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HUMAN-WHALE INTERACTIONS IN KARWAR

NARRATIVES OF A BIG HARMLESS FISH



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INTRODUCTION



Fishing boat at sea | Credit: Opensource/Canva

Human behaviour towards wildlife is often portrayed as a rational assessment of the advantages and disadvantages, neglecting the emotional and cultural aspects that shape such interactions (Pooley et al., 2020). Human and wildlife interaction exists on a spectrum ranging from positive to negative, varying in intensity from minor to severe, and occurring with frequencies ranging from rare to frequent (Glikman et al., 2021). The perception of the same animal can vary among different cultural groups, influenced by their respective cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon has important implications for fostering shared spaces and promoting coexistence (Athreya et al., 2018).

In certain communities, the narratives and knowledge of human-wildlife interactions are deeply intertwined with informal social institutions (Nair et al., 2021). One such notable example is the tigers residing in the Sunderbans are considered the guardians of the forest and are revered as "Banobibi/Dakkhinrai" by the people practising both Hindu and Muslim faiths (Jalais, 2008).

While scholars have extensively studied human-whale interaction, much of the focus has been on whale watching and tourism. The cultural aspects related to these marine mammals have received comparatively less attention and documentation. Gaining a comprehensive understanding of human-whale relationships necessitates the crucial task of understanding and documenting the multi-layered cultural dimensions associated with these interactions.

An illustrative instance to remember here is whale worship in Vietnam. In Vietnam's coastal regions like Phan Thiet and Vung Tau, human-whale relationships extend beyond simple encounters. Whales are considered sacred and are worshipped as deities, known as "Ca Ong" or "Mister Ong." Local fishermen believe these benevolent beings protect them from storms and guide them to abundant fishing grounds. Fishing communities have constructed temples dedicated to worshipping Ca Ong Voi to express their deep gratitude and respect. (Thuoc, P. 2007).

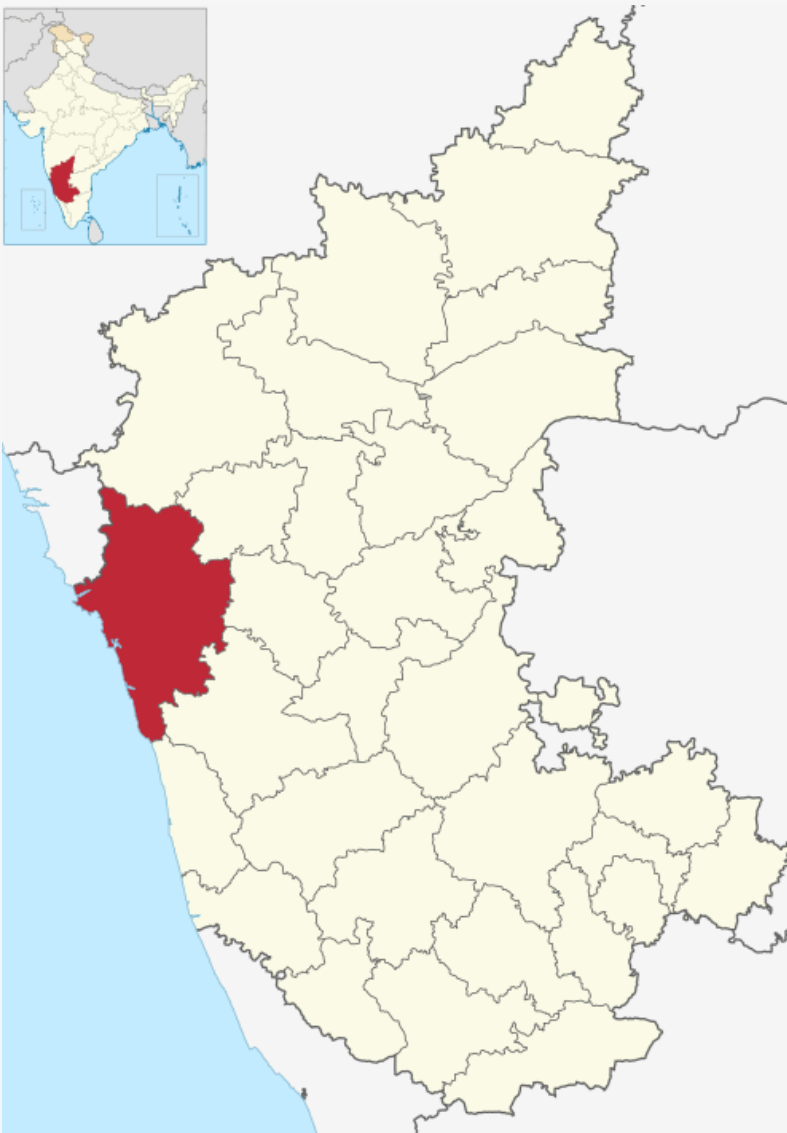
India, a country known for its rich folklore and diverse cultural heritage, has long been inspired by the interactions between different species and the intricate tapestry of multispecies landscapes. Due to its diverse geography and presence of endemic species, wildlife has profoundly influenced the culture and informal social institutions in the shared spaces of India. The cultural aspects of multispecies interaction in shared spaces in India, particularly regarding whales, have been relatively under-documented in the available literature. There is a lack of comprehensive research on narratives and cultural practices related to whales in coastal regions of India.

