

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Belief and the beast: Religion and attitudes towards tigers in Central India

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Abstract

1. Human perceptions of wildlife are critical to shaping conservation outcomes, particularly in landscapes where people coexist with large carnivores. Religion, a deeply rooted sociocultural force, remains underexplored in the context of human–wildlife conflict.
2. This study examines how faith-based belief systems influence attitudes and tolerance towards tigers (*Panthera tigris*) in the surrounding area of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, central India—where tigers are both culturally significant and frequently implicated in life-threatening conflict.
3. Using structured surveys conducted across 17 villages, we effectively applied the four-compartment Wildlife Value Orientation (WVO) typology in this context, with classification predicting attitudes.
4. Religiosity was positively linked to Mutualist WVOs—characterised by empathy and care for wildlife. Belief in divine protection (i.e. the idea that a divine being protects individuals and their cattle from tiger attacks) showed a novel dual effect: it reduced perceived risk while simultaneously increasing engagement in active risk mitigation.
5. This study explores the relationship between divine protection and wildlife risk perception and is the first in central India to incorporate religion as a variable influencing attitudes towards a high-conflict species using a quantitative methodology. These novel results reinforce the growing realisation that effective wildlife conservation cannot take place within a social vacuum.

KEYWORDS

conservation, faith traditions, human–wildlife coexistence, human–wildlife conflict, religion

1 | INTRODUCTION

1.1 | Background

Human–wildlife conflict arises when humans and wildlife compete over limited resources such as space and food. Large carnivores,

especially felids, are particularly prone to conflict due to their wide-ranging behaviour, which often leads them outside protected areas (Dickman, 2010; Inskip & Zimmermann, 2009; Sillero-Zubiri & Laurenson, 2001). In India, conflict between humans and tigers (*Panthera tigris*) is widespread and is heightened by dense human populations encroaching on shrinking tiger habitats (Jhala

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et al., 2025). Despite supporting 50% of the global tiger population within just 11% of its global habitat (Jhala et al., 2021, 2025; Qureshi et al., 2023), India faces increasing human–wildlife conflict as tigers prey on livestock and occasionally attack humans, sometimes fatally (Dertien et al., 2023; Dhanwatey et al., 2013; Lubis et al., 2020). These events often provoke retaliatory killings and reduce public support for tiger conservation.

With 35% of India's tigers living outside Nature reserves, conflict is especially acute in human-dominated landscapes, including buffer zones of protected areas (Dertien et al., 2023; Jhala et al., 2019). This is evident in Maharashtra's Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (hereafter Tadoba), where 132 carnivore attacks on humans were recorded during 2005–2011, over half of them fatal, with tigers responsible for 78% (Dhanwatey et al., 2013). Though human–tiger coexistence has historical roots in Tadoba, rising conflict has worsened attitudes towards tigers (Goodrich, 2010; Li et al., 2022; Patel, 2019). Conservation of endangered carnivores such as tigers increasingly hinges on fostering tolerance among local communities, which is shaped by values, beliefs and perceptions (Liordos et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2020).

Wildlife Value Orientations (WVOs) describe the ways people conceptualise and prioritise wildlife, grounded in basic belief patterns (Fulton et al., 1996). Situated at the base of the cognitive hierarchy (i.e. a psychological model that states that values and beliefs on a subject translate into attitudes and behaviours in a hierarchical and subsequential manner), WVOs are deeply linked to attitudes and behaviours towards wildlife (Vaske & Donnelly, 1999; Manfredo et al., 2009, 2021). Traditionally modelled as a continuum from Domination (wildlife used for human benefit) to Mutualism (wildlife deserving of care and moral consideration), WVOs have more recently been divided into four types: Mutualist, Traditionalist, Pluralist and Distanced—see Figure 1. Mutualists view wild animals as an extension of their social families and believe that animals are deserving of rights. Traditionalists have a consumptive view and believe that wildlife should be managed. Pluralists possess both value orientations and their views are situational. Distanced individuals lack a strong interest in wildlife (Keener-Eck et al., 2019; Teel & Manfredo, 2010). These orientations often correlate with demographic patterns: studies in Europe suggest that young women tend to be more mutualistic, while older men often hold more domination-oriented views (Gamborg & Jensen, 2016a, 2016b; Liordos et al., 2021, 2023; Teel & Manfredo, 2010).

Religion is another important yet understudied influence on WVOs (Yeshey et al., 2023). Defined as 'an institutionalized set of beliefs and practices' (Ver Beek, 2000), religion influences perceptions through cognitive associations between concepts and values (Coleman III et al., 2018). Religious belief tends to vary by age and gender, with older individuals and women typically more religious (Zimmer et al., 2016; Hackett et al., 2016). Increasingly recognised as a significant motivator for nature conservation (Gosler et al., 2013), religion shapes interactions with wildlife—ranging from species-specific reverence to habitat protection (Borde et al., 2023). Dandy (2005), building on Kellert's Biophilia typology (1993),

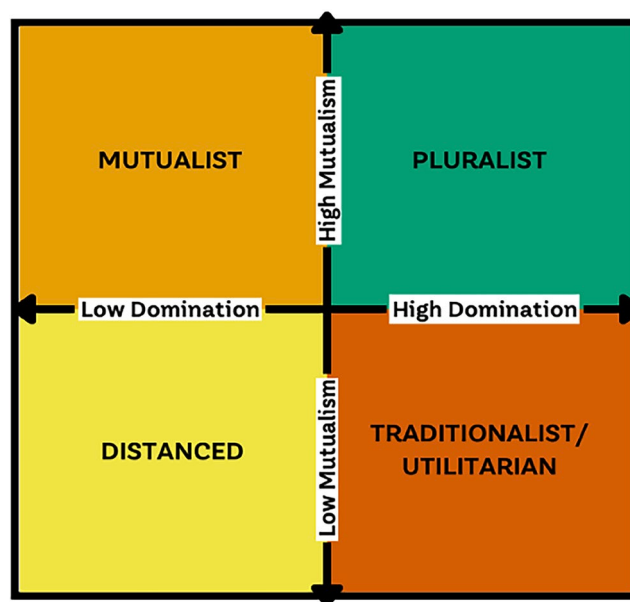


FIGURE 1 The Wildlife Value Orientation (WVO) typology four-compartment model. Typology is determined by scores on Mutualism and Domination orientations such that Mutualist (high Mutualism, low Domination), Pluralist (high Mutualism, high Domination), Traditionalist or Utilitarian (low Mutualism, high Domination) and Distanced (low Mutualism, low Domination). Figure inspired by Landon et al. (2019).

introduced Sacred WVOs, which capture spiritual or religious relationships with wildlife. This framework highlights the potential of religious values to inform attitudes towards wildlife conservation.

