



# My Journey as a Conservation Ecologist & Photographer



**Dr Latika Nath**  
latika@latikanath.com

Dr Latika Nath is a Conservation Ecologist and Photographer. With a Masters on Elephant-Human Conflict Resolution and a Doctorate in Tiger Conservation and Management from the University of Oxford, she is one of the first Indian scientists to work on Tigers, and the first Indian with a doctorate on tiger conservation. An author, photographer, diver, and hotelier, she is an intrepid traveller with a passion for the outdoors and has always lived a life intimately connected with animals. She now focuses on using photography and writing as tools to raise conservation awareness alongside continuing efforts for wildlife conservation at the grassroots level in India.

Her life and work have been featured on National Geographic television in a documentary called 'The Tiger Princess' and on the Discovery Channel in the programme 'Wild Things'. She has contributed to films like 'Sita's Story' and a 'Tale of Two Tigers' on the BBC, as well as the National Geographic Magazine cover story on tigers for the 'Year of the Tiger' special in 2000. She has authored two coffee table books – Hidden India and Omo. Her work has been featured in several other books.

She has exhibited at the largest exhibition on Tigers "The Eye of the Tiger", with 37 of the world's top Wildlife Photographers at the Royal Albert Hall, London. She is a member of Wildlife Photographers United and has contributed to the Series on Remembering Wildlife and her photograph was a part of the event on the Great Apes at the Royal Geographical Society, London. She was awarded the Photographer for a Cause for the year 2019 by T+L India and South-East Asia. She has been awarded by ATOI, is a UN Karmaveer Maharatna awardee and is a Chevening Scholar.

**M**Y fascination with the world of conservation began when I was a toddler. I was fortunate, having been born into a family of leaders and thinkers. My family boasted of Nuclear Scientists, Thinkers, Philosophers, Women Entrepreneurs, Doctors and Lawyers – some of the most pathbreaking people in their time. My father, Prof. Lalit M Nath, is a world-renowned epidemiologist and an equally well-known Conservationist. It was at his side that I met with legends like Dr Salim Ali and shyly watched the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi, endorse action to protect the incredible natural heritage of India.

At the age of 7, I decided to become an Ecologist. A new goal that most did not take seriously and many scoffed at. Around me, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), Delhi, most young people my age were studying to become doctors and engineers.

I had begun to apply to universities abroad as there was no place that would offer an undergraduate degree in Ecology in India. I was frustrated because at the time, there was no way to allow students to select subjects of their choice at the school levels. I would have ideally liked to study Biology and Mathematics with Chemistry, Physics, Geography and Economics. I had been accepted at several Ivy League colleges in the USA when the University of Delhi announced an undergraduate course in Environmental Sciences.

I entered Delhi University at sixteen and realized that I was going to have to sacrifice college student life as my friends knew it. The Bachelor's degree was offered only in one college in each of the North and South campuses, and these were not my ideal colleges of choice. Classes continued till late evening and well past most other programmes. Commuting in peak office hours by public transport



was a nightmare. A three-month long teachers strike followed with almost no studies; then the college festivals were scheduled. Those years in college were not ideal.

I was determined to succeed and moved in the middle of the second year from the north to the south campus. Immediately after my third-year examinations, I was awarded the Chevening Scholarship by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and I left to pursue a Masters in Rural Resource Management under the School of Forestry at the University College of North Wales, Bangor.

I focused on wildlife conservation and hydrology and worked at the Institute of Terrestrial Ecology to learn the techniques of Satellite Remote Sensing and the use of Geographical Information Systems to model changes in the habitats of species. My thesis was on the Human Elephant Conflict at Rajaji National Park, India with the guidance and support of the staff at the newly instituted Wildlife Institute of India.

I returned to India with a burning passion for conservation and applied for several scholarships and doctoral programs. The hope was that I would be allowed to work on Snow Leopards, Brown Bear and Hangul in Kashmir. It was not to be. Some months after my return, terrorism broke out in the valley of Srinagar. Seven staff were gunned down, and our home was burnt using incendiary bombs. My grandparents survived but lost their material possessions and had to move to Delhi.

