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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Beyond the Fortress: Rethinking Conservation With Communities, Not Against Them

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

8 July 2026

**ENVIRONMENT****GS3****GS1**

CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

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# Beyond the Fortress: Rethinking Conservation With Communities, Not Against Them

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**GS3**
**GS1**

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## THE LIFT LINE

For over a century, conservation has too often meant drawing a line, putting nature inside it and people outside. This fortress model, inherited from colonial rule and exported across Africa and Asia, promised to save wildlife by keeping communities away. Increasingly, the evidence says it does neither: it impoverishes the people who lived with the forest longest, and it loses the very allies conservation most needs. The alternative already exists in Indian law. The task is to use it.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Conservation models, forest governance, tribal rights and the human dimension of biodiversity run across the environment and society syllabus. The fortress-versus-community debate is a rich Mains theme that ties the Forest Rights Act to conservation outcomes and social justice.

**GS Paper 3:** Conservation, biodiversity and ecology; environmental protection; sustainable development (<https://ujyari.com/terms/sustainable-development/>).

**GS Paper 1:** Salient features of Indian society; effects of colonialism; the role and rights of tribal and forest-dwelling communities.

**Prelims angle:** Fortress conservation; the Yellowstone or Yosemite model; the Forest Rights Act, 2006 (Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Recognition of Forest Rights Act); Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights; Gram Sabha; eco-development; the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** (<https://ujyari.com/legislation/wildlife-protection-act-1972/>); critical wildlife habitats.

**Mains angle:** Whether India should shift from exclusionary conservation to rights-based, community-inclusive conservation, and how the FRA enables it.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

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Fortress conservation is the belief that biodiversity is best protected in areas walled off from human use and disturbance. Its template is the nineteenth-century American national park, and colonial powers carried the idea to Africa and Asia, often evicting or excluding indigenous and local communities from lands they had inhabited and managed for generations. After independence, this exclusionary model persisted, reinforced by international conservation organisations and by domestic forest and wildlife laws.

India's own conservation history carries this inheritance. Protected areas and tiger reserves have frequently been managed by restricting or relocating forest-dwelling communities, sometimes through relocation described as voluntary but shaped by long-standing pressure and loss of access. This has fuelled human-wildlife conflict and alienated the very communities whose cooperation conservation depends on.

The corrective in Indian law is the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which recognises the rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers over forest land and resources, partly redressing what it calls the historical injustice of colonial-era forest laws. Crucially, it provides for Community Forest Resource rights, empowering the Gram Sabha to protect, regenerate, conserve and manage forests they have traditionally used. Yet recognition has been slow: only a small fraction of the land over which communities could claim CFR rights has actually been secured, and mainstream conservation has not fully embraced the FRA as a conservation tool.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central argument is that fortress conservation is failing on both counts, harming livelihoods and undermining conservation, and that a rights-based, community-inclusive model, enabled by the Forest Rights Act, can align local incentives with conservation outcomes if it is actually implemented.

### The Fortress Fails Twice

Excluding communities dispossesses people who depend on the forest and removes the local knowledge and stewardship that protect it. Alienated communities have little stake in conservation, which can worsen conflict, poaching pressure and **encroachment** (<https://ujjayari.com/vocab/encroachment/>), so the wall meant to protect wildlife can end up leaving it less protected.

### The FRA Is a Conservation Tool, Not Only a Rights Tool

Community Forest Resource rights make the Gram Sabha a manager of the forest, not merely an occupant. Where communities have secure rights and a stake in outcomes, they have strong incentives to conserve, aligning livelihoods with biodiversity. The FRA thus reframes people as partners, not threats.

## Implementation Is the Weak Link

The model's promise is undercut by slow recognition of CFR rights, bureaucratic resistance and the continued dominance of the exclusionary mindset in parts of the forest and conservation establishment. Rights on paper that are not secured on the ground cannot change conservation outcomes.

DIMENSION	FORTRESS CONSERVATION	COMMUNITY-INCLUSIVE CONSERVATION
View of local people	Threat to be kept out	Partner and steward
Legal basis in India	Exclusion under protected-area regime	Forest Rights Act, 2006 and CFR rights
Effect on livelihoods	Dispossession, conflict	Secured rights, stake in the forest
Conservation outcome	Alienation can weaken protection	Aligned incentives can strengthen it
Decision-maker	Forest bureaucracy	Gram Sabha with community

### HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Ask who conservation is for and who does it. The fortress answer, conservation for nature, done by the state, against people, sounds pure but ignores incentives: people excluded from a resource have no reason to protect it and every reason to resent the protectors. The rights-based answer, conservation with people, aligns incentives so that stewardship pays. Apply a historical-justice lens: colonial forest laws dispossessed communities, and the FRA is a partial correction, so this is a question of equity as well as ecology. Then guard against romanticism with an evidence lens: community management is not automatically successful, it needs capacity, secure tenure and support, so the argument is not that communities always conserve better, but that inclusion creates the conditions under which conservation and livelihoods can both succeed.

### THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Colonial fortress model walls wildlife off from people -> communities are excluded or relocated -> they lose livelihoods and the forest loses its stewards -> alienation fuels conflict and can weaken protection -> the Forest Rights Act 2006 recognises community rights and CFR -> the Gram Sabha becomes a forest manager with a stake in outcomes -> incentives align, livelihoods and conservation reinforce each other -> but only if CFR rights are actually recognised and secured on the ground.

## WAY FORWARD

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- 1 **Accelerate CFR recognition.** Fast-track and secure Community Forest Resource rights under the FRA so communities become legally empowered forest managers.
- 2 **Integrate the FRA with conservation planning.** Treat the FRA as a conservation instrument, not an obstacle, and align protected-area management with recognised community rights.
- 3 **Support community capacity.** Provide technical, financial and institutional support to Gram Sabhas for monitoring, regeneration and sustainable use.
- 4 **Reform relocation.** Ensure any relocation from critical wildlife habitats is genuinely informed, consent-based and fairly compensated, in line with the FRA's safeguards.
- 5 **Blend with eco-development.** Combine rights-based conservation with eco-development and benefit-sharing so that living near wildlife becomes an asset, not a burden.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has examined forest rights and conservation (2019: "How far do you agree that the behaviour of the Indian economy..."; more relevantly, questions on tribal rights, the Forest Rights Act and conservation-versus-development tensions recur across GS1 and GS3). This editorial links the colonial legacy of fortress conservation to the FRA-based alternative.

**Practice question:** "Fortress conservation protects wildlife by excluding people, but often fails both."

Critically examine, with reference to the Forest Rights Act, 2006, how community-inclusive conservation can reconcile biodiversity protection with the rights of forest dwellers. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: *Down To Earth* (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>)

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