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# From State Stewardship to Collaborative Governance: A Qualitative Study of Emerging Models of Private-Led Wildlife Conservation in India

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***Abstract:*** This paper studies the changing landscape of wildlife conservation governance in India, which is defined by a change from centralized government-led models to collaborative and private-led approaches. The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, in India has been following what may be called as a "fortress" model for wildlife conservation which is characterized by government control and limited stakeholder participation. Due to challenges such as habitat fragmentation, rising human–wildlife conflict, and problems related to institutional capacity there is a need to find alternative governance frameworks. Using a qualitative case study methodology, this paper analyses four different conservation models India, which are: Vantara (Reliance Foundation), Aravalli Biodiversity Park, The Corbett Foundation, and the Godrej Mangroves, to understand what role of private and non-government stakeholders can play in conservation. This study draws on Elinor Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance and looks at the selected cases across legal, ecological, socio-economic, and managerial dimensions. The findings show that private-led and collaborative models improve conservation results by bringing in technological innovation, financial flexibility, and community engagement. The private sector initiatives contribute to advanced infrastructure and long-term governance, while the private-led and hybrid partnerships improve local participation and conflict mitigation. In spite of this, issues related to accountability, regulatory oversight, and potential greenwashing act as challenges to these efforts. This study concludes that private-led conservation is not a substitute for state/government interventions but an important complement within a polycentric governance framework, and requires formal institutional mechanisms for its success.

***Keywords*****:** *Wildlife Conservation, Collaborative Governance, Polycentric Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Human Wildlife Conflict, Community Based Conservation***.**

## [1]. INTRODUCTION

Wildlife conservation in India is a complex account of events of transition, moving from ancient spiritual reverence and colonial-era exploitation to a modern era which is defined by rigid government control and, recent trends of, collaborative governance. While a formal legislation came later, conservation has always been a part of the Indian ethos. The Mauryan Emperor Ashoka's edicts established the first known veterinary hospitals to the sacred groves protected by local communities; the relationship with nature was essentially participatory (Chimalgi, 2009). The British colonial period fundamentally altered the dynamic and wildlife was reframed as a resource for sport and revenue, leading to the near-extinction of flagship India species like the Asiatic lion and the official extinction of the Indian cheetah in 1952 (Rai, 2022).

After independence there was a need to ensure wildlife conservation and this led to the passing of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLPA) by the parliament of India. This Act established a centralized, top-down framework that shifted authority from the state governments to the central government, effectively ending the era of unregulated hunting (Khandelwal, 2024). In the 1970s, government-driven conservation efforts improved during what some now call its most active phase. There were many large-scale initiatives like Project Tiger launched in 1973, later joined by Project Elephant launched nearly two decades after in 1992. Still, even as animal numbers began recovering under this strict approach, protected zones grew apart from people living nearby. The remote settlements, especially the indigenous people tied to forests, found themselves pushed out as they were seen more as obstacles than allies in preservation work (Live Law, 2023).

After the year 2000, the limits of this purely government led system became increasingly evident as the fortress model began to demonstrate structural limitations and problems that no single state department could solve in isolation. Habitat fragmentation driven by a four-fold expansion in infrastructure forced wildlife to enter human living spaces, leading to an escalation in human-wildlife conflict incidents that claimed thousands of lives and led to local resentment (CII Foundation, 2025). Further, the state's operational capacity was often affected by vacant ranger posts, low conviction rates for organized poaching, and a lack of the high-tech infrastructure required for modern ecological monitoring.

The problem of government capacity led to a fundamental paradigm shift from polycentric and private-led governance. This transition does not mean the end of government responsibility but a recognition that the new conservation landscape in India requires a shared responsibility model. The two key drivers which have accelerated this evolution are :

a) Legal Evolution: The Companies Act of 2013, along with many court judgements that have come slowly brought Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) from a voluntary activity into an expected obligation. This brought private companies into the conservation landscape as stakeholders with a key role to play in the ecological future of the country.

b) Global Trends: India has been studying how African nations have built successful conservation models around private reserves, and to the growing global momentum of the "Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures" (OECM) standards. India is increasingly looking at private reserves to restore degraded lands and secure wildlife corridors (UNDP,2022).

