

LETTER FROM THE CONSERVATION FRONTLINE OPEN ACCESS

Helping People Live Alongside Tigers (*Panthera tigris*): The Role of Social Science

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In February 2026, India announced the first-ever International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) Summit, to take place later this year. The goal is to form an alliance of 95 countries for the conservation of seven big cat species through collaboration and learning. The case of tigers (*Panthera tigris*) is exemplary of how a species on the brink of extinction can recover through international commitment and sustained conservation effort. A significant recovery in global tiger populations was achieved by 2022 through coordinated work by the 13 tiger range countries. India and Nepal played pivotal roles in this recovery by doubling their tiger populations and currently support over 72% of the global tiger population. We propose that the frontline experiences of these countries can inform a framework for the collaborative efforts initiated by the Global Big Cat Summit.

While tiger recovery is remarkable, an associated increase in human-tiger conflicts is jeopardizing long-term conservation goals. Tiger attacks are consequential, not only resulting in human injury or death, but also causing psychological stress and economic impacts on victims' families. As a result, fear and anger are mounting in local communities, fetching notable political attention. In Nepal, 245 people were attacked by tigers between 2010 and 2024 (Dhakal et al. 2026). In December 2024, then Prime Minister K. P. Sharma Oli, responding to increasing public outcry, claimed that of the current estimated population of 355, "150 tigers in Nepal were enough," sparking fierce reactions from conservation groups. In February 2026, hundreds of people protested separately in Banke and Bardia National Parks after fatal attacks by a tiger and a leopard (*Panthera pardus*), respectively. Conserving any species without the support of local communities and politicians is challenging and perhaps ill-fated.

In contrast, many conservationists in Nepal had emphasized understanding the ecological carrying capacity (ECC) for better planning of tiger conservation. A recent ECC study by Shah et al. (2024) showed that Bardia and Banke National Parks can support more tigers than the current numbers, raising an important question of how to achieve tiger conservation goals when communities and political sentiment are starkly opposed. Promoting community incentives for conservation is considered one of many possible strategies to encourage tolerance (Salerno et al. 2021). Nepal is among the first countries to share 30%–50% of park revenue with local communities through Buffer Zone User Committees (BZUCs). But despite the program running for decades, evidence suggests that BZUCs can be poorly equipped to handle conflict with carnivores (Lamichhane et al. 2019). Given this unique challenge, we aim to share perspectives on addressing this problem and stir discussion around the issue.

In South Asia's crowded landscapes, people and tigers are forced to share space. The implication is that people will experience varying degrees of interactions with tigers, and therefore, varying exposure to risks. Adopting human behaviors that are less risky remains crucial. However, people tend to display optimism bias, believing that attacks are infrequent and that they are unlikely to be a victim. Exposure to risks can be increased by economic hardship: for example, laborers working in sugarcane fields in Uttar Pradesh, India, or individuals collecting non-timber products from forests in Nepal face greater risk of tiger attack by the nature of their livelihoods. Therefore, conflict mitigation should address these complex socio-ecological dynamics by identifying and tackling the conditions that compel humans to engage in activities laden with risk.

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Behavior change programs are already seen as a solution to promote risk reduction, but caution is warranted such that these programs must go beyond routine awareness raising efforts. For instance, Bagh Mitras (Friends of Tiger), a community-based volunteer program in Uttar Pradesh, India, monitors tiger presence in farmlands and settlements and works together with the Forest Department and local communities to communicate risks. By using the information shared by Bagh Mitras, the Forest Department is better equipped to assess risk and severity of specific situations and initiate timely mitigation actions (Mann Ki Baat 2024). This model could be replicated in Nepal to build community-based risk mitigation. Efforts in Uttar Pradesh, however, must go further to incentivize conservation-friendly, low-risk behaviors that will support vulnerable livelihoods while reducing the likelihood of conflict with tigers. Co-production approaches can help identify locally suited incentives along with gaps in knowledge for community-based research to fill (Chambers et al. 2021).

Gathering forest resources and livestock grazing are among the riskiest behaviors in Nepal but remain essential for many households. Honey production and other entrepreneurial activities that reduce time spent in tiger habitats could offer potential solutions. For example, Bonphool Natural Mangrove Honey, produced by the *moulis* community through a honey cooperative initiated by Sundarbans Biosphere Reserve and WWF-India, a human-tiger conflict hotspot, is an example of achieving risk reduction through alternate viable livelihoods (WWF India 2026). Research development to design and promote tools for mechanical harvesting of sugarcane could significantly reduce risks as exposure is high during harvest seasons. By pairing livelihood support with knowledge of how to reduce risk, conservation efforts can begin to limit conflicts.

The role of human values is underutilized in tiger conservation. The assumption that values are stable across time, situation, and context—like people maintaining fixed supportive vs. antagonistic feelings about tigers—may have limited their integration in practical conservation efforts. However, research in the field of psychology indicates that values are not unchangeable (Otto and Kaiser 2014; Schuster et al. 2019). Therefore, carnivore research should prioritize understanding the extent to which values can be shaped by interventions. Mutualistic values prevail in India and Nepal owing to religious, cultural, and Indigenous worldviews. How these values shape responses to conflict, and how conflicts may induce shifts in these value orientations, have not been adequately explored. This knowledge can help conservationists productively engage religious and cultural institutions in tolerance building and risk reduction efforts. Furthermore, research indicates that values are initially formed in childhood and early teenage years (Bubeck and Bilsky 2004), implying that nurturing mutualistic values in young people today will shape the future of tigers in the shared landscapes. Locally based, grassroots conservation is best equipped to support such value shifts in communities.

Building tolerance and resilience together with local communities has been conceptualized as a pathway to reduce human-carnivore conflict (Carter and Linnell 2023; Carter et al. 2026). While such conceptualization is meaningful, further research in the tiger range states, and particularly within the agricultural landscapes harboring the majority of conflicts, is needed to identify the processes through which tolerance and resilience

can be best supported. This will require partnership between communities and managers, with attention to the interplay among individual attitudes and behaviors, local institutions, and governance processes.

Formidable efforts such as the International Big Cat Alliance in India and the human-wildlife coexistence project (started in February 2026) of the Ministry of Forests & Environment in Nepal are notable examples of human-centered coexistence work. Furthermore, the Bagh Mitra program in India (Mann Ki Baat 2024) could serve as a model to reduce risks of human-carnivore conflict, coupled with livelihood support. We believe these initiatives should be used to bring focus at a national level to the integration of livelihoods, values, and other social processes in conservation work to promote human-carnivore coexistence.

Author Contributions

A.B. and J.S. conceptualized the research idea, and prepared the original draft of the manuscript. A.B., R.W., and J.S. contributed equally in review, editing and revision of the manuscript.

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