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# The human cost of India's tiger conservation policy

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Ignoring the rights of tribal people is a recipe for environmental disaster

The global environmental movement is split in two. You might not be aware of this in the UK, where only one side of the great green divide has any real presence. But in the wider world, and especially across developing countries, a battle for the soul of the environmental movement is raging.

In one corner of the ring we have bourgeois environmentalism. In the opposing corner we have pro-poor environmentalism. The former, which prevails in the UK and the Western world, tramples upon the world's 900 million rural poor that live directly among the natural environment. It can only lead us to ruin. The pro-poor alternative seeks to place the green movement back within the context of justice for the world's hungry. It might just lead us to safety.

Bourgeois environmentalism centres upon the mad dreams of those stuck in cities. It is preoccupied with clueless Romantic-era notions of "pristine" wildernesses. Advocates of this viewpoint wish the world to consist only of clean modern cities and vast "untouched" green lands. Fat chance. India alone has hundreds of millions of impoverished rural dwellers, living among its plains and jungles.

These rural poor, who indulge in small-scale tree cutting and hunting to survive, have no place in the virgin lands of bourgeois environmental fantasy. Never mind that they actually offer a millennia-old blueprint for living in harmony with nature. Never mind that they are the victims, not the culprits, of the industrial degradation of our environment. To counteract the massive ecological footprint of the urban rich, these rural poor must be allowed no footprint at all. They must be removed from the forests.

This perverse dream is, of course, already a reality across thousands of square miles of the earth's surface. Developing nations have been encouraged over recent decades to sign up to the bourgeois environmental doctrine of conservationism, which creates nature reserves and national parks by booting tribal people from their lands.

The national park movement began in the US with the displacement and slaughter of thousands of Native Americans. According to the investigative historian Mark Dowie, almost 20 million tribal people have been displaced from their homelands by their respective governments in the name of conservation in the last 100 years. One by one, the world's developing nations are encouraged to wage these quiet wars of internal colonialism against their own rural poor.

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But the night-back is strengthening. In India, the battle between bourgeois greens and pro-poor greens has reached a critical point, so much so that the conflict even has a tabloid name: "the tigers versus the tribals". Dwindling tiger numbers are a flagship bourgeois environmental issue, under which almost any crime against the country's 80 million-strong tribal population can be committed.

Tribal leaders are still **battling** for the successful implementation of India's recent Forest Rights Act. This breakthrough law was conceived to give tribes ownership of jungle lands so often snatched from them for industrial or national park use. The law was also a historic acknowledgement that these most marginalised of Indians could play a role in the stewardship of the country's environment.

But India's bourgeois environmental elite knows this is a grave threat to its control of the country's forests, and so it has lobbied that granting tribal people such rights would be a conservational disaster, claiming they would be encouraged to hunt tigers and chop down trees within their given lands.

The act has duly been watered down with the inclusion of "critical wildlife corridors," which promise more tribe-free wilderness playgrounds for rich people bouncing around in Land Rovers.

The urban elite's forest management in India is not just cruel, it's utterly incompetent. The country's Panna Tiger Reserve admitted, in July this year, that it is a tiger reserve **without any tigers**. They have all been lost. Many of the missing creatures were probably shot, despite the claim that such reserves are the best defence against poachers. It's not the first time - four years ago, it emerged that Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan was also totally tiger-free. Eager to reintroduce new big cats and to avoid the same humiliation in the future, the authorities at Sariska decided upon clearing entire villages from within the boundaries of the park. Villagers said that their local knowledge could have helped save the tigers and combat the poachers. They were ignored.

Bourgeois environmentalism isn't only unjust, it's stupid and it doesn't work. Sure, Bourgeois environmentalists want to save the world, but with all its current injustices fully intact.



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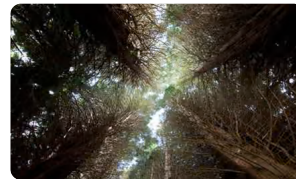
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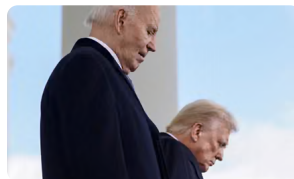
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