The Elinor Ostrom's theory of polycentricity, advocates for multi-level governance where multiple independent authorities collaborate on objectives. This paper explores the emergence of non-state/ government actors in the Indian conservation landscape by studying four distinct models Vantara, Aravalli Biodiversity Park, The Corbett Foundation, and Godrej. This study looks into how these partnerships are filling the critical gaps left by traditional Government led models. The future of Indian biodiversity lies in a decentralized, collaborative framework that matches economic growth with ecological resilience, moving from "conservation vs. growth" story to "conservation with growth" (CII Foundation, 2025).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The academic and policy discussions in India have centered around "fortress conservation", in which the understanding was that for nature to thrive, humans must be excluded (Kabra, 2019 ). This was largely a colonial regulation , where the government acted as a landlord of the forest. This model helped save the tiger from the verge of extinction in the 1970s, but it created what researchers call a human-wildlife binary (Fanari, 2022).

Literature highlights a crisis of legitimacy in this approach because as the human populations grew and habitats shrank, the government's inability to manage conflict through force alone was visible. Critics point out that by treating local communities as encroachers instead of stakeholders, the government laws indirectly gave rise to poaching and resistance. This led to a call for landscape-level conservation, noting that wildlife does not recognize the boundaries of a map. (Network for landscape conservation,n.d.)

In order to know why the private sector is now entering the scene, we must look to Elinor Ostrom's Nobel-winning work on "Polycentric Governance." The conventional theories have suggested that only the state or the market could protect natural resources. Ostrom challenged this, arguing that complex ecosystems are best managed by multiple, overlapping authorities at different scales like local, regional, and national (Ostrom, 2010).

In the Indian context, recent literature has applied this theory to explain the rise of Public-Private-Citizen Partnerships (PPCP) where instead of a single government department holding all the power, a polycentric model allows private corporations to provide funding and technology, NGOs to offer and build community trust, and the government to provide legal legitimacy (Pawar et al., 2026). This change shows a move from command and control to collaborative governance model. The recent literature focuses on the Companies Act of 2013 as a turning point for the Indian conservation landscape. Before the implementation of this act, the involvement of the private sector in wildlife was seen as something which was philanthropic and an optional activity by the private. However, Section 135 of the Act changed the institutional framework by mandating a 2% contribution on CSR (Baroth et al., 2019).

Legal scholars state that this was a legal nudge that forced corporations to integrate environmental sustainability into their policies and decisions . The research also shows that while the private sector in the beginning focused on education and health, an increasing trend towards blue and green CSR investing in mangroves, rewilding, and veterinary infrastructure is also seen (CII Foundation, 2025). This institutionalization of conservation has provided the long-term, stable funding that government budgets don't have. However, there are concerns on the potential for CSR-driven interventions to prioritize visibility over ecological depth, which makes it necessary to have stronger accountability mechanisms.

The literature shows a growing efficiency gap between government and private sector management noting that state forest departments suffer from bureaucratic delays and lack of specialized staff, while the private-led initiatives are praised for their agility (Chimiti , 2025). On issues like rapid deployment of anti-poaching units or the use of high-tech medical scans in rescue centers, the private sector brings an operational efficiency to conservation that treats ecological health with the same urgency as a business KPI (CII Foundation, 2025).

While existing literature has examined fortress conservation, CSR-driven environmental initiatives, and polycentric governance in isolation, there is limited empirical work that integrates these strands to analyse emerging private sector -led conservation models in the Indian context. Furthermore, comparative case-based evidence on how different governance arrangements perform across ecological, social, and managerial dimensions are also not developed. This study seeks to address this gap by providing an analysis of diverse conservation models in India.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative research design based on the Case Study Method. This approach is useful to understand the shift from government-led to private-led conservation in India. The study analyzes four distinct cases from India to see how different strategies work in conservation namely:

a. **Vantara model** which focuses on high-tech animal rescue and medical care.
b. **Aravalli Biodiversity Park** case centers on urban rewilding and citizen participation.
c. **The Corbett Foundation** case concentrates on community relations and reducing human-wildlife conflict.
d. **Godrej Mangroves** case which focuses on long-term corporate stewardship of private land.

The analysis of the cases focused on how the project fits into Indian laws like the Wildlife Protection Act and the Companies Act, the scientific methods which are being used, such as carbon tracking or advanced veterinary medicine, how the project affects local people/ stakeholders and reduces human animal conflict and the efficiency brought in by the private sector.