Based on stranding and sighting records in India, studies have shown that the seas of India harbour a diverse range of cetaceans, comprising 20 species. Among these, five species belong to the Mysticeti category (baleen whales), while the remaining species are classified as Odontoceti (toothed whales)(Naik et al., 2015). The presence of these species serves as a motivation to delve deeper into the cultural dimension and explore people's perceptions towards marine mammals.

This study aimed to document and gain insights into the narratives associated with marine mammals, specifically whales, in the villages of Karwar, Karnataka. Through an ethnographic approach, the study aimed to explore diverse aspects such as language, lived experiences, oral narratives and traditional ecological knowledge to understand the interactions between humans and whales in the region. Scholars suggest that the knowledge possessed by fishermen can be a valuable addition to scientific knowledge.

Combining fisher and scientific knowledge promotes more holistic approaches to conservation. The current study also highlights the role of linguistic diversity, the complexities of shared space, and the lived experiences of fishing communities in fostering a harmonious coexistence between humans and whales.

STUDY SITE



Map of Uttara Kannada district in Karnataka, India
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

The study took place in the villages of Karwar, a coastal area located on the banks of the Kali River in the Uttara Kannada district of Karnataka. Karwar is a well-liked tourist spot and the second largest Uttara Kannada city. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Karwar is 155,213. The average sex ratio in this region is 984, and the literacy rate is 89.91%. Among the population of Karwar Taluk, 4.7% consists of Schedule Caste (SC) and 0.8% consists of Schedule Tribe (ST).

Hinduism is the dominant religion in Karwar (87.96%). Other religions observed in the area include Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Jainism. The majority, or 52%, of the population speaks Kannada. Konkani and Urdu are also spoken in this region.

Following are the places in Karwar where the study took place :

1. **Port of Karwar, Baithkol:** Among the ten minor ports in Karnataka, it is considered as the only all-weather natural harbour. It is located between the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, creating a unique geographical setting for the port.
2. **Karwar Fish Market:** One of the significant fish markets in Uttara Kannada district. Situated in the heart of the city, this market is dominated by women, like most of the fish markets in coastal Karnataka.
3. **Majali:** Majali is a village in the Karwar Taluk of Uttar Kannada District in Karnataka, India. It is positioned approximately 8 kilometres to the north of the district headquarters, Karwar. Most of the Kharvi and Harik community people live here.
4. **Devbagh:** Situated 2km south of Majali, popularly known for its beautiful beach. Fishermen from Ambiga, Harik, Gabit, and Naukada communities cohabit this place.



