

BOOK REVIEW

Shekhar Singh, A.R.K. Sastry, Raman Mehta and Vishaish Uppal (eds), *Setting Biodiversity Conservation Priorities for India: Summary of the Findings and Conclusions of the Biodiversity Prioritization Project*. New Delhi: World Wide Fund for Nature—India, 2000, 707 pp., vols I and II.

India is an enormous country, encompassing a tremendous diversity of ecosystems. In addition, it is home to a diversity of different states, each with their own

languages and political systems. Across the country are a multitude of conservation organisations, social welfare organisations and economic development agencies, in some cases with links to international organisations. Establishing an effective national conservation strategy in this complex environment is a great challenge. Yet such a strategy is needed to effectively utilise the resources of the country and the funds and expertise of international organisations and funding agencies. Such a strategy also needs to be accepted by Indian society, and this can only be done if the strategy emerges from a broad consensus, rather than being developed by a small, elite group of experts, whether from within India itself or outside of India. This book, then, represents the efforts of hundreds of scientists, social scientists, government officials, conservation officials and local leaders, the great majority of them from India itself, to develop a set of conservation priorities for India. The emphasis here is on developing priorities as a process toward reaching consensus. This report does not presume to describe what needs to be done to protect biodiversity, so much as describing the process of identifying those priorities.

The report, despite its impressive length and weight, is only a summary of many, much longer documents, which are available from WWF—India and the chapter authors. The first chapters describe the process itself of establishing priorities, including methodology, design, values and mapping. The largest section of the report is a set of chapters covering deserts, rangelands, wetlands, coasts, oceans, forests, islands, mountains, biosphere reserves, sacred groves and national parks and sanctuaries. Several chapters in this section also focus on individual states, including Tripura, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh. A third section describes establishing priorities for species, with special chapters on trees, medicinal plants and wild relatives of crop plants and domesticated species. The next set of chapters describes priorities involving social, political and legal issues, with a great emphasis placed on including all people involved in and affected by biodiversity. The book concludes with chapters on environmental ethics, biosphere reserves and religion as applied to conservation in India.

This huge effort at priority setting for India has to be contrasted with other such efforts put together by a group of 'experts', often flown in for the occasion, sitting in a conference center, deciding what the priorities should be for a country. In this effort for India, over forty lead organisations, and hundreds of participants developed an approach which would represent a consensus of opinion for national conservation efforts. The result is not a tidy group of chapters which comprehensively covers each major group of organisms, major ecosystems and individual states, and clearly describes what needs to be done. This would be the expectation of many people seeing the title of the report. However, given the diversity of opinions, organisations and agendas within India, such a report would be premature and might likely create further conflict and political inaction. In a country as socially and politically diverse as India, consensus has to emerge from an extended and transparent public process, and this is what is shown in this report. The chapters describe how priorities were established rather than a detailed conservation action

plan. The first phase of the project appears to be successful, and the next step will be to translate these priorities into action. This process will likely happen through more extensive discussion and linkages between the government of India, Indian conservation organisations, international conservation organisations and international funding agencies. And like everything related to conservation and development in India, the process will require patience, more patience, and then, even more patience.

*Biology Department
Boston University
5 Cummington Street
Boston, MA 02215
USA*

Richard Primack