Mitigation of human–wildlife conflict requires an understanding of people's attitudes towards wildlife which, in turn, necessitates an understanding of people's values regarding wildlife. With growing recognition that local communities are integral to the success of conservation efforts, it is even more valuable to understand how religion can influence wildlife conservation decisions (McLeod & Palmer, 2015; Borde et al., 2023). This is especially important in biodiverse, culturally rich, conflict-prone regions like Chandrapur (Nair et al., 2021). Taken together, we sought to explore how WVOs and religion can shape the attitudes and perceptions of people towards tigers and, subsequently, conflict in Tadoba (Bhagwat et al., 2011; Yeshey et al., 2023; Struebig et al., 2018).

To address human–tiger conflicts effectively, understanding the sociocultural dimensions of coexistence is essential. By conducting questionnaire surveys across western Tadoba, the overarching aim of our study was to understand how faith systems impacted people's attitudes towards tigers in central India.

We evaluated the applicability of the four-compartment WVO typology in Tadoba and its association with sociodemographic factors and attitudes towards tigers. This involved categorising respondents within the WVO framework, examining whether women and older individuals were more likely to exhibit Mutualist WVOs, and investigating whether stronger religious beliefs were associated with Mutualism-directed WVOs. Furthermore, we assessed whether

respondents with Mutualist WVOs expressed more positive attitudes towards tigers than did those with Domination-based WVOs. We analysed the influence of belief in divine protection and WVO typology on people's risk perception of tigers, where belief in divine protection is the idea that a divine being, that is, God, protect/s individuals and their livestock from tiger attacks. We explored whether belief in divine protection was associated with lower perceived risk (both affective—worry of attack—and cognitive—likelihood of attack), as well as a reduced perception of risk mitigation. We also examined whether Mutualist-directed WVOs were associated with more optimistic perceptions of tiger-related risks. We use the results of our study to highlight the role of religion in the mitigation of human–tiger conflict and promotion of coexistence.

2 | METHODOLOGY

2.1 | Study site

The Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve is the oldest and largest tiger reserve in Chandrapur district of Maharashtra. The reserve is primarily composed of southern tropical dry deciduous forest interspersed with grasslands, bamboo thickets and water bodies, and supports rich biodiversity (Nagendra et al., 2006; Paliwal & Mathur, 2014). In addition to its keystone species—the Bengal tiger—Tadoba is home to over 40 mammal species, nearly 200 bird species, and a diverse assemblage of invertebrates (Ghate, 2003; Khawarey & Karnat, 1997). Surrounding the core is a buffer zone which represents 64% of the tiger reserve and contains 79 villages, agricultural land and tourism infrastructure (Bayani & Dandekar, 2017; Dhanwatey et al., 2013; Nagendra et al., 2010). Buffer zones are areas where land use is partially restricted to ensure the maintenance of ecological integrity while providing benefits to local people (Lamichhane et al., 2019).

Local communities have coexisted with the forest and its wildlife for centuries. The name 'Tadoba' derives from Lord Taru Dev, a deity of the Gond tribe believed to have been killed by a tiger in a mythological encounter. A temple dedicated to him remains an important site of worship (Patel, 2019). This cultural narrative underscores the symbolic significance of tigers in the region. Today, tiger statues (Waghoba) are erected at sites of tiger-inflicted mortalities, where people continue to offer prayers and worship (see Figure 2) (Athreya et al., 2013; Nair et al., 2021). The Gond are one of India's largest Indigenous (Adivasi) communities, primarily residing in the central Indian states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Maharashtra. Their traditional belief system is rooted in animism and Nature worship, in which elements of the natural world—including forests, rivers, mountains and animals—are regarded as spiritually significant. Over time, these Indigenous beliefs have become intertwined with aspects of Hinduism, and many Gond communities today practise a syncretic religion that incorporates both local deities and Hindu gods (Chaubey et al., 2018). Many Gond people also believe in an overarching divine spiritual presence (*Bhagavan*, meaning 'God')



FIGURE 2 A Waghoba (shown here as a statue) erected on the road to Moharli village demarcating a human fatality caused by a tiger. This serves as both a poignant reflection of the high levels of human–tiger conflict, but also a reminder of the intrinsic cultural connection the people of Tadoba have with the Wagh (tiger).

that is expressed through the natural world and deities. These deities are drawn from both localised traditions and the broader Hindu pantheon. Given the omnipresent nature of *Bhagavan*, many Gond people believe that this higher, supreme power actively guards and protects individuals—this providential power is known as divine protection (Braswell & Dunn, 2024; Kupor et al., 2015). In this region, totemism is widespread, with many families identifying with a particular animal or plant as their clan totem. The tiger (*Wagh*), for example, is an important totem for some Gond families and is regarded as a symbol of ancestral, spiritual and cultural significance (Goswami, 2018). These religious and cultural beliefs can shape how people perceive and tolerate tigers, influencing local responses to human–tiger interactions and conflict (Dudhapachare, 2015; Patel, 2019).