Map of the study villages | Credit: Google Earth

The interviews with individuals from the fishing community and villagers were carried out in a vicinity spanning 5 kilometres around each area including small villages like Dandibag and Maldarwada. The choice of the study area was guided by available data and took into account recommendations from the fishing community, subject experts, and government officials.

STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

For the study, a short-term ethnographic approach was used, initially engaging in numerous informal and unrecorded conversations and observations, laying the groundwork for more in-depth follow-up. Due to the exploratory nature of the study, an attempt was also made to document and understand people's perceptions towards whales based on their personal experiences and oral history of the shared spaces.

The interviewer dedicated four months to fieldwork, spanning from mid-December 2022 to mid-April 2023. During the initial 90-day period, the interviewer immersed in the community by interacting with locals, consulting subject experts and participating in local festivals to establish a rapport and gather diverse narratives about marine mammals. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, using a set of questions to initiate a conversation. The study received ethical approval from the WCS-India Ethics Committee and informed oral consent was obtained from all participants for audio-recording the interviews. No personally identifiable information was collected to ensure participant anonymity.

To analyse the data, the researcher engaged in a process of iterative reading and attentive listening to the collected data, allowing for the identification of key themes. With the help of mind mapping tools (for the study logseq was used), connections between the major themes were noted.

SAMPLING

The selection of participants was done by a snowball sampling method. Care was taken to include individuals from various communities, social classes, genders, and religious backgrounds across all the villages involved in the study. The interviewer approached

people at the Karwar port as an initial contact point, which resulted in identifying potential respondents. 18 interviews and 3 FGDs were conducted with oral consent from the participants.

RESULTS



On board a fishing vessel | Credit: Sahamatha

By conducting 18 interviews and 3 focus group discussions (FGDs), key themes emerged from the data. An analysis of conversations was undertaken, and the interrelationships among the identified themes were examined and compared with existing literature.

The interviews with individuals from the fishing community and villagers were carried out in a vicinity spanning 5 kilometres around each area including small villages like Dandibag and Maldarwada. The choice of the study area was guided by available data and took into account recommendations from the fishing community, subject experts, and government officials.

BOUNDLESS SHARED SPACE

Shared space implies that both humans and wildlife have access to and utilize the same geographical area, often with limited physical barriers or boundaries. In shared spaces, there is a potential for direct or indirect interactions between humans and wildlife, which may involve various degrees of coexistence, cooperation or conflicts depending on the specific circumstances and the behaviour of the wildlife species involved.

In the landscapes comprising multiple regions such as preserved areas, farmland and residential areas, the natural habitats are divided into smaller sections, leading to wildlife navigating through human-dominated environments. This often results in frequent interactions between humans and wildlife.

It is worth noticing that the residents of the coastal communities have less encounters with whales as a part of their daily lives. Due to gender dynamics prevalent in fishing communities in Karwar, where men predominantly engage in fishing activities, women have limited direct interactions with whales unless stranded carcasses wash up on the shore. Fishermen have shared that it is highly improbable for whales to naturally approach the shoreline. To catch a glimpse of a whale, one must venture at least 50 km into the ocean. Therefore, in this particular region, there is an absence of ‘conflict’ in terms of human-whale interactions.

“The ocean is not like agricultural land. There are no boundaries; whether it is you or someone else, fishing can occur anywhere in the ocean. One day I may go to a particular section of the ocean, while another person may do the same the next day.” said a boat owner from the Gabit community.



Fisherman preparing for the day | Credit: Sahamatha

These shared spaces become deeply ingrained in the day-to-day lives of fishermen, shaping their behaviour and the stories they construct. The intimate connection between fishermen and the natural environment fosters a rich tapestry of traditions, beliefs, and folklore.

Shared spaces also give rise to captivating stories passed down through generations, narrating extraordinary encounters and the delicate balance between humans and wildlife. Through their narratives, fishermen weave together a collective understanding of the interconnectedness between themselves, the marine ecosystem, and the creatures they encounter, fostering a profound respect and reverence for these shared spaces.

