



When Forest Healers Fall Silent: Traditional Medicine Under Human–Animal Conflict Regimes

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Abstract

For indigenous communities, forests are not only habitats but living pharmacies where traditional medicine evolves through sustained interaction among humans, animals, and ecological systems. However, the growing intensity of human–animal conflict has profoundly altered this relationship. Expanding conservation controls, habitat fragmentation, and conflict-driven forest restrictions have increasingly limited indigenous access to medicinal resources, placing traditional healing practices at risk of extinction.

This paper examines the impact of human–animal conflict regimes on indigenous systems of traditional medicine, situating the analysis within the broader framework of forest governance, conservation law, and indigenous rights. It argues that contemporary conflict management strategies often designed with an exclusive focus on wildlife protection and human safety frequently overlook the healthcare needs and cultural practices of forest-dependent communities. As a result, indigenous healers face marginalization, criminalization of customary practices, and erosion of intergenerational medicinal knowledge.

Adopting a socio-legal and rights-based approach, the study critically analyses relevant legal frameworks, including wildlife conservation laws, forest rights legislation, and international instruments such as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The paper highlights the tension between conservation imperatives and indigenous health systems, particularly in conflict-prone forest landscapes where access to medicinal plants and traditional spaces is increasingly regulated or denied.

The paper contends that the silencing of forest healers represents not merely a cultural loss but a violation of the right to health, livelihood, and cultural identity of indigenous communities. It concludes by advocating for inclusive human–animal conflict management frameworks that recognize traditional

medicine as an essential component of sustainable coexistence. Integrating indigenous knowledge into conservation and conflict mitigation policies is crucial for ensuring ethical, equitable, and sustainable solutions.

Keywords: Indigenous Peoples, Traditional Medicine, Human–Animal Conflict, Indigenous Rights, Forest Rights.

Introduction: Whispers of the Forest —Indigenous Knowledge, Healing, and Coexistence

“The earth does not belong to us; we belong to the earth.” — Attributed to Chief Seattle

Indigenous systems of traditional medicine are not merely therapeutic practices; they are living expressions of an epistemology rooted in coexistence. Among forest-dwelling communities in India, healing emerges not from extraction but from relationship a continuous dialogue between humans, animals, plants, and the land they inhabit. In these communities, medicine is neither commodified nor isolated; it is embedded in ritual, responsibility, and restraint. Every cure carries a moral instruction: take only what the forest allows, return what you disturb, and listen when the forest falls silent.

Traditional healers often elder, women, and spiritual custodians function as both medical practitioners and ecological regulators. Their knowledge of animal behaviour, seasonal movement, plant toxicity, and regenerative cycles has historically mitigated conflict between humans and wildlife. Such knowledge systems represent what contemporary scholars describe as biocultural heritage, wherein biodiversity and cultural survival are inseparable. Yet, modern legal frameworks have struggled to recognise this interconnectedness, often treating forests as administrative spaces rather than inhabited landscapes of care.

Colonial forest governance marked the first rupture in this relationship. The Indian Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, and 1927 systematically alienated indigenous communities from their medicinal landscapes, criminalising access to plants and forest produce that had sustained generations. Healing practices that once flourished under customary norms were reframed as illegal extraction. This legal displacement continues to echo in contemporary conservation regimes, where wildlife protection often supersedes indigenous survival without adequate reconciliation mechanisms.

The Supreme Court of India has intermittently acknowledged the deep link between indigenous identity and land. In *Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, the Court recognised that land is not merely an economic asset for Scheduled Tribes but “a means of livelihood and dignity”. While the case concerned mining leases, its reasoning implicitly extends to medicinal practices dependent on forest access. Denial of such access erodes not only economic security but cultural continuity, particularly where traditional medicine functions as the primary healthcare system.

Human–animal conflict introduces a further layer of vulnerability. As wildlife habitats shrink and animal incursions increase, indigenous healers find themselves navigating a paradox: they are custodians of coexistence, yet they bear disproportionate risk. Encounters with elephants, bears, or

predators often occur during medicinal foraging, exposing healers to physical harm while simultaneously subjecting them to legal scrutiny should conflict arise. The forest healer, once revered, becomes precariously positioned between conservation law and survival.

