

# Beyond Conflict vs Coexistence: Human-Tiger Relations in Idu Mishmi Land

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The breathtaking landscape of Diband Valley

As you drive into Diband Valley in Arunachal Pradesh, you can't help but be consumed by the scale and depth of its greenness. It stretches relentlessly – from its summit of rock and ice to the glistening depths of the Dibang river beneath. The landscape is at once ominous and hopeful. This formidable greenness hides many secrets. Here, tigers, clouded leopards, and Asiatic wild dogs prowl the mountains, preying on both flesh and spirit. Semi-domesticated gaur (mithun) and Mishmi takin, furrier renditions of the African wildebeest, stand proud atop



Mithun, the semi-domesticated gaur, is a precious animal for the Idu Mishmi of Diband Valley

mountain precipices, staring down the clouds. This is the traditional homeland of the Idu Mishmi people. Here, Idu shamans (priests) fly treacherously over sky-high peaks to journey into the land of the spirits. Diband Valley also guards a beautiful, complex, and fragile story. This is the story of the Idu-wildlife relationship that challenges the simple binaries and assumptions that underlie our understanding of the natural world. Notice the use of "relationship" as opposed to "conflict" to describe human-wildlife interactions? It is intentional as it encapsulates the true scope of interactions between the Idu and wildlife. It is intentional as it tries to course-correct decades of misguided preconceptions.

I was first introduced to Diband Valley in 2011, when I was sent there to verify unconfirmed reports of tigers. We succeeded in uncovering direct evidence of tiger presence in the foothills. But what really had me hooked were the many more tigers that the Idu told me about – those that lived high up in the mountains, those that could

mimic human and animal sounds, those that sought revenge when people killed them, and those that could think like us. I returned a year later to begin my doctoral fieldwork, studying Diband Valley's 'many' tigers and the reasons why they were there. Over the next two years (2013–15), I deployed camera traps in more than 220 locations from lowland tropical forests all the way to alpine meadows. I collected faecal samples to find out what tigers and other predators fed on. I lived with Idu families and shamans to learn Idu mythology, customs, and belief system. Over time, as I became conversant in the Idu language, I conducted hundreds of interviews to understand the local socio-economic dynamics, patterns of forest use, and ideas around tigers.

The Idu Mishmi are predominantly animists, who believe that non-humans such as animals and spirits have the same capacities of conscious decision-making as humans. They too live in families and societies. And just like us, they can tell right from wrong. The world of animists is inhabited by good





Idu elders at a local ceremony

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and bad spirits. To survive and prosper, one must ensure that these spirits are appeased with the help of a shaman, who is the only one able to communicate with the spirit and animal worlds. In Arunachal Pradesh, including Dibang Valley, land and forests are under the *de facto* ownership of the local people, unlike in the rest of the country. The Forest Department controls a meagre percentage of land. In the very north of Dibang Valley, along the Tibetan border, lies the Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (DWLS, 4,149 sq. km): eight times as big as Corbett National Park but staffed with fewer than 10 Forest Department employees.

My cameras captured an astounding diversity of animal life – 30 different species of mammals! We photocalptured 12 individual tigers, including cubs and breeding females. Eight of these tigers were found living in Idu-owned forests. I had only begun to scratch the surface, as my cameras covered less than 10% of Dibang Valley's forested mountains.

Advanced statistical analyses indicated that there could be as many as 50 adult tigers in Dibang, up to 90% of which would live in Idu-owned forests. Unlike in the rest of their range, these tigers relied on a unique prey assemblage with two species of muntjac, the Indian *Muntiacus muntjak* and Gongshan *M. gongshanensis* making up most of their diet, followed by mithun, Himalayan serow *Capricornis thar* and the Mishmi takin *Budorcas taxicolor*. In the absence of formal protection mechanisms, tigers and their prey and habitat had been protected in Dibang Valley in large part due to the Idu culture, which in turn had been safeguarded by Arunachal's Inner Line Permit, a legal instrument that prohibits settlement by non-locals.

#### Conflict, you call it?

"Ohh, so you study human-tiger conflict in Dibang Valley," is the standard response when I introduce my research topic at gatherings of ecologists and conservationists. I protest without fail, "No, I study all types of relationships between people and tigers." Why is it that conflict is how we in the conservation community frame almost all human-wildlife interactions? Since the dawn of humanity, people have cohabited with wild animals. To us, wild animals have been foes, food, predators, companions, and spirit guides. They have been both feared and revered, detested yet tolerated. Through history till the present day, even against the backdrop of the global environmental crisis, human-wildlife relationship has never been singularly that of conflict. Then why is it that conservationists deem conflict the only relationship worthy of study? Let me describe the myriad ways in which the Idu interact with and relate to the tiger. Perhaps then we can decide whether conflict is the suitable frame for this relationship.