Residents of Majali, Devbaug, and Dandibag frequently come across dolphins, porpoises, turtles and occasionally whales. These frequent encounters provide people with opportunities to observe and comprehend animal behaviour and their interactions with the surrounding environment.

The following are examples provided by participants that demonstrate the significant presence of the marine ecosystem in their daily lives :

- *“Dolphin is very friendly but the duplicate dolphin (porpoise) often disturbs our catch and nets.”*
- *“It (whale) looks like a shark.”*
- *“All of them (whales) spray water from their head.”*
- *“The fountain is visible to us from a distance of 2km, giving us a signal... and we maintain a safe distance from the whales.”*

LIVED EXPERIENCES AND ORAL NARRATIVES

Perceptions towards wildlife exhibit significant geographical and class-caste variations and are influenced by a range of factors not limited to positive or negative interactions with wildlife but also cultural and religious values, social influences, and educational background. These lived experiences serve as a lens through which we interpret and make sense of the world.

People's direct interaction with nature, such as encounters with wildlife, their occupation and interactions with specific landscapes, shape their perceptions and attitudes towards these aspects. For example, individuals with positive and harmonious interactions with wildlife may develop a sense of respect, appreciation, and empathy towards animals and their habitats.

The lived experiences of people often result in a wealth of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). It encompasses observations, practices, and beliefs developed by communities over generations through their close interactions with the natural environment (Moller, H.,2004).

“It is huge in size. Maybe around 30ft. Its body is rich in fat, making its flesh inedible... Nothing is as big as devrameenu. It gives birth to younger ones like how humans do. It doesn't show its face. if you are lucky, you can see its back or tail.” said a fisherman from the Harik community. *“It encircles the fishes before swallowing them. It goes round and round, gathering smaller fish to create a mound”*

Often less considered, oral histories and mythologies also significantly contribute towards people's perception towards animals. Animals hold a crucial position in human existence and shared environments, as depicted in traditional narratives such as the Panchatantra and Jataka Stories. Folktales from India, collected by A K Ramanujan, exemplify the significant roles played by animals in the lives of humans.

In an oral culture, learning or knowing involves attaining a deep, empathetic, and communal connection with the known (Havelock, 1963)., Knowing is not solely about the accumulation of information in oral tradition but about the embodiment of knowledge through lived experiences and communal identification (Ong, W. J.,1982). It is a dynamic and interactive process that shapes individual and collective identities.

In relation to perceptions of the natural world, oral narratives play a significant role in shaping people's understanding, attitudes, and relationships with the environment. They can convey ecological knowledge, such as information about animal behaviour, seasonal patterns, and the interconnections between species and ecosystems. The story of the thirsty crow is one example worth remembering here in this context. In folk tales and mythology, it is common to find instances where the personal experiences of individuals transcend their individuality and become universally relatable.

Each respondent we engaged with expressed that whales are a kind and harmless species.

“Peer saheb... meaning... our God. It doesn't harm us. It is very kind”

“While releasing the water fountain from its blowhole, the whale emits a resounding and forceful sound, similar to this...” (the fisherman imitates the whale's sound) said a fisherman from Dandibag.

Through oral narratives, communities pass down their collective wisdom, beliefs, values, and worldviews. These narratives often incorporate elements of mythology, folklore, legends, and local histories, which contribute to the formation of cultural identity and a sense of belonging. They provide a framework for interpreting and understanding the world, including the natural environment and its inhabitants.

The following is a list of common observations shared by the participants regarding the behaviour of the whales :

- 1.They are harmless, “Paapa adu”. They don’t disturb us(humans)
- 2.They are the largest among fishes.
- 3.Whales release water through a blowhole; that’s how they breathe.
- 4.It (whale) brings large amounts of fish to the coastline
- 5.Whales are regarded as good omens
- 6.It keeps its mouth open for several minutes to engulf large amounts of prey.
- 7.They encircle around small fishes before catching them.
- 8.Young ones(whales) live with their mothers for 5-6 years.
- 9.They have backbones.
10. They are black in colour.



