation Biology -Engaging Faith Leaders for Conservation. The proposed guidelines will be submitted in December to the SCB for forming a dedicated working group on this theme. In countries like India, faith leaders and religion are significant influences on people and therefore powerful entities. However, there have been no systematic studies on how to harness this human resource for the benefit of people and nature. For this reason, this proposed study will focus on collecting some of the most elementary and base level information on engaging faith leaders. If successful, this will open up a new non-monitory way of promoting conservation. Further, faith leaders are already engaged with the society, so there is minimal extra infrastructure that is required for the new task. So folk stories it may be a very cost-effective way to promote conservation messages.

*How will the proposed research be carried out?*

Step 1: Involve para-ecologists and make contact with spirit intermediaries/faith leaders in my study area.

Step 2: Inform them of our efforts and include those leaders who are interested in being part of the project.

Step 3: Through them get introduced to other faith leaders in the areas.

Step 4: Hold discussions with the selected group of 4-5 faith leaders and involve them in designing folk stories that will communicate my research findings.

Step 5: Test the folk stories for their effectiveness?

Step 6: Involve para-ecologists to motivate faith leaders to share new stories during rituals and public events.

Step 7: Monitor, adopt changes and ensure there is a continuation of the program and that the 43 villages are evenly covered.

Step 8: Assess project every three months.

Step 9: Keep para-ecologists motivated.

- What products will result from the research, how will these products benefit management of the landscape, and how will they be made available to relevant parties?

1. A video published on the methodology used to involve faith leaders in conservation.
2. Project reports.
3. Folk stories that were designed will be published.

- What institution will be the partner to accept funds? Please provide a letter of commitment from the institution.

Leo Foundation, The Netherlands.

- What permissions are required to carry out the research and how will these permissions be obtained?

- Madhya Pradesh Forest Department has been approached to allow access to visit buffer zone villages.
- No permission needed to work with people.

## **References**

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## Budget

S.No	Particulars	Quantity	Amount	In	In US \$\$
			In Rupees	Euros	
1	Para-ecologist salary	1 @ 8,000 X 24 months	1,92,000.00	2489.00	2936.00
2	Para-ecologist salary (Only if there is additional budget)	1 @ 6000 X 24 months = 1,44,000.00			
3	Petrol	4000 X 24 months	96,000.00	1244.00	1468.00
4	Motorcycle maintenance	1000X 24 months	24,000.00	311.00	367.00
5	Involving spirit intermediaries to design folk stories	3 group meetings/ month @ 1500 Rs/ meeting (travel and food) X 12 months  (If additional budget then increased to 12 more months)	54,000.00	700.00	825.00
6	Recording instruments, batteries, books, internet, phone costs etc		20,000.00	260.00	305.00
7	Leo Foundation Administrative Charges	5% of grant amount	19,300.00	250.00	300.00
	Total		405,300.00	5254.00	6201.00

## Curriculum Vitae

### Personal Information

Name Srinivas Shekhar Kolipaka  
E-mail kolipaka.s.s@gmail.com  
Address Kamerlingh Onneslaan 6  
2641 ZN, Pijnacker  
The Netherlands  
Telephone +31-15-3611900  
Date of Birth 03-11-1973

### Academic Qualifications

2017 PhD (have to defend my thesis in December)  
Thesis Title Can Tigers (*Panther tigris tigris*) Survive in Human-Dominated Landscapes of India?  
University Leiden University, The Netherlands  
Departments Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology (FSW) & Institute of Environmental Sciences (CML)

2012 MSc- Environmental Sciences  
University University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), South Africa  
Subjects Protected Area Management, Change Management  
Thesis Title Application of Theory U to Assess Implementation Possibilities of a Coexistence Agenda at Panna Tiger Reserve, India.

2000-01 M-Phil - Natural Resource Management  
University Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal, India.  
Subjects Sustainable Forest Management, Rural Community Development, Protected Area Management, Ecology, Wildlife Management, Statistics in Resource Management, Management of Common Property Resources.  
Thesis Title Status and Distribution of Caracal *Felis caracal* outside protected areas in Madhya Pradesh, India.