I sought guidance from my father and many of his friends to find a new focus for research for my doctorate. It was at this time that I met Dr H.S. Panwar, the then Director of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). He threw a gauntlet at me and asked if I would take on the challenge of doing the first ever doctoral level scientific research project on our National Animal, the tiger. My life changed from that moment on.

My first guide at the Wildlife Institute was Prof. V.B. Mathur, who later became the Director of the WII. Dr Mathur had a keen interest in GIS and helped me map a large part of Eastern Madhya Pradesh and to analyze remote sensing data over 30 years to assess forest fragmentation patterns and identify prime habitat for the tiger in this region.

I simultaneously began to apply for scholarships to fund my doctoral degree. One of the scholarships that I applied for was INLAKS. I was selected to be in the final three candidates for the scholarship and went in for my interview. There was a panel — one of whom was a man I will never forget. This person began by examining my appearance and loudly proclaimed that I was too young and looked too spoilt to be able to work in the field. He was also of the opinion that my work with modern technologies like GIS was fine for the developed nations of the west but that these had no relevance for India. Let it suffice to say I was not offered a scholarship.

Meanwhile, at the WII I was asked to work under the guidance of another younger faculty member. This person seemed to have an issue with working with a woman and proceeded to tell me that since he was my guide, I was going to have to follow all that he said blindly, and that I would not be allowed to question techniques or instructions. This was of course, totally unacceptable, as science by its very nature asks one to have an open mind and question everything to gain a better understanding and new insights.

I could not continue to work at the WII and was fortunate enough to gain admission to the Wildlife Conservation Research Unit at the University of Oxford. Four scholarships and five years of research led to the first doctoral thesis on the tiger by an Indian.

With this came the interest of the National Geographic and a film on me and my work titled the “Tiger Princess of India”. Meantime, my work in conservation continued with projects with international bodies like IUCN, the UN and ICIMOD. I worked in a diverse number of projects ranging from Wetland ecology to High altitude landscape ecology, and species as diverse as the Gangetic Dolphin and the Snow Leopard.

However, still faced with unending virulent personal and professional attacks, I decided to move from research and academia to hands-on conservation work at the grassroot level focusing on Madhya Pradesh. The decision to change the way I worked allowed me to gain a better understanding of the practical application of conservation biology to daily life and situations on the buffer areas surrounding national parks. This was a belt where the maximum human wildlife conflict took place, and often led to injury and mortality.

Working in the villages also allowed me to understand the pressing need for controlling illegal wood extraction from forests, controlling plastic use and working to raise awareness for mitigating animal crop predation.

A project with MIT resulted where I created a simple cost-effective method for making charcoal briquettes from Lantana. I also worked with a team from Nepal to design a system for garbage recycling which is now being used in Kathmandu.

Research-based projects connected with wildlife are difficult to implement as individuals. There needs to be a change in the way state governments work in the forest departments. As trained foresters, there is a fundamental difference in their approach to dealing with wildlife issues. A new cadre of people needs to be created who are trained exclusively in dealing with wildlife conservation and human-wildlife conflict resolution. This cadre needs to be the one working with all large development projects to ensure the correct mitigation steps are incorporated within the initial project proposals to ensure ecosystem protection and watershed integrity. These same wildlife trained officials need to be the team taking care of all protected areas in India as well as sensitive ecosystems across the country.

A policy decision is also needed to ensure that all sites of special scientific interest, ecosystems where endangered or endemic species live, and origins of riverine systems are managed as regions of national heritage importance.

To encourage women to enter the field of Conservation Biology, precedence needs to be given to job creation in this field. Linkages between Tourism and Biological Conservation need to be strengthened and a national level project for this needs to be created jointly with the Ministry of Tourism.

To ensure the safety of women in the field, especially in remote forest areas, facilities need to be designed and protocols implemented. Often, security is a great issue in wilderness areas. Women Veterinarians are also not common and this is another area that needs attention. With a large agro-based population in India, veterinary science is an important area that has not been given the focus it should.

As a woman working in the field of Conservation Biology, the journey has been tough. There have been challenges and many times very difficult but the immediate perceptible difference you see your work making in the lives of people and animals makes it very worthwhile.