A mural painted to raise awareness on plastic waste | Credit: Sahamatha

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

Significant work has been done on how language influences the thought process of human beings. According to the Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis, “Language systematically influences how one perceives and conceptualises the world”. We can also see in the works of Chomsky that “When it comes to understanding a word(or sentence, phrase), the actual words are the tip of the vast iceberg of a very rapid, unconscious, non-linguistic processing that’s necessary even to make sense of the language itself”. This linguistic framing can influence people’s attitudes towards wildlife. Languages carry narratives, stories, and oral traditions, often incorporating the elements of local ecology that are exclusive to a specific community.

The data collected from the interviews reveals the varying names used to address an animal within a 5-kilometre range, providing insights into the diversity of its nomenclature within the local area.

A list of identified names used to address whales in Majali, Devbaug and Maldarwada are given below:

- **Devmaasa** - God fish (in Marathi and Konkani). Konkani and Marathi-speaking fishing folks refer to whales by this name.
- **Devrameenu** - God’s fish (in Kannada). Kannada-speaking fishing communities address it using this specific name.
- **Peer Saheb** - Elderly Sufi master (originally Persian): the one who gives spiritual direction to their disciples, master (source: wiki). Some Konkani-speaking people use this name.
- **Husseini Machi** - Handsome fish (Arabic origin). Whale species are referred to by this name among the fishing community in the region who follow Islamic culture.

Multiple studies suggest that language not only acts as a medium for cultural transmission but also mirrors the understanding of the local environment, including its flora, fauna, and other ecosystem components. In this particular study, an effort was made to explore the origins of these names by gathering the narratives shared by the participants.

Some stories shared by the participants were inspired by religious mythology (the story of Manu from Hindu Mythology and the story of Prophet Yunus from Hadees), and

others stemmed from local narratives, predominantly influenced by personal experiences. It is interesting to observe the wide array of names employed to refer to whales within a 5km radius, highlighting the diversity in the naming practices.

“We don’t eat it, one should not be supposed to eat it. Isn’t that our God? Our ancestors used to believe that the devmasa carries precious treasures like gold and pearls in its belly, which is why we refer to it as devmaasa.” This is one such narrative shared by a Konkani-speaking Gabit woman when asked about the origin of the name “Devmaasa”.

Within a linguistically diverse community, individuals draw upon a rich repertoire of linguistic resources, idioms, proverbs, and metaphors to craft compelling stories that reflect their worldview, understanding of the environment, and interactions with wildlife. The existence of diverse languages in the study area has given rise to numerous narratives about marine mammals, yet none of them portray whales as cruel creatures.

Languages are embedded with cultural values, beliefs, and norms. They shape how people perceive their relationship with the natural world. For instance, some languages may have specific terms of respect or kinship for animals, reflecting a cultural reverence for wildlife. It is noteworthy in this study that all the names attributed to whales carry a sense of divinity or sacredness. The names *Devmaasa*, *Devrameenu*, *Peer Saheb*, and *Husseini Machi* all reflect the perception of whales as divine beings. These names indicate a belief in the sacred nature of whales within the cultural context studied.

It is also important to note that languages are not determinative of perceptions, and individuals within a linguistic community can have diverse perspectives. However, languages provide a framework and tools for expressing and shaping those perceptions within a cultural context.



Whale breaching | Credit: Opensource/Canva

INTER-SPECIES COMMUNICATION

There have been many studies showing interspecies communication like animal-birds, human-animal, and human-birds in a shared space. Human-animal communication encompasses various forms of interaction, including verbal and non-verbal communication, body language, vocalizations, gestures, and shared activities. Dogs are known for their ability to communicate with humans through a combination of vocalizations and body language (wagging, facial expressions etc.). Dolphins are recognized for their sophisticated vocalizations and social conduct. They engage in communication by employing a series of clicks, whistles, and body movements. Through extensive research and training, humans have devised methods to engage with dolphins, utilising precise hand signals and vocal cues (Herzing, D. L. 2016).