The information was gathered by triangulating multiple sources of secondary data to ensure accuracy. This included analyzing government and private sector body reports, supreme Court judgments, corporate CSR disclosures, and academic journals.

The limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary data and limited number of case studies, which may limit the generalization of the findings across the broader and diverse landscape of wildlife conservation in India.

## 4. CASE ANALYSIS: EVALUATING EMERGING MODELS OF WILDLIFE GOVERNANCE

### *4.1. Vantara (Reliance Foundation): Redefining Ex-Situ Care and Veterinary Infrastructure*

The Vantara initiative is located within Reliance's Jamnagar Refinery Complex in Gujarat. This initiative shows a global shift towards the welfare side of conservation. The conservation centre is spread across 3500 acres, and is classified as the most ambitious private-led wildlife initiative in the world. The traditional state-run zoos often struggle with outdated infrastructure and limited medical budgets, but Vantara has introduced a managerial and technological rigor that treats animal healthcare with the same precision as a multi-specialty human hospital (Reliance Foundation, n.d.).

The Vantara model focus is on in its Ex-Situ (off-site) care and has over 25,000 to 1,50,000 plus animals across 2,000 plus species (including vast numbers of birds, reptiles, and smaller rescues), many of which are rescued from illegal trafficking or abandoned circuses. The reason for the success is its investment in advanced diagnostics like portable MRIs, CT scans, and robotic surgery suites technologies that usually are not available in government -run forest department clinics (Vantara, n.d.).

Vantara initially faced scrutiny regarding the private possession of wild animals. However, a Special Investigation Team (SIT) which was appointed by the Supreme Court of India in 2025 verified the project, noting that Vantara serves as a matter of national pride by filling a massive infrastructure gap that the state alone could not address. The shift from the display aspect of traditional zoos and focusing on high-end rehabilitation in this initiative, shows how massive private investment can provide a safety net for wildlife (Bhaumik , 2025).

### 4.2. Aravalli Biodiversity Park (ABDP): The Power of Public-Private-Citizen Partnerships (PPCP)

The Aravalli Biodiversity Park (ABDP) is located in Gurugram and offers an urban rewilding which is spread across a 392-acre site that was once not fit for usage and a degraded mining pit. Its transformation into a thriving city forest was not achieved through a government mandate alone, but through a unique collaborative model involving the Municipal Corporation of Gurugram (MCG), the NGO "iamgurgaon," and several corporate CSR partners.

The ABDP model is significant because it became India’s first "Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures" (OECM) site (UNDP, 2022). This global tag recognizes areas that are not formal "National Parks" but still provide immense biodiversity value. The park’s ecological impact is undeniable and it has seen the return of over 300 species of birds and mammals like the golden jackal and nilgai.

Managerially, the park is successful because responsibility is distributed. The state provides the land and legal protection and corporations provide the sustained CSR funding required for long-term maintenance. This "Citizen-Led" approach ensures that the forest is not just a government asset, but a community one. It proves that in a rapidly urbanizing India, private-led rewilding can create lungs for a city while securing vital wildlife corridors that link to the larger Aravalli range (iamgurgaon, n.d.).

### *4.3. The Corbett Foundation (TCF): Building Bridges through Community Coexistence*

A major failure of the fortress conservation model was the alienation of people living near tiger reserves. The Corbett Foundation (TCF), an NGO-led initiative, addresses this through a landscape-Scale model that focuses on human-wildlife coexistence. Operating across seven states in the critical buffers of Jim Corbett, Kanha, and Bandhavgarh, TCF acts as the "social glue" between the Forest Department and local villagers.

TCF's most effective initiative is the "Interim Relief Scheme." In the government -run system, if a tiger kills a villager's cow, the compensation process can take months, often leading the villager to poison the tiger in retaliation. TCF bridges this gap by providing immediate financial aid often within 24 hours of the incident. This fiscal agility is something state bureaucracies find nearly impossible to replicate .

Furthermore, TCF employs a "One Health" approach, providing veterinary care for livestock and medical camps for villagers. By improving the lives of the people, they decrease the community's dependence on the forest and increase their tolerance for the predators living next door. This model shows that private-led conservation is not just about animals; it is about managing the human-wildlife interface with empathy and speed, turning former poachers into protectors (The Corbett Foundation., n.d.).

