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## Human-animal conflicts and social dimension

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### Human-leopard conflict in Ahmednagar, Pune, and Nashik Districts of Maharashtra, India: patterns and community perceptions on conservation

Kurhe, Anil<sup>1\*</sup>; Raut, Ranjit<sup>2</sup>; Nirbhawane, Ashutosh<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune-Padmashri Vikhe Patil College of Arts, Science and Commerce Pravaranagar, Department of Zoology, Tal. Rahata, Dist. Ahmednagar, MS, India

<sup>2</sup> Yogeshwari Mahavidyalaya, Department of Zoology, Ambajogai, Dist. Beed, MS, India

\* anil.kurhe@gmail.com

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Human-animal conflict represents a significant challenge in regions where human populations expand into wildlife habitats. This leads to increased encounters with species that can threaten livelihoods, property, and safety. Human-leopard conflict has become a growing concern in the regions of Ahmednagar, Pune, and Nashik in Maharashtra. Indian leopard (*Panthera pardus fusca*) attacks on humans and livestock have a long history and are increasing in severity due to habitat encroachment, resource competition, and the leopards' adaptable nature, which brings them into close proximity with human settlements. The purpose of this study was to explore conflict patterns and to examine local community perceptions of conservation strategies aimed at mitigating these interactions.

The research identifies prevalent conflict forms, including livestock predation, occasional human attacks, and property damage, which have resulted in economic losses, fear, and retaliatory actions. Conflict patterns reveal that leopards, driven by habitat fragmentation and prey shortages, increasingly venture into peri-urban and rural areas, making domestic animals easy targets. The study also investigates demographic, cultural, and economic factors that shape community attitudes towards leopards and assesses the effectiveness of current conservation measures. Community perspectives reflect a range of responses, from antagonism to conditional support for leopard conservation, influenced by the perceived effectiveness of mitigation measures and compensation schemes. Many local people express frustration with current policies, citing delayed compensation and insufficient support in the wake of leopard encounters. However, where educational outreach and rapid response programs are in place, there is greater tolerance and support for conservation efforts. Study highlights the need for an integrated conservation framework that involves local communities in decision-making, enhances compensation processes, and promotes awareness campaigns on safe coexistence. Understanding local perceptions is essential to formulating strategies that balance human livelihoods with leopard conservation, creating a sustainable model for wildlife management in Maharashtra's multi-use landscapes.