The existence of such rich biodiversity and a population of the endangered tiger without formal government/NGO protection was a surprise to me. To the Idu, however, it was

nothing but a mundane fact of life, for they have always shared their mountain home with these wild animals. Idu children are raised on the story of ancestral brothers born to the same mother: the first, an Idu from whom all Idus descend; the second, the tiger. A disagreement resulted in man conspiring to kill his brother tiger. The creator re-birthed the tiger and sent it to the high mountains away from his brother's villages, where it lives to this day. But the willful killing of the tiger by his own brother, an act of murder that spilled the blood of one's own kin, unleashed a series of misfortunes that still plague the Idu to this day. Killing a tiger is the greatest sin. The two live separate lives, however, the tiger does occasionally descend into his human brother's villages in the lower mountains to steal his prized cattle, mithun, creating tense confrontations. Tiger killing by mithun is not mere livestock depredation; it is a re-enactment of the ancestral myth that intertwines man and tiger. It is this myth that enrages man, but despite financial, emotional, spiritual, and psychological stress, it is the same myth that prohibits immediate and violent retaliation. Livestock depredation, a definitive predictor of conflict everywhere else in India, is for the Idu a complicated matter, a symbol of continued mythological enactment.

For a common Idu, the tiger is a physical, psychological, and spiritual danger. "The threat from the tiger is so great that we don't talk about it flippantly," said an Idu elder. "If you kill it, it doesn't just seek revenge once. It keeps attacking the killer's entire family for generations. It'll make a family member commit suicide, cause epilepsy, drown you in the river, or burn down your house," he added. Most Idus wouldn't even say its name, referring to the tiger as "it" or "khinu" (the Idu word for powerful spirits). Idu shamans are believed to be born with a tiger spirit whose powers they need in order to heal and protect people. It is the shaman (through his spirit-tiger) who brings children

into the world, hence making them 'Idu', and lays the dead to rest. Even though the Idu are modernizing rapidly, shamans still hold a key position in their society. The Idu need the shaman, the shaman in turn depends on the tiger.

Those who have had close physical encounters with tigers often speak of the animal's great powers. They speak of its guile and how it thinks like us. Many of these same people for whom the tiger is a grave spiritual danger, also argue that it should live in Dibang Valley since "that's how the world has always been". For the Idu, the tiger is many things. It is a wild animal that kills mithun, the mythical brother who must not be killed (yet again), a spiritual danger, and the shaman. These different 'tigers' exist together, neither in perpetual peace nor in conflict. Often, they are indistinguishable. Like any other, the Idu-tiger relationship is speckled with episodes of conflict amidst fear, indifference, and dependence. This relationship cannot be described adequately



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Traditional Idu house





Clouded leopard



Gongshan muntjac



Himalayan serow



Himalayan monal



Mishmi takin



Tiger

through the easy binary of conflict vs coexistence. It is neither, yet it is both.

#### Conflicting ideologies, conflicting interests

This is not just the story of Dibang Valley. Across the world, both indigenous and otherwise, human relationship with wild animals is multidimensional, layered, and temporally variable. Recent research has found thriving leopard populations outside protected areas across India, some of these exist without any natural prey. Here, the conflict-like situation between people and leopards is but one of the many ways in which the two interact. The Maasai community of the Kenyan Serengeti largely views lions as integral to their lives and wants them around, despite episodes of cattle depredation and an age-old tradition of lion spearing as a rite of passage for young men. This multi-layered relationship is now the foundation of a novel Maasai-led lion conservation model.

Yes, there are antagonistic episodes, but describing a wide spectrum of human-animal relations only in terms of conflict calls for this 'conflict' to be resolved urgently. Often, it is resolved by creating new and permanent separations between people and wildlife. This separation makes the case for demarcation of spaces within which we believe animals 'should' live, and where they shouldn't. Once these artificial boundaries are drawn, they cement and make permanent what were transient spaces of negative interactions. It is these stark divisions between animal and human spaces that justify radical restructuring, such as the plans to build 17 mega hydropower dams in Dibang Valley. The same divisions are being used to force the 'Idu tiger' to become the 'Indian tiger' through the proposed conversion of DWLS into a tiger reserve. If and when DWLS is declared a tiger reserve, it will surely exclude Idus from their ancestral land, but it is unlikely to keep the tigers in or from occasionally preying upon mithun. However, instead of Idu culture and

shamans mediating temporary episodes of conflict between people and tigers, the Forest Department will be held responsible. This will, at best, convert the Idu-tiger relationship into a monetary transaction via ill-designed compensation programmes. At worst, it will create perpetual enmity, conflict between Idu and tigers which the culture is no longer able to encompass and explain.

Generations of wildlife researchers and practitioners have been trained in flawed assumptions whereby most would immediately and indiscriminately term the mere existence of wildlife, particularly large predators, outside protected areas as conflict. Yes, there are situations where interactions between people and wildlife are predominantly negative for both. In such situations, separating the two may be the only option. However, in most cases, what is typically labelled human-wildlife conflict, which in essence makes people and animals conscious combatants against each other, is in reality 'human-human' conflict. That is, when two or more parties – those holding pro-wildlife positions and those defending other positions favouring people and/or developmental interests – attempt to assert their interests at the expense of the other. It is an ideological conflict over how wildlife and the relationship with it is conceptualized; over who protects it and where.

Until we are open to understanding both the human and the animal story, we will continue to simplify and misunderstand their relationship. We will continue to let 'conflict' obfuscate a spectrum of interactions. And we will continue to believe in the myth of either permanent conflict or romanticized coexistence.



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