The current study also provides insights into the instances of communication between humans and whales. While whales primarily communicate through their own complex vocalizations, it appears that fishermen, who frequently come into contact with whales, have developed a unique and individualized approach to communicating with these marine mammals.

“Humara pir saheb na[...]humara raksha karo aisa bole to chala jaata hai, nuksan nahi pahuchata, (You know, our peer saheb.. If we seek protection, the whale moves away and does not harm us).” said a fisherman from Devbaug

Another fisherman from Dandibag shared: *“Ninna paadige neenu hogu, naavu hotte tumbisuva saluvagi bandiddeve, ninna daariyalli neenu hogu” (You go on your path.. we are here to fulfil our hunger. You continue on your own way).*

Respondents also shared that there is a belief that whales comprehend the emotions of fishermen. They believe that when they offer prayers with joined palms, whales listen to them. Consequently, they refrain from expressing any negative sentiments towards whales, as they fear that it may provoke a potential retribution from the whale in the future.

“Ondu vele naavu enadru tappu helidare adu matte bandu doni suttu haaki, maguchi haakuttade.” (If we say anything wrong, there is a possibility that it might return and surround the boat, causing a disturbance).

In this context, both whales and humans utilize a range of gestures and verbal communication as forms of interaction. Many of the fishermen shared that whales are kind and they care for humans. Such observations by local fishermen need more attention and further research.

The altruistic behaviour exhibited by whales has been observed previously, although it has not been extensively studied. Human-whale communication not only contributes to scientific research and conservation efforts but also fosters a deeper appreciation for the beauty and significance of these remarkable creatures in our marine ecosystems.

DISCUSSION



Fishing boat at the port | Credit: Sahamatha

MUTUAL AVOIDANCE

Mutual avoidance in a shared space can refer to an approach where humans and wildlife consciously and intentionally avoid direct contact or conflict with each other when necessary for the benefit of both parties. It is based on the understanding that certain species, particularly those that are large, should be given space and respected in their natural habitats to minimize stress, harm, and disturbance to both humans and wildlife.

In the study area, there is a prevalent sense of reverence for whales due to their immense size. Nearly all the respondents expressed the belief that it is natural to offer prayers and seek shelter from these magnificent creatures when they see unimaginably huge animals.

The idea of mutual avoidance recognizes the importance of maintaining a safe distance and respecting the boundaries of wildlife. It is clear from the research, fishermen in the study area acknowledge that whales have their own needs, behaviours, and territories., and it is safer for fishermen to coexist in a way that minimizes negative impacts on the natural behaviour and well-being of wildlife.

Mutual avoidance in conservation practice can involve establishing a distinct physical separation in the shared space between humans and wildlife. However, in the context of fishing communities, where there are no clear boundaries in the ocean, they still maintain a respectful boundary, ensuring that they never disturb the natural habitat of whales.

Fishermen recognise that maintaining a healthy and harmonious relationship with whales requires a mutual understanding and respect for each other's needs and boundaries. The research emphasizes the interconnection between mutual avoidance and mutual respect, illustrating how these two concepts reinforce one another. Mutual avoidance in conservation practice fosters a harmonious bond between humans and other species within a shared habitat, promoting coexistence and enabling both to thrive in their respective surroundings, particularly when there's an understanding between both species.

STORIES SHAPING BEHAVIOUR

Stories have the ability to captivate, inspire, and engage people on an emotional and intellectual level, making them a potent tool for shaping perceptions, values, and behaviours. Though Western influence on human-whale interaction has been multifaceted, encompassing both negative impacts and positive efforts towards conservation, the narratives and perspectives of the local communities regarding whales have often been marginalized or overlooked.

It is important to note that oral narratives are dynamic and evolve over time. They are shaped by the cultural, social, and environmental contexts in which they are shared. As such, they reflect the lived experiences, adaptations, and responses of communities to their changing environments.

