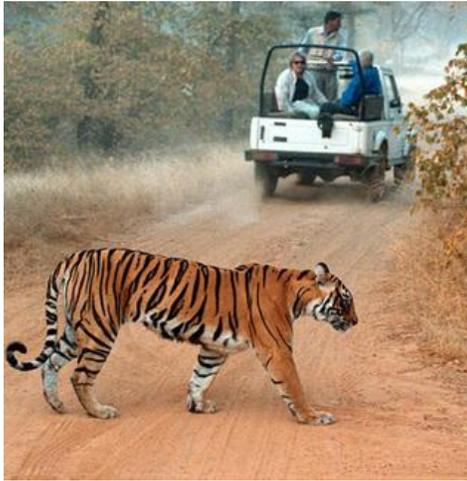


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# Business Line

## Pay for toll on wildlife

Kumar Kakumanu



Tiger, tiger, sorry sight

*Forest roads are a menace to wildlife. Their users should pay for this.*

March 21, 2013:

In India, vehicular traffic on forest roads is directly responsible for wildlife mortality (road kills), ill-effects on wildlife health, habitat loss due to noise and air pollution, habitat degradation and fragmentation. The forest departments and conservation organisations in India have been protesting against construction of new highways and widening of existing highways. They have been seeking closure, at night, of some existing highways in protected areas.

Against this backdrop, there is a legal, economic and social basis for imposing toll charges on existing forest roads to alleviate biodiversity losses.

Forest highways benefit society at large and are considered a valuable public asset, but there is also a need to factor in the cumulative negative effects on local wildlife populations and biodiversity. Since at present there is no budgetary allocation for such losses, there is a need to explore other ways of financing the mitigation of ecological risks of forest highways. Levying a toll is one possible method.

### Legal provisions

The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, enacted in 1981 and amended in 1987 provides for the prevention, control and abatement of air pollution in India. In 2000, the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules set ambient air quality standards in respect of noise for silence zones. The vehicular air and noise pollution levels on most forest highways far exceed the legally permissible levels.

If both the laws are interpreted in their letter and spirit, the authorities, based on the existing legal provisions, should be able to take necessary steps for regulation and abatement of vehicular noise and air pollution in ecologically sensitive and fragile forest areas.

Support is also provided by the Ministry of Environment and Forests through its recent guidelines on Ecotourism (October 2012) and Eco Sensitive Zones (ESZ 2011) which direct the State governments to impose charges on temple tourism, and regulate pollution in protected areas and near to critical wildlife habitats. Over the longer term, it is important to frame laws and shape public policy to specifically address the ill-effects of forest highways on biodiversity.

### Let beneficiaries pay

A common-sense solution would be to require the socio-economic beneficiaries of forest roads — such as State governments, public, project departments (e.g. irrigation, power), temple boards (when temples are located inside the

forest areas) etc., — to pay the social cost of the damage to wildlife on forest roads.

An important question is what the fair price for a toll charge on forest highways should be. Any attempt at arriving at a price should be based on a proper estimate of the damages to forests and wildlife. The rate of toll should be fixed on the basis of real, tangible and ongoing costs to the forest and eco- system that are caused purely as a result of the traffic on the forest roads.

There are two ways to quantify these impacts: damage costs which reflect damages and risks to forests and biodiversity, and avoidance or mitigation costs which reflect the costs of reducing ill-effects. A reasonably accurate toll price estimate can be developed on the basis of readily available environmental and biodiversity damage valuation studies done in similar contexts in India and elsewhere.

## **Plough back the funds**

There is an inherent difficulty in quantifying the exact costs in financial terms to wildlife. However, the damages are real and significant, whether immediately quantifiable in financial terms or not.

Remittances from toll systems should be entirely ploughed back for development and maintenance of forest and wildlife by employing native tribal communities. This could be managed by the government's Tiger Conservation Foundation in tiger reserves and/or local forest departments in other protected areas. This approach would not only be conservation-centric but also improve the local livelihood options in a financially self-sustainable (i.e. not dependent on government funds or charities) manner.

Other steps to be considered are: Treatment and rehabilitation of injured wildlife on forest roads, proper signage, underpasses for animal crossings, imposing speed limits and setting up speed breakers, clean-up of litter along the highway, research on road kills, and monitoring pollution/ and noise levels and their impact on native flora and fauna.

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