2.2 | Questionnaire

We administered a questionnaire to 134 consenting adults (aged 18+) in 17 villages in the buffer of Tadoba (see Figure 3). Participants were selected via targeted sampling and snowball sampling. An employee of the Tiger Research and Conservation Trust (TRACT) familiar with the area and experienced in survey data collection here identified villages, and households within these villages, previously receptive to other TRACT-administered questionnaires. From these targeted households, that is, the initial seed samples, individuals recruited future participants

from their own social networks. A balanced gender and mixed age representation was chosen to investigate potential gendered and age-based differences in WVO typologies and attitudes towards tigers. Recruitment was monitored throughout the data collection period to achieve a balanced representation of men and women, as well as a broad distribution of age groups. Participant characteristics were recorded and updated continuously, allowing the research team to track the demographic composition of the sample in real time. This information was used to guide subsequent recruitment efforts.

Collaboration with the TRACT and pilot testing was conducted to ensure internal validity of the survey measures. We developed a



FIGURE 3 A map showing the 17 sampled villages on the western side of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, located in the Chandrapur District of Maharashtra, central India. The map inset shows the position of the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve within India. Satellite map made using Google Earth.

27-question structured survey, which was designed to record religious beliefs, attitudes towards tigers, perceptions of tiger-related risks and WVOs (full questionnaire available in Supporting Information).

Participants were presented with eight statements—four representing Mutualism WVO dimensions and four for Domination WVO dimensions (see Table 1). Respondents were asked to indicate their response on a 4-point bipolar Likert scale, ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. Answers to other questions—exploring religious beliefs, Sacred WVOs, belief in divine protection, attitudes towards and perceptions of tigers—were also recorded on the same 4-point bipolar Likert scale. One of the questions related to attitudes ('Tigers are a nuisance'), was negatively coded to correct for directionality (i.e. higher scores reflect positive attitudes). Risk perception questions were on a 3-level unipolar nominal scale (i.e. none, somewhat, very) (Carter et al., 2012; Inskip et al., 2016).

Interviews were carried out in the local language (Marathi) by the same interpreter (a TRACT employee) at each respondent's residence with the principal investigator present. Interviews lasted around 10–20 min. Participants were pseudonymised using a number ID to maintain anonymity. As a researcher external to the community, I (SK) remained aware of how my background, identity and academic framing could shape the interview process and interpretation of responses. Efforts were made to minimise bias through careful question design, local collaboration and continuous self-reflection during fieldwork (Newing, 2011). Consent, data storage and data collection protocols were followed. Prior to participation, all respondents were informed about the purpose of the study, what their participation would involve and how the data would be used. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any point during the interview, and that no personally identifying information, including names, would be recorded. Verbal rather than written consent was obtained to ensure that the consent process was accessible to participants with varying levels of literacy and could be communicated clearly in the local language. The project's methods were subject to assessment by the University of Oxford's Research

TABLE 1 Mutualism is split into two sub-dimensions, Social Affiliation and Caring, with two statements for each sub-dimension.

Mutualism			
Social Affiliation 		Caring 	
<i>'Tigers have the right to live freely in their natural habitat, just as we do'.</i>	<i>'Tigers are like my family, and I want to protect them'</i>	<i>'I feel a strong emotional bond with tigers'</i>	<i>'We should protect tigers even if it requires us to adapt our practices to live alongside them peacefully'.</i>
Domination			
Appropriate Use 		Hunting 	
<i>'Tigers should be controlled or managed to ensure they do not interfere with human activities or resources'.</i>	<i>'Human needs and safety should always take precedence over the conservation of tigers'.</i>	<i>'Tigers are dangerous animals, and if they harm our livestock or threaten our safety, it is justified to kill them'.</i>	<i>'Hunting tigers is cruel and inhumane'*</i>

Note: For Domination, the two sub-dimensions are Appropriate Use and Hunting, with two statements for each. For the statement 'Hunting tigers is cruel and inhumane', the scoring was negatively coded to account for directionality (indicated by the "**").

Ethics Committee (Ethics ID: R95719/RE001) and were approved prior to fieldwork commencing.

2.3 | Data analysis

All quantitative and statistical analyses were executed using R Studio (R version 4.3.3) and Excel. We used reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha, α ; Cortina, 1993) to confirm the validity of the sub-dimensions grouped into Mutualism or Domination WVO components. A conventional threshold of 0.7 was used to ensure internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). Domination and Mutualism WVO scores were then derived by calculating the mean of the two mean scores for the two sub-dimension statements. The scores were used to categorise respondents within the four-compartment framework. A scale midpoint of 2.5 was used such that individual scores were classified as high or low based on their relationship to the scale midpoint of 2.5 ('low' $\leq 2.5 < \text{'high'}$) (Keener-Eck et al., 2019; Teel & Manfredo, 2010). People aged 35, roughly the median age or below were classified as 'younger', while those older than 35 were classified as 'older' ('younger' $\leq 35 < \text{'older'}$).

To explore the relationship between attitudes and WVO typology, we applied generalised linear mixed models (GLMMs) using the original Attitudes Score as the response. However, diagnostic checks again indicated overdispersion and non-normal residuals (Hartig, 2024). To correct for right-skew and heteroscedasticity, we log-transformed the response variable. Given the normal distribution of the log-transformed Attitude Score, a linear mixed-effects model (LMM) was used instead, using the *lmer()* function from the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015). The LMM showed substantially improved residual behaviour, better meeting assumptions of normality and homoscedasticity. In all models, village was included as a random intercept to account for spatial clustering and the hierarchical structure of data collection.

To assess whether religious beliefs were associated with WVO typologies, we employed a multinomial logistic regression model using the *multinom()* function from the *nnet* package in R (Ripley, 2025). This method is appropriate when the outcome variable is categorical with more than two levels—in this case, WVO Typology—and allows estimation of the probability of an individual belonging to each category relative to a reference group. The model included Religious Beliefs Score as the predictor variable.