The majority of participants expressed the belief that whales bring good fortune to fishermen. Since whales bring numerous fishes to the shore they believe that spotting a whale during fishing ensures a successful catch for the day. Similar beliefs have been

observed among fishing communities in Vietnam, where people also believe that whales have protected and assisted fishermen during times of danger or distress.

In addition to personal narratives, individuals are inherently engaged in broader collective narratives that significantly influence our behavioural patterns as a species. Human existence is permeated with a plethora of narratives that exert substantial influence on our actions and conduct. The study proposes to place greater emphasis on documenting the local narratives shaped by lived experiences rather than focusing on the already existing Western-influenced narratives of wildlife.

The study also identifies fear and spirituality as integral components of interspecies communication. These parameters influence the belief systems surrounding perceptions of other species.

REIMAGINING CONSERVATION PRACTICES

- **Challenging Eurocentric perspectives and narratives:** In the study, it has been argued that local narratives contribute to the coexistence of multiple species in a shared space. Along with encouraging community-based stories, it is important to question the dominant position of Western narratives and perspectives, which have historically influenced and shaped conservation practices. It would encourage the amplification of diverse voices and narratives that have the potential to challenge existing power structures and foster inclusivity.
- **Redefining protected areas and shared spaces:** Traditionally, protected areas have been designated as spaces where human activities are restricted or limited to preserve biodiversity and ecological processes. However, this approach often neglects the presence and rights of local communities with long-standing relationships with these areas. It is vital to consider humans as one of several organisms that engage with different species, collectively influencing and shaping environments. Taking a "Multispecies lens" approach when analyzing landscapes can lead to a deeper comprehension of the intricacies of conservation challenges ([Hannah E. Parathian, et al., 2018](#)). By redefining protected areas as shared spaces, conservation efforts can benefit from the insights and contributions of local communities by promoting a sense of ownership among community members.

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- **Embracing diverse knowledge systems:** Recognising the importance of diverse knowledge systems, including traditional ecological knowledge, and granting them equal weightage to Western-influenced 'scientific knowledge' is crucial in the present era. This could be one of the significant ways to break the hierarchy and decolonise the conservation efforts. Different knowledge systems offer unique perspectives and insights that can enhance conservation outcomes.
 - **Adopting an interdisciplinary perspective:** Conservation challenges often require insights from diverse fields such as ecology, social sciences, economics, policy, and cultural studies. An interdisciplinary perspective encourages the exchange of knowledge, methodologies, and insights across disciplines, leading to innovative approaches and more effective conservation strategies. Furthermore, it allows for a better assessment of the trade-offs and synergies between ecological conservation, social well-being, and economic development

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the peaceful coexistence between humans and whales in the study area. The local narratives lived experiences of the fishing communities, and linguistic diversity provides valuable insights into the perceptions, behaviours, and cultural significance associated with whales. Understanding the role of lived experiences in shaping perceptions is crucial for conservation efforts, environmental education, and sustainable management of natural resources. By recognising and valuing diverse lived experiences, one can foster inclusive and participatory approaches that consider local knowledge, cultural contexts, and community perspectives in conservation and decision-making processes.

It is important to acknowledge that lived experiences are subjective and can vary among individuals and communities. Different people may have contrasting experiences and interpretations of the same phenomenon based on their unique circumstances, cultural backgrounds, and personal perspectives.

The study also highlights the linguistic diversity present in the study area. Languages are essential for maintaining cultural identity and a sense of belonging within a community. Recognising the value of different languages in environmental discourse can lead to a richer understanding of the complexities of human-nature relationships and foster inclusive approaches to conservation and sustainability.

The study emphasises the significance of documenting local narratives. Conservation narratives rooted in traditional ecological knowledge and local wisdom provide an alternative lens. By weaving together personal experiences, ancestral wisdom, and scientific understanding, these stories offer a holistic and interconnected perspective on conservation. Incorporating and respecting these narratives in conservation planning, environmental education, and policy-making can foster a deeper appreciation for cultural diversity and strengthen the connection between people and their environments.

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