

THESIS SUMMARY

My PhD thesis focuses on the relations between humans and nature in the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh (Northeast India). This study problematizes the notion of nature and highlights the contradictions of trying to understand nature. Nature is often seen as existing in opposition to humans and this belief has resulted in the formulation of conservation laws and policies. Nature has been understood differently by different groups of people and thus there is no 'one understanding of nature'. My thesis seeks to understand how nature conservation projects are undertaken when nature is understood in different ways. I examine the ways that local people's views of nature are different or similar to the views of the state, NGOs and science. Examining this is the core of my thesis. I use animals as a metaphor for nature and the thesis focuses on Mishmi-animal relations using the case of tiger conservation.

After the discovery and rescue of several tiger cubs in 2012, who were orphaned when a tiger was killed by a local hunter trying to protect his village, the Government of India carried out tiger survey projects in the borderlands of Dibang Valley in 2012-13. Tigers as the national animal of India, and a highly endangered species, are given top priority when it comes to wildlife conservation. The local Mishmi people had mixed feelings about the research in Dibang Valley, and have not responded very positively to researchers, NGOs and the forest department. The anxieties of the local Mishmis were exacerbated by fears that the proposal of declaring the existing Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary to a Tiger Reserve means increase in state presence, which would restrict their access to forest resources and wildlife hunting. Mishmi claim that tigers are their elder brothers and that killing of tigers is an act of homicide. Therefore, they take pride in their indigenous taboos against hunting and take credit for conserving local wildlife. While hunting tigers is a taboo, Mishmi undertake trips to the Sino-Indian border for musk deer hunting to trade musk pods that have high market value. The increasing presence of forest department and NGOs following the tiger cubs rescue is a concern for the Mishmi who feel that their hunting trips will be curtailed. Mishmis claim that their hunting trips keep a check on Chinese incursions into India's territory and therefore justify their dual role as 'hunters and border patrollers'.

I argue that like other natural resource management projects, tiger conservation is an institutionalized way to control resources and people's access to those resources. The role of science combined with the state's bureaucratic governance of natural resources has produced simplified versions of nature. The multiple local meanings of nature should not be reduced to an understanding of nature that sees it as a mere 'resource' to be protected.

Making an anthropological enquiry, I use ethnography as my principal method. I spent a year in Arunachal Pradesh (Anini, Roing, Itanagar) for my fieldwork. My methodological approaches included doing in-depth interviews with the residents of Dibang valley, NGOs, scientists and foresters and carrying out participant observations in the Mishmi villages and with tiger research teams. Ultimately I argue, that for successful conservation to take place the biological scientists and various state departments must work together with social scientists and local communities to find the best way to collaborate on conservation of biodiversity.