Associations between variables were assessed using Fisher's exact tests, as more than 20% of expected cell counts were below 5, violating the assumptions of the chi-squared test (McHugh, 2013). Specifically for sociodemographic factors (gender and age) and WVO typology; and views on active risk mitigation (i.e. classified as either optimistic or pessimistic based on a composite score threshold) and WVO typology (Kim, 2017). Potential for Conflict Index 2 (PCI2) is a descriptive statistical tool developed within the field of human dimensions of wildlife to quantify the degree of agreement or disagreement among respondents (i.e. consensus) on a given variable of interest. The index ranges from 0 to 1, where values close to

0 indicate a high level of consensus among respondents, and values close to 1 indicate a greater potential for conflict, reflecting more polarised or divergent opinions. In this study, PCI2 was used to visually assess the potential for conflict (and consensus) among the different WVO types related to attitudes towards tigers. In the visualisation, the degree of consensus is illustrated using bubbles, where bubble size represents the PCI2 value and, consequently, the potential for conflict. Smaller bubbles indicate greater consensus (i.e. lower potential for conflict), whereas larger bubbles indicate greater disagreement (i.e. higher potential for conflict). The vertical position of each bubble represents the mean response on the 5-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Bubbles positioned towards the top of the axis indicate stronger agreement with the statement, while those towards the bottom indicate stronger disagreement; bubbles located near the midpoint reflect more neutral responses. By simultaneously displaying the average response and the degree of consensus, PCI2 visualisations enable the identification of demographic groups with both divergent attitudes and high levels of disagreement, thereby highlighting potential demographic conflict hotspots (Vaske et al., 2010; Engel et al., 2017; Waldo et al., 2020). Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the relationship between belief in divine protection and views on risk (specifically risk perception and active risk reduction).

3 | RESULTS

Approximately 64.7% ($n=44$) of women were classified as Mutualist, compared to 69.7% ($n=46$) of men. Among women, 14.7% ($n=10$) were classified as Traditionalist and the same for Pluralist, while 5.9% ($n=4$) fell into the Distanced category. In contrast, 13.6% ($n=9$) of men were Traditionalists, 15.2% ($n=10$) were Pluralists and 1.5% ($n=1$) were Distanced. The test revealed no significant association between gender and WVO typology ($p=0.660$). This indicates that the distribution of WVO types does not significantly differ between male and female respondents in the sample (see Figure S1).

Among respondents categorised as 'younger', 74.1% ($n=40$) were Mutualists, compared to 62.5% ($n=50$) of those in the 'older' group. A higher proportion of older respondents (18.8%, $n=15$) were classified as Traditionalists, compared to 7.4% ($n=4$) of younger respondents. Pluralists made up 13.8% ($n=11$) of the older group and 16.7% ($n=9$) of the younger group. Finally, 5.0% ($n=4$) of older people and 1.9% ($n=1$) of younger people were Distanced. A Fisher's exact test showed no statistically significant association between age and WVO typology ($p=0.212$). These results suggest that WVO typology distribution does not differ systematically across age groups (i.e. older vs. younger) in this sample (see Figure S2).

A multinomial logistic regression revealed that higher religious belief scores were significantly associated with lower odds of being classified as Traditionalist ($\beta=-0.85$, $SE=0.37$, $p=0.022^*$) or Pluralist ($\beta=-0.91$, $SE=0.36$, $p=0.012^*$) compared to Mutualist. These negative coefficients suggest that individuals with stronger religious beliefs were more likely to hold Mutualist orientations than