Traditional medicine also operates through observational ethics understanding animal movement to avoid confrontation, recognising signs of territorial stress, and adjusting human behaviour accordingly. Such practices resonate with contemporary conflict-mitigation strategies now promoted through technology and data, yet remain undervalued because they resist quantification. The law's preference for scientific evidence over experiential knowledge marginalises indigenous expertise, despite its proven sustainability.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006, sought to correct historical injustice by recognising individual and community forest rights, including rights over minor forest produce. Medicinal plants fall squarely within this ambit. However, implementation gaps persist. Procedural barriers, delayed recognition, and conflicting conservation priorities often prevent healers from exercising these rights meaningfully. Where rights exist on paper but not in practice, silence replaces song the forest healer's knowledge recedes into memory.

The erosion of traditional medicine is not a passive loss; it is an active silencing. When healers retreat from forests due to fear of animals, of law, of punishment an entire healthcare system collapse. This loss disproportionately affects women, who are primary knowledge bearers of ethnomedicine. Their displacement signals not only ecological breakdown but gendered injustice within conflict regimes.

Thus, indigenous traditional medicine must be understood as a legal subject deserving protection not as folklore but as a rights-bearing practice essential to coexistence. As human-animal conflict intensifies, the wisdom embedded in these healing traditions offers pathways toward harmony that law alone cannot script. To ignore them is to allow the forest's whispers to fade, leaving conflict to speak in their place.

Land, Law, and Loss: Human-Animal Conflict as a Legal and Cultural Crisis

Human-animal conflict is often narrated as an unfortunate by-product of development or conservation failure. Yet, for indigenous communities, it is neither accidental nor new. It is the legal manifestation of a deeper rupture the severing of land from life, of territory from memory, and of coexistence from governance. When animals cross into villages and humans are driven out of forests, the conflict is not merely spatial; it is jurisprudential. It reflects how law has reimagined land as property, wildlife as state-owned entities, and indigenous presence as conditional.

Colonial forest laws inaugurated this crisis by transforming inhabited forests into regulated enclosures. The Indian Forest Act, 1927 consolidated state control, rendering customary access to land and resources illegal unless expressly permitted. Indigenous communities, once stewards of ecological balance, were reframed as encroachers. Wildlife, meanwhile, was elevated as an object of preservation

divorced from the human ecologies that had sustained it. This asymmetry laid the groundwork for contemporary conflict regimes, where animals are protected by law while human survival is subject to administrative discretion.

Post-independence conservation legislation, particularly the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, reinforced this imbalance. While the Act marked a crucial commitment to biodiversity protection, it largely ignored the lived realities of forest-dwelling communities. Protected areas were declared without adequate rehabilitation, and traditional land-use patterns were disrupted. As forests were cleared for infrastructure or fenced for conservation, animals were displaced, altering their migratory routes and increasing encounters with human settlements. Conflict, in this sense, became a legally produced condition rather than an ecological anomaly.

Judicial discourse in India has occasionally acknowledged this contradiction. In *Centre for Environmental Law, WWF–India v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court emphasised the inviolability of wildlife corridors and protected habitats. However, the judgment simultaneously exposed a tension: conservation imperatives were prioritised without equally robust engagement with indigenous displacement and livelihood loss. The forest was protected, but its people remained peripheral to the legal imagination.

Human–animal conflict thus emerges as a crisis of recognition. When crops are destroyed by elephants or livestock killed by predators, compensation mechanisms are slow, inconsistent, and bureaucratically burdensome. Indigenous communities often lacking formal land titles due to historical dispossession struggle to prove loss within a system that demands documentary evidence. The law's insistence on paperwork becomes another form of exclusion, where suffering must be proven in formats alien to lived experience.

The Supreme Court's intervention in *Wildlife First v. Ministry of Forest and Environment* starkly illustrated this fragility. The 2019 order directing eviction of forest dwellers whose claims under the Forest Rights Act had been rejected triggered widespread fear among indigenous communities. Though subsequently stayed, the judgment revealed how tenuous legally recognised belonging remains. In regions already grappling with increased wildlife incursions, the threat of eviction compounds vulnerability, pushing communities further into conflict zones without institutional protection.