Why shutting down reserves to prevent Covid transmission to tigers is a questionable move

A blanket ban could endanger wildlife and human livelihoods. India must seize opportunity to innovate to live with and reduce the risk from the inevitable future contagion

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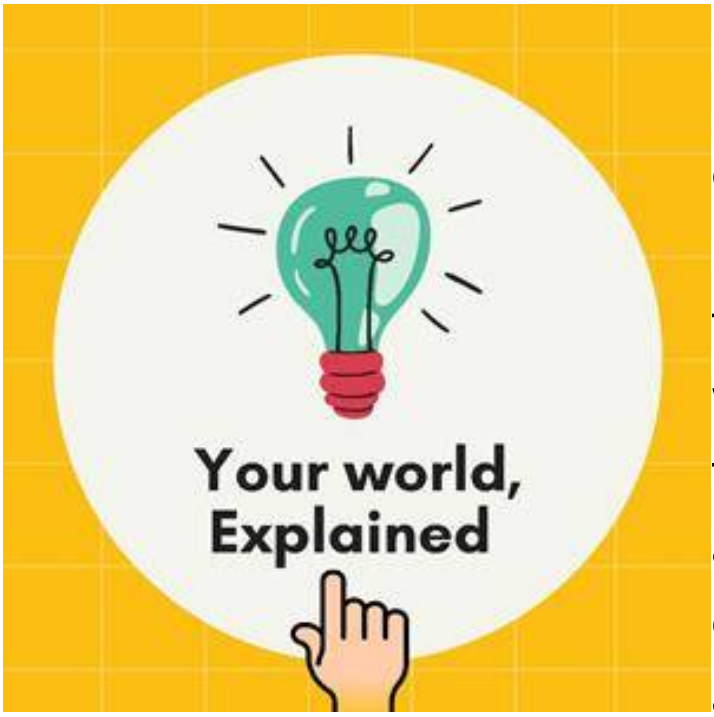
India's Project Tiger is a success by any measure. Our 51 tiger reserves now boast of at least 3,000 tigers. More and more Indians flock to safari parks to marvel at them and other spectacular wildlife. Nature lovers are impatient to return to the forests after the lockdown.

On June 7, however, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) sent out a circular to the chief wildlife wardens of all the tiger range states.

Referring to the lioness at the Chennai Zoo, suspected to have died of a Covid-19 infection, it warned of the high likelihood of disease transmission from affected human beings to captive wild animals. It fears that a similar

transmission may also happen in tiger reserves, and that they need to be closed for tourism activities until further orders.

The intent of the NTCA to protect our wildlife is to be respected. However, this particular directive deserves a wider public discussion.



Forests and wildlife reserves fall under the concurrent list. On most issues concerning state forests, it is the state chief wildlife wardens that are the ultimate deciding authority. This allows decentralised, contextual, and timely decision making in our very diverse ecospheres.

To mandate the closure of all state reserves with a stroke of the pen is vexatious. It has been quickly challenged in Madhya Pradesh, with its popular and lucrative safari parks. The timing of this decision, at a time when the country is planning to open up carefully, is also puzzling.

Tiger reserves in Karnataka, which, unlike those in central India, normally remain open throughout the year, were rightfully closed for almost two months in this brutal second wave. They are gearing up to reopen. Government

and civil society organisations have used the lockdown time to educate, test, treat and, where possible, vaccinate communities living around the parks – be they forest staff, tourism staff or tribal communities.

As for tourists, the sad truth is that safari holidays are affordable mainly for the urban elite, and it is likely that they are already vaccinated, further reducing the risk to wildlife. Some reserves, therefore, may be even safer from human threat to the animals and vice versa than when they were opened some months ago.

There have been documented cases of SARS-CoV-2 anthroponosis from humans to zoo animals and domestic pets, though fatality has been rare. The crossover has come mainly from direct contact with infected humans, be they zookeepers or pet owners. There appear to be no cases anywhere in the world of free-roaming wildlife infected with Covid-19 through humans.

In any case, entry is strictly controlled in India's tiger reserves. Jeeps and people are required to keep a distance from park animals. It is a safe gap even from affected humans, and that, too, in wide open spaces. With most people wearing masks, which should certainly be mandatory, there is ample additional precaution. Surely, local forest officials could themselves decide whether safaris are safe for people and wildlife?

Lakhs of livelihoods around these reserves have hung in

precarious balance since the pandemic started. The impact of a prolonged shutdown needs a cost-benefit analysis, for the people who live there, but also for the impact on the wildlife that we aim to preserve. There is documented evidence from last year's shutdown that more species of wildlife were being killed for subsistence.

The wildlife tourism economy brings in substantial revenue to state coffers. It also brings many caring eyes into the forests, which helps protect them from uncontrolled fires and poaching and, more importantly, creates incentives for conservation.

Even without tourists, forest officials and staff do go into tiger reserves to do their routine jobs. Lakhs of tribal people live close to or inside these parks and have the right to collect minor forest produce. It is not desirable or possible to exclude them from the forests they help preserve.

There is ample wildlife outside the tiger reserves, too, including big cats that stray out. This is an indicator of success for flagship species conservation, and it is impossible to control. Is there then any real risk mitigation in shutting down just the safari parks?

Forest departments, instead, could seize this opportunity to prepare for future waves and pandemics. No one knows when the pandemic will fully subside. The lesson from this pandemic is that humans will have to innovate to live with

and reduce the risk from the inevitable future contagion.

There are many opportunities to do so in tiger reserves, now, with a receding second wave. Non-invasive, bio-safe protocols could be set up quickly for species monitoring and wildlife surveillance. The threat of zoonoses from stray cattle and feral dogs near the reserves is already real. Spillover dynamics could be better understood and widely communicated. Early warning systems could be designed for rapid action to prevent spread if any wild animal died from Covid-19. India has many competent environmental research organisations that, given half a chance, would enthusiastically assist in all these endeavours.

States could quickly launch such scientific research and prevention measures and decide whether their parks are safe to open. Sometimes, a blanket ban does more harm than good, as people globally have realised during this pandemic.

Decentralised, science-based decision-making could flip the narrative from fear to hope, from the illusion of control to the possibility of resilience. It is also a creative opportunity to invite citizens back into our reserves not just as tourists, but as trustees of our rich biodiversity.

This article first appeared in the print edition on June 14, 2021 under the title 'Don't let covid eclipse the tiger'. The writer is chairperson, Arghyam, a

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