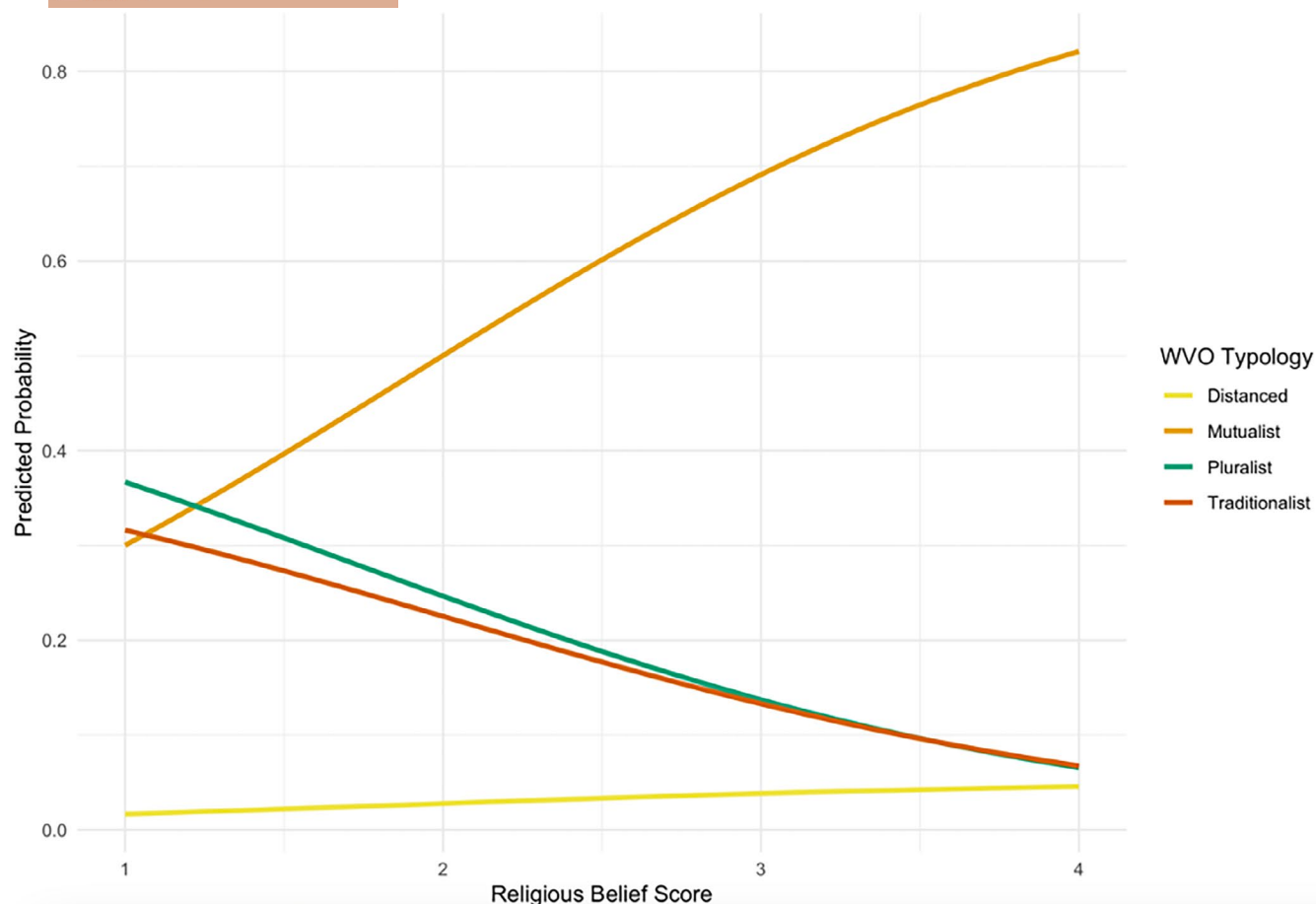


FIGURE 4 Predicted probability of Wildlife Value Orientation (WVO) typologies across religious belief scores for respondents interviewed in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve and buffer areas. Higher religious belief scores are associated with an increased probability of being classified as a Mutualist and decreased probabilities of being Pluralist or Traditionalist.

either Traditionalist or Pluralist ones. The relationship between religious beliefs and the Distanced typology was not statistically significant ($p \approx 1$), likely due to the small number of respondents in this category. The visualisation (Figure 4) reinforces the regression findings: higher religious belief is strongly associated with a greater likelihood of holding Mutualist WVOs, while those with lower religious belief scores are more evenly distributed across Traditionalist and Pluralist categories. As religious belief increases, the probability of being classified as a Mutualist rises sharply, becoming the dominant typology among individuals with stronger religious beliefs ($p > 0.8$ at the highest belief levels). The clear divergence in trend lines shows that religious belief is a significant predictor of WVO typology.

A linear mixed-effects model revealed that WVO typology, determined by classification from sub-dimension statements, was a significant predictor of attitudes, metricised by a separate set of purely attitudinal statements. Compared to individuals classified as Mutualists (reference category), those classified as Traditionalist had significantly lower log-transformed Attitudes Scores (Estimate = -0.560 , $SE = 0.045$, $t = -12.34$); Pluralist also had lower scores (Estimate = -0.108 , $SE = 0.044$, $t = -2.44$); and Distanced individuals similarly showed lower scores (Estimate = -0.173 , $SE = 0.083$, $t = -2.09$). These results indicate that, on average, individuals with

Mutualist orientations tend to hold more positive attitudes towards tigers than those with Traditionalist, Pluralist or Distanced orientations (Figure 5). This was expected as mutualistic individuals hold value orientations that influence positive attitudes, as per the cognitive hierarchy. There were also higher consensus levels (lower PCI2 values) among Mutualists than Traditionalists.

There was a moderate, statistically significant negative correlation between belief in divine protection and affective risk perception ($r = -0.318$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that individuals who more strongly believed they were divinely protected from harm tended to report lower emotional concern or fear regarding a tiger attacking them. Similarly, a weaker but still significant negative correlation was observed between belief in divine protection and cognitive risk perception ($r = -0.263$, $p = 0.002$), indicating that stronger beliefs in divine protection were also associated with lower perceived likelihood of harm from a tiger (Figure 6).

Further Pearson's correlation tests revealed statistically significant positive associations between belief in divine protection and active risk mitigation. Specifically, belief in divine protection was moderately positively correlated with the belief that these risks can be reduced through one's own actions ($r = 0.320$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, belief in divine protection was positively correlated