1996-98 Masters Diploma in Business Administration  
Institute Symbiosis Institute of Management Studies, Pune, India.  
Subjects International Trade, Product Management, Finance Management, Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis, Marketing and Sales Management.

### Work Experience and Consultancies

Current Waiting to defend my PhD Thesis.  
PhD Thesis In this Biosocial Conservation Science study I questioned if, "Tigers can survive in human-dominated landscapes of India?" I conducted four different investigations and synthesised them to answer the main question. The first anthropology investigation is a study of people-carnivore relations and how these relationships influence tiger conservation. Next, on livestock practices and people's ability prevent losses. The two animal biology studies focus on tiger space use in multiple use lands and their diet in the livestock dominated environment.

April 2009 May 2015	Project Consultant for Panna Tiger Reintroduction Project, Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh, India.
Status	Phase I of the project Ended in 2015. The proposal to build a dam in the PA delayed the start of phase 2.
Project Title	Panna Tiger Reintroduction Project
Work Contents	<p>As a consultant I was commissioned by the State Forest Department to develop a management plan with a coexistence agenda for the multiple-use buffer zone and corridor areas of the Panna Tiger Reserve. While preparing the master plan I conducted action research to understand the capacity of the local stakeholders to support the change to the government envisioned coexistence agenda. I used the findings to manage the human dimension component of the tiger reintroduction program.</p> <p>Next, I analysed tiger radio telemetry data and provided interpretation and management inputs to the Panna tiger reserve management.</p> <p>I also conducted a study to assess the status of the rare Indian caracal (<i>Caracal caracal schmitzi</i>) in North Madhya Pradesh and found the animals may have become locally extinct. I further provided the underlying reasons for the loss to the government authorities.</p>
Financial support and Partners in the projects:	Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh (2009 to 2015), Madhya Pradesh State Bio-Diversity Board (2013-1014), University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, South Africa (2009 to 2012), Louwes Fund for Research in Food and Water, The Netherlands (2013-2017), Pugdundee Safaris, India (2009 to 2015), De Fries – Bajpai Foundation, USA (2013-2015).
Period	01-12-2008 to 30-11-2010
Project	Building Zoo Knowledge Networks
Work Contents	I was responsible for creating an efficient communication network for exchange of knowledge for ex-situ captive breeding between Zoo's in South Asia and Zoos in Europe. I was also responsible for identifying and nurturing local and regional organisations in South Asia region that can cater to the knowledge needs of Zoo personnel and managers.
Supported by	Dutch Zoo Conservation Fund
Period	2001 to 2015
Status	Completed several research projects on small wildcats in this time.
Project	<b>Small wildcat Research and Conservation Project, India</b>
Work contents	To develop base knowledge on relatively understudied Indian wildcats such as rusty spotted cat, fishing cat, Asiatic wildcat and the Indian caracal. The behavioural and ecological understanding of these wildcat species is published and dissipated to the government forest departments in India for their conservation outside protected areas. I surveyed and documented small wildcat species status, regional distribution and threats to their survival in three geographically distinct regions of India (Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, Central India and Assam). Some of the outcomes of the work conducted during this period include:

- Establishing reliable and low-cost field methods to study and monitor nocturnal animals in dry deciduous forests (category II Protected Area) of Central India.
- Studying the use of village-forest fringes by small carnivore species and working with 3 local stakeholders to develop these landscapes into safe areas for carnivore species movement.
- Estimating the leopard carrying capacity of a category II Protected Area in India using a social science approach. This monitoring method captures visible disturbance and land use by people living in the sanctuary and allows the Park management to focus their interventions on people management.
- Involving local rural villagers in wildcat monitoring and conservation.

Financed and Supported by

Wild About Cats (USA), Feline Conservation Federation (USA), Dutch Zoo Conservation Fund (The Netherlands), Chicago Zoological Society (USA), and State Forest Departments of Govt of India.

### **Journal Articles and Books**

- 2017 Kolipaka, S.S., 2017. Assessing Change To A Human-Tiger Coexistence Scenario Using Theory U. LAP –Lambert Publishing, Germany.
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