### *4.4. Godrej Mangroves: Corporate Stewardship and Blue Carbon*

The Godrej Mangroves (Pirojshanagar) in Mumbai, illustrates the importance of long-term private stewardship of sensitive ecosystems. While many urban mangroves in India have been lost to development, Godrej has protected this 1,750-acre private forest since the 1940s long before environmental laws were even drafted in India.

The Godrej model is a pioneer in Blue Carbon sequestration. Scientific studies show that these mangroves store millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide , acting as a massive carbon sink for the city of Mumbai. Unlike state-run mangrove cells that often face manpower shortages, Godrej manages this forest using industrial-grade precision utilizing satellite monitoring, ISO-certified management systems, and a dedicated team of marine biologists (Godrej & Boyce, 2024).

When this model is looked at from an ecological understanding, this private forest acts as a critical buffer against coastal erosion and flooding. Godrej, by keeping this land private and managing it as a public good, has set an example for how industrial-ecological models can coexist. It challenges the concept that private land is a threat to conservation and shows that when a corporation views a forest as a heritage asset rather than real estate, the ecological outcomes can exceed those of state-managed lands. (WWF-India, 2021)

## 5. DISCUSSION

The change from a centralized fortress model to more collaborative frameworks as seen in Vantara, ABDP, the Corbett Foundation, and Godrej Mangroves shows a fundamental transformation in India's environmental governance. This transition is not only a change in sources of funding but also on the issue of who holds the responsibility for the country's natural heritage. After the analyses of these cases collectively, there are many important themes which have emerged that define the new framework for Indian wildlife conservation.

One of the most important insights from this study is the disparity between government-led and private-led technological adoption. As seen in the review of literature, state forest departments mostly operate under fiscal constraints and bureaucratic red tape, which limits their ability to acquire modern specialized equipment .

The Vantara case shows that private capital can do away with these limitations, by providing veterinary infrastructure such as robotic surgery suites and advanced diagnostic labs, that sets a global benchmark. Similarly, the Godrej Mangroves utilize industrial-grade satellite monitoring and ISO-certified management systems to track carbon sequestration, a system which can rarely be seen in government-managed wetlands. This shows that the private sector's role is no longer just philanthropic and has become functional,filling critical gaps in high-tech ecological monitoring and animal welfare that the governments are unable to do .

The theoretical reason for this shift lies in Elinor Ostrom's Polycentricity. The 1972 Act established a monocentric model, which relied only on the government for conservation. However, the success of the Aravalli Biodiversity Park (ABDP) and The Corbett Foundation (TCF) shows that conservation is more resilient when responsibility is shared across multiple stakeholders .

TCF's interim relief scheme is an example of managerial agility where compensation is provided to villagers within 24 hours of livestock loss, for which the government takes many months to process. This speed is important for building community trust and the social capital necessary for wildlife survival in human-dominated landscapes. In the ABDP case, the partnership between the city council, an NGO, and corporate donors shows that urban rewilding is more sustainable when citizens feel a sense of ownership over the forest. These models move away from the old "fines and fences" toward a "participatory stewardship" which connects local needs with national goals.

The Government of India by mandating CSR has effectively outsourced a portion of its ecological duty to the private sector. However, the recent 2025 Supreme Court interventions regarding Vantara and the CSR mandate have given constitutional legitimacy to these private efforts.

The court has clarified that protecting the environment is a fundamental duty under Article 51A(g) for both citizens and private corporations. This judicial backing has shielded private-led conservation from criticisms of privatization, and suggests that the State vs. Private debate is becoming outdated and the new reality is one of "State-enabled Private Action," where the government sets the standards and private entities execute them.

While the advantages are clear, it is important to take note of inherent risks of private-led governance like greenwashing, where corporations use conservation projects to mask environmental damage created by them . Further, there is a risk that private-led projects might focus only on specific species or high-profile urban parks and ignore ordinary but equally important ecosystems.

The cases suggest that regulatory oversight remains important to mitigate these risks. The clearing of charges on Vantara by the Special Investigation Team (SIT) shows that while the private sector can lead, the government must monitor to ensure that scientific standards and animal welfare protocols/standards are strictly followed.

## 6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Wildlife conservation in India has come to an important historical and ecological intersection where for more than five decades, the government served as the only guardian of the country's biodiversity, taking several steps to protect species like the Bengal tiger and the one-horned rhinoceros from the verge of extinction. However, as this study showed, the monocentric and exclusionary model of the 1972 Wildlife (Protection) Act is not enough to address the problems of the wildlife conservation landscape. Modern conservation efforts are defined by uncontrolled urban development, extreme habitat fragmentation, and the high-tech requirements of advanced veterinary medicine, challenges that are often more than the fiscal and operational capacities of the government forest departments.

The change towards collaborative and private-led governance shows an evolution of the Indian conservation system. The detailed analysis of Vantara (Reliance Foundation), the Aravalli Biodiversity Park (ABDP), The Corbett Foundation (TCF), and the Godrej Mangroves, have shown us a new blueprint for ecological resilience which replaces the rigid fines and fences strategy with a comprehensive framework that brings together corporate capital, scientific innovation, and deep-rooted community trust.

The examples of the modern medical infrastructure at Jamnagar, which has set a global benchmark for animal welfare, and the blue carbon management in Mumbai, which has protected the ecosystem for nearly eighty years, shows that non-government stakeholders are no longer only donors or volunteers and they have emerged as key partners in protecting natural heritage.

To enable that these private-led and collaborative models are scalable, accountable, and nationally integrated, the following policy interventions are recommended:

### 6.1. Formulate a Comprehensive National Policy for Wildlife PPPs

One of the primary hurdles identified in this study is the lack of a standardized legal framework for Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in the wildlife sector. Currently, this kind of collaborations are handled on an ad-hoc basis, which creates bureaucratic hurdles and legal uncertainty.The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) should draft a National Framework for Wildlife PPPs and must define the boundaries of private involvement ensuring that while private entities bring in managerial efficiency and technology, the government ensures regulatory oversight and sovereign ownership of forest lands.

### 6.2. Standardize and Incentivize the OECM Designation

The transformation of the Aravalli Biodiversity Park into India’s first "Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures" (OECM) site is a landmark achievement. However, the process for achieving this status remains difficult for many private landowners.The National Biodiversity Authority (NBA) should create a single-window application process for private estates, corporate campuses, and community lands to register as OECMs. The government should introduce green tax credits or incentives for corporations that successfully manage OECMs, effectively rewarding them for providing ecosystem services like carbon sequestration and water table recharge.

### 6.3. Institutionalize Green CSR Technical Advisory Cells

The Companies Act of 2013 has successfully got in crores in funding, but many corporations lack the ecological expertise to spend these funds effectively. This often leads to tokenistic tree-planting drives instead of high-impact conservation measures which are needed to be undertaken. The Governments can look at establishing Green CSR Advisory Cells at the state level which could act as a platform for connecting corporate CSR funds with high-priority, scientifically-backed projects such as securing wildlife corridors, mitigating human-wildlife conflict hotspots, and upgradation of regional veterinary hospitals/clinics.

### 6.4. Create a National Wildlife Rescue and Medical Network

Currently, the Forest Department is often overburdened when dealing with injured or rescued animals and therefore the government should formally recognize and integrate high-tech private facilities into a National Wildlife Emergency Network. By pre-approving specific private centers to treat Scheduled animals, the government can leverage private medical technology (like MRIs and robotic surgery) during difficulties, ensuring that rescued wildlife receives the best possible care without the delays inherent in government procurement.

### 6.5. Transition to Landscape-Level Community Relief Models

The Corbett Foundation's "Interim Relief Scheme" has proven that speed is the most critical factor in preventing retaliatory killings of wildlife. The current government compensation models are often too slow and bureaucratic to be effective.State Forest Departments should partner with local NGOs to create "Rapid Relief Funds" by delegating the initial verification and payout process to trusted local intermediaries (NGOs) as this will ensure that farmers are compensated for livestock loss within 48 hours.

### 6.6. Formalize Blue Carbon Accounting for Private Forests

As seen in the Godrej Mangroves case, private sector participation can lead to world-class carbon sequestration. However, there is currently no standardized national framework to account for these blue carbon gains in private lands.The government should develop a National Carbon Credit Registry specifically for private-led mangrove and forest restoration which would allow corporations to trade or offset these credits would and provide an incentive for the long-term protection of sensitive ecological buffer zones in urban and industrial areas.

By enhancing the involvement of the private sector, India can move from a defensive conservation system to a proactive one , where the protection of biodiversity becomes a shared, high-tech, and socially inclusive nationwide mission.

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