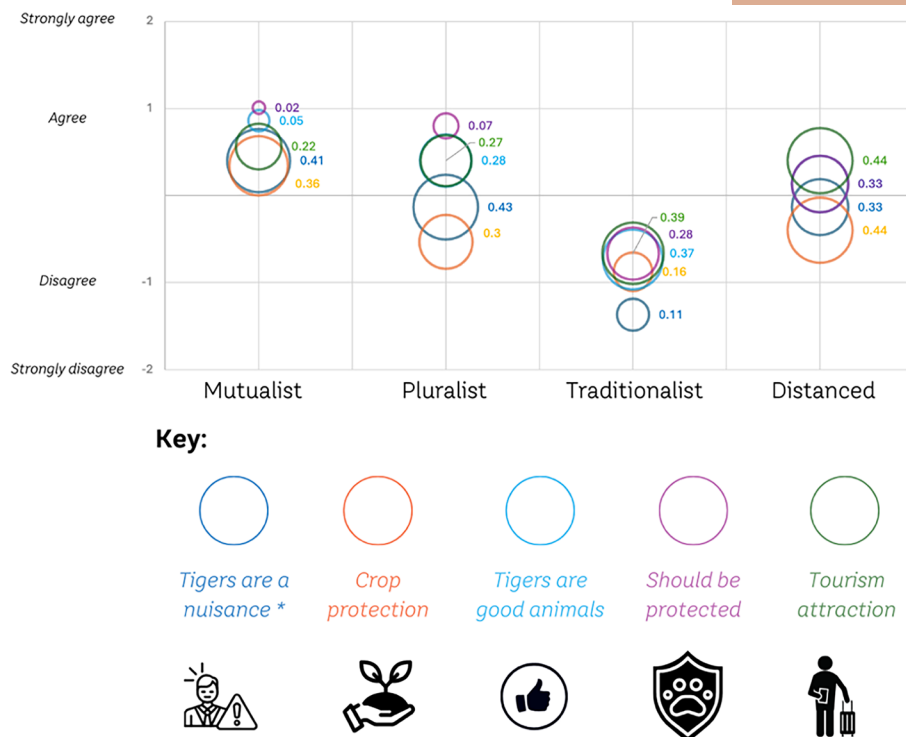
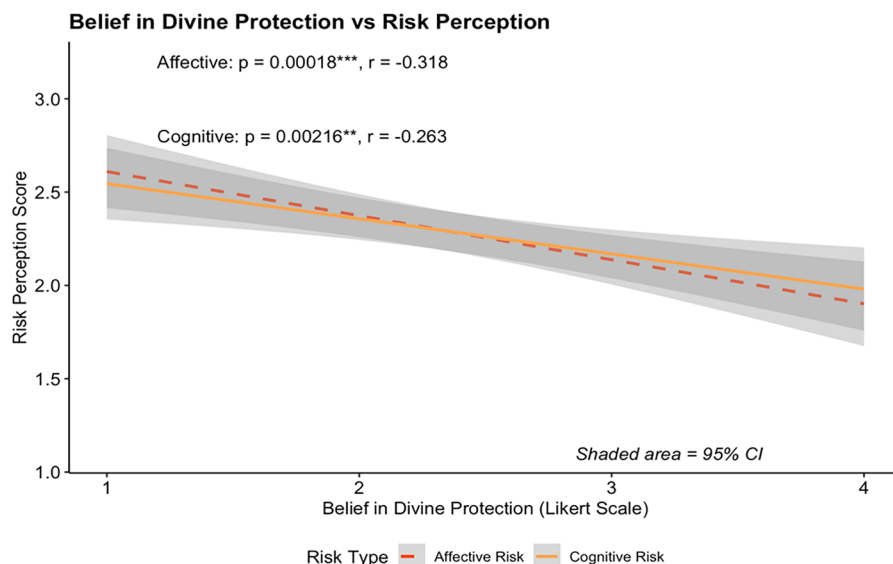


FIGURE 5 Potential for Conflict Index 2 plot (PCI2) showing differences in attitudes (from five attitude statements) among the four Wildlife Value Orientation (WVO) typologies of respondents interviewed in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve and buffer areas. In the plot, larger PCI2 values are represented by bigger bubbles. These in turn signify higher potentials for conflict (due to greater dispersion in responses) within WVO types. Position on the y-axis indicates positive or negative attitudes (i.e. higher position means more positive attitudes). Note that 'Tigers are a nuisance' was negatively coded to correct for directionality (indicated with "**").

FIGURE 6 There is a significant negative relationship between belief in divine protection and both affective and cognitive risk perception among respondents in and around Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. As belief in divine protection (i.e. the belief that God protects individuals and their livestock from tiger attacks) increases, perceived fear of and risk from tiger attacks decreases. Shaded areas represent $\pm 95\%$ confidence intervals. Asterisks (*) denote levels of statistical significance: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.



with the belief that tiger-related risks are avoidable ($r=0.219$, $p=0.011$; Figure 7).

There is a statistically significant association between WVO typology and levels of optimism in risk views ($p < 0.001$). Most Mutualists (83.3%, $n=75$) were classified as optimists (i.e. optimists think risks are avoidable and believe their actions can reduce

risks), while only 16.7% ($n=15$) were pessimists. In contrast, Traditionalists showed the reverse trend, with a larger proportion identifying as pessimists (68.4%, $n=13$) than optimists (31.6%, $n=6$). Pluralists had 70.0% ($n=14$) identifying as optimists. None of the Distanced respondents were classified as pessimists (Figure 8).

