

Human-tiger conflict: Are the risks overestimated?

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Image: Wikipedia.

Wildlife conservationists are well aware of the potential conflicts that exist between the endangered species they seek to protect and the human populations which inhabit areas where the animals live. Carnivores, such as tigers, pose a risk to humans and their livestock and can be killed because of this potential risk. Previous research has found that killing of animals can be motivated as much by social and psychological factors, such as perception of danger, as by any actual real risk posed by a species.

A new study published in the journal [Human Ecology](#) has identified several key factors which may contribute to perceptions of risk from tigers in a [conservation area](#) in Bangladesh. The study, by Chloe Inskip and her colleagues from the Durrell Institute of Conservation and

Ecology in Kent, UK, and WildTeam, Bangladesh, is the first to use participatory risk mapping (PRM) and in-depth interviews to explore the wider socio-economic context of human-tiger conflict.

The survey was carried out around the Sundarbans [mangrove forests](#) of south-western Bangladesh, home to one of the world's largest remaining [tiger populations](#). Although there are no human inhabitants of the Sundarbans, eight sub-districts with a total population of around 1.7 million people lie directly adjacent to the forest boundary. Records indicate that approximately 30-50 people are killed annually by tigers in the area.

The researchers held 54 semi-structured interviews in six villages which border the Sundarbans forest, followed by 385 questionnaires in a further ten border villages. Of all the issues related to lives and livelihood, tigers were the most commonly reported problem. Other issues recorded were largely poverty-related including low incomes, dependence on natural resources, poor infrastructure and services and a lack of clean water together with [soil erosion](#) and weather. Inskip and her colleagues identified the fact that these issues had a direct impact on villagers' perceptions of risk from tigers. The respondents' perceived susceptibility to and their ability to mitigate human-tiger conflict was influenced largely by their poverty related-problems.

The authors suggest that any actions taken to improve these socio-economic issues will also reduce the perceived level of risk from tigers and help to reduce the rate at which [tigers](#) are killed. For conservationists, this would mean a shift from traditional models of conflict reduction to holistic models which also incorporate situation-specific actions to reduce risk perceptions. In many poor, rural communities in conservation areas such as the Sundarbans, risk perception reduction is likely to be tied strongly to poverty alleviation.

The authors believe that the abatement of killing endangered species will only be achieved if the human dimensions and social context of human-wildlife conflict situations are well understood and appropriately managed. They conclude that "participatory risk mapping (PRM) and qualitative research are valuable tools for enhancing understanding of and identifying actions to address the wildlife-related risk perceptions which can influence killing behavior." Addressing risk perceptions will require long-term commitment and funding.

More information: Inskip C et al. (2013) Human-tiger conflict in context: risks to lives and livelihoods in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. *Human Ecology*; [DOI 10.1007/s10745-012-9556-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-012-9556-6)

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