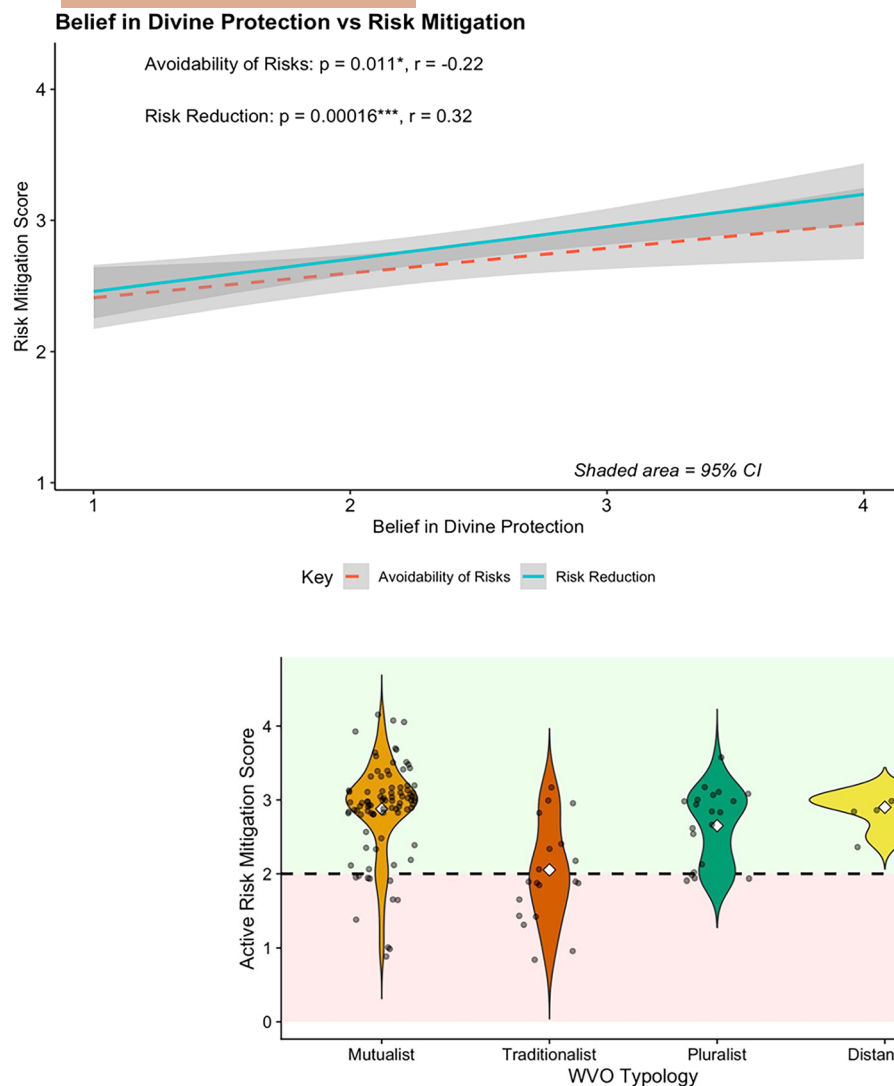


FIGURE 7 There is a significant positive relationship between belief in divine protection and both risk avoidability and risk reduction among respondents in and around Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. As belief in divine protection (i.e. the belief that God protects individuals and their livestock from tiger attacks) increases, engagement in behaviours to avoid and reduce the risk of tiger attacks also increases. Shaded areas represent $\pm 95\%$ confidence intervals. Asterisks (*) denote levels of statistical significance: $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$; $***p < 0.001$.

FIGURE 8 Distribution of active risk mitigation scores across the four Wildlife Value Orientation (WVO) typologies among respondents interviewed in and around Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. Respondents were classified as either 'optimists' or 'pessimists' based on their active risk mitigation score, with a composite score > 2 indicating an optimist (i.e. respondents who believe risks are avoidable and that their actions can reduce the likelihood of tiger conflict). Mutualists generally exhibited higher active risk mitigation scores and were more frequently classified as optimists than Traditionalists.

4 | DISCUSSION

This study explored how religious beliefs and WVOs intersect to shape human attitudes towards tigers in Tadoba. It was the first study of its methodological type in India, investigating the relationship between belief in divine protection and risk perception in a human population that interacts frequently with a wild carnivore recognised as dangerous. Individuals with higher religiosity were more likely to hold Mutualist value orientations—these, in turn, were associated with more positive attitudes towards tigers. Interestingly, belief in divine protection had a dual influence: it was negatively correlated with risk perception but positively associated with active risk-mitigation beliefs.

4.1 | The four-compartment WVO typology

The Teel and Manfredro (2010) framework and methodology was used to categorise residents adjacent to a tiger population by WVO type. WVO types were associated with attitudes towards tigers such that people with high Mutualism value orientations (i.e. Mutualists) were more likely than other WVO types to hold favourable attitudes towards tigers. This relationship has also been found for timber rattlesnakes (*Crotalus horridus*) (Keener-Eck et al., 2019), Eastern box turtles (*Terrapene carolina*) (Hartel et al., 2015) and wolves (*Canis lupus*) (Manfredro et al., 2020). This makes rational sense given that Mutualists are characterised by a care and love for wildlife and are thus expected to have more

positive attitudes towards wildlife; especially within the context of the cognitive hierarchy which states that values and value orientations (i.e. groups of related values, related to wildlife in this study) influence attitudes which underpin behavioural intentions and behaviour (Fulton et al., 1996). As such, it is logical that WVO typologies can predict attitudes.

The association between religiosity and WVO classification reflects the role of religious beliefs and practices in shaping human-wildlife interactions. While our methodology and quantitative statistical approach is novel, existing research within the Indian subcontinent has previously demonstrated the importance of local religiosity in influencing conservation attitudes, especially for high conflict species. In Odisha, an eastern state where human–elephant conflict is rife and complex, elephant worship and associated religious iconography influence people's, particularly women's, attitudes towards elephants. The elephant is considered as the *vahana*, or vehicle, of the Hindu Goddess Lakshmi, demonstrating its cultural significance in this region (Nayak & Swain, 2023). Vahana symbolism is also seen in Himachal Pradesh, a northern state, where the leopard is viewed as the vehicle for their Goddess *Devi* and is considered a protector, despite the prevalence of human–leopard conflict (Dhee Athreya et al., 2019). Bhatia and colleagues' research in Ladakh, a northern region, showed the positive relationship between attitudes towards large carnivores and religiosity in Buddhist communities (Bhatia et al., 2016). This finding aligns with the philosophies of the religion: Buddhism, and other dharmic faiths—including Hinduism, Sikhism and Jainism—have a view of interconnectedness of all beings and posit the value of *ahimsa* (path of least violence). These spiritual beliefs fit within Mutualistic-related attitudes. Our results further exemplify this philosophical connection, as increased religiosity (within the Hinduized Gond belief systems) was associated with mutualistic-orientated WVO classification. These examples, and others in the body of socio-anthropological literature, highlight the role of the relationship between religion and attitudes towards wildlife, particularly conflictual species (Oommen, 2021).

Furthermore, given these differences in attitudes towards tigers, our results showed that WVO typology was significantly associated with either optimistic or pessimistic views on tiger-related risks. Mutualists were more likely than Traditionalists to be optimists (i.e. think risks are avoidable and believe their actions can reduce risks). This novel insight aligns with the characteristics of these classifications.

Gender has been shown to influence perceptions of wildlife (Zinn & Pierce, 2002). Jafarpour and Mariapan (2014) found Malaysian men more likely than women to hold Mutualist WVOs. Although more recent studies suggested the opposite: women were increasingly found to be more mutualist-oriented than were men (Gamborg & Jensen, 2015; Manfredo & Zinn, 1996; Teel & Manfredo, 2010; Vaske et al., 2011; Liordos et al., 2023; Jacobs, 2007; Rizzolo et al., 2023). Furthermore, women are generally found to be less supportive of wildlife killing, including of large carnivores—an attitude aligned with Mutualistic

value orientations (Dougherty et al., 2003; Zinn & Pierce, 2002; Hermann et al., 2013). Age also plays a role, with younger individuals more likely to hold mutualist views than are older people (Manfredo et al., 2009; Vaske et al., 2011; Liordos et al., 2023; Gamborg & Jensen, 2015; Alba et al., 2023).

Despite evidence from the literature and role of religiosity, we found no statistically significant association between WVO typology and sociodemographic factors. This may be due to our small sample size in each age-sex category; a larger sample size may be required to address these questions with higher statistical rigour. Nonetheless, some patterns in percentage composition were notable. A greater proportion of men were classified as Mutualists compared to women, while more women were classified as Distanced. This may reflect gendered experiences of tiger conflict in Tadoba, where men are more frequently fatally attacked (Dhanwatey et al., 2013), and women, as surviving partners and household managers, may develop less empathetic views towards tigers. Age-based trends aligned with previous research: a higher percentage of older individuals were classified as Traditionalists, whereas younger respondents showed stronger Mutualist leanings. This could be attributed to increased conservation awareness, better science education and the appeal of livelihood opportunities associated with Nature-based tourism.

4.2 | Belief in divine protection and views on tiger-related risks

Our study examines the relationship between belief in divine protection and perceptions of wildlife-related risk. Prior research has shown that past experiences significantly shape risk perception, with negative encounters heightening perceived risk—for instance, with black bears (*Ursus americanus*) and pumas (*Puma concolor*) (Gore et al., 2005; Thornton & Quinn, 2010). Risk perception is commonly divided into affective (worry) and cognitive (perceived likelihood) components. Species-related beliefs can attenuate both forms, as shown for tigers in Nepal and the Sundarbans (Carter et al., 2012; Inskip et al., 2016) and for black bears (Siemer et al., 2009). However, the specific role of divine protection in wildlife contexts remains unexplored. Kupor et al. (2015) found that belief in divine protection (through reminders of God) increased risk-taking in nonmoral domains, although this was not a study of wildlife-related risk.

We hypothesised that belief in divine protection would lower both perceived risk and active mitigation behaviours. While we did find that stronger belief in divine protection was associated with lower affective and cognitive risk, contrary to expectations, it was also positively associated with active risk mitigation. This suggests that individuals may believe in divine protection while simultaneously recognising the importance of their own actions in avoiding risk. This highlights the complex, often paradoxical ways in which faith can shape human–wildlife relationships and responses to conflict, but perhaps relates to the relationship between moral and individual responsibility.

4.3 | Future perspectives and synthesis

Our work underscores the role of religious belief systems in shaping WVOs, attitudes and tolerance towards tigers in Tadoba. The findings highlight the need for conservation strategies that are culturally grounded. While many conservation interventions overlook intangible sociocultural drivers, this research demonstrates that religious narratives, spiritual worldviews and community-held values can meaningfully influence human–wildlife coexistence (Borde et al., 2023; McLeod & Palmer, 2015). Future initiatives should explore how conservation messaging and education can align with local faith-based frameworks—particularly in communities that revere tigers as sacred or symbolic (Bhatia et al., 2016). Approaches such as engaging religious leaders, conducting outreach in religious spaces (e.g. temples) or designing culturally resonant campaigns may improve conservation effectiveness and foster risk mitigation (Yeshey et al., 2023). As human–wildlife interactions intensify across India's shared landscapes, moving beyond a solely ecological lens towards integrative, values-based conservation is both timely and imperative (Jhala et al., 2025).

4.4 | Limitations and further research

While we offer valuable insights into the intersection of religion and tolerance towards tigers, several limitations should be acknowledged. The number of interviews, 134, was constrained by logistics. Therefore, though the sample size was sufficient for exploratory analyses, it limited the generalisability of the findings across the broader Tadoba population—especially given that only western villages were sampled. Furthermore, this limited the number of variables that could be included robustly in models. Self-reported measures on statements for religiosity and attitudes may have been influenced by social desirability bias (Tourangeau & Yan, 2007). These limitations highlight the need for longitudinal, multi-method approaches in future, interdisciplinary conservation research.

To expand upon the current framework and build on the findings of this study, comparable interviews across multiple tiger-range states in India could be conducted. A cross-regional, national-level comparison would help address spatial variation in how religion influences perspectives on tiger conservation. Furthermore, an examination of the interaction between religion and other socio-economic variables, such as literacy/education levels or media exposure, in shaping conservation perceptions and responses to human–wildlife conflict could be conducted. To broaden the scope, a comparative study could investigate how religious affiliation influences attitudes towards tigers among diasporic Hindu communities—for instance, comparing perspectives in India with those in Western countries—and whether these attitudes translate into specific conservation behaviours, such as charitable giving. At an even wider scale, a review of species with religious significance across traditions could help assess whether sacred symbolism correlates with conservation statuses or population trends.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sathvika Krishnan: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft, writing—review and editing, and funding acquisition. **Poonam Dhanwatey:** Methodology and investigation through fieldwork facilitation. **Harshwardhan Dhanwatey:** Methodology and investigation through fieldwork facilitation. **Andrew Gosler:** Supervision, and writing—review and editing. **Claudio Sillero-Zubiri:** Supervision, and writing—review and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data used in this study were collected through structured surveys and compiled into a tabular dataset. The anonymised dataset is publicly available as a CSV file on Figshare. DOI: [10.6084/m9.figshare.33312888](https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.33312888).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Figure S1. Mosaic plot depicting the distribution of respondents interviewed in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve and buffer areas segregated by Gender (male and female) and Wildlife Value Orientation Typology (i.e. Distanced, Mutualist, Pluralist and Traditionalist).

Figure S2. Mosaic plot depicting the distribution of respondents interviewed in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve and buffer areas segregated by Age Bracket (where younger ≤ 35 years old < older) and Wildlife Value Orientation Typology (i.e. Distanced, Mutualist, Pluralist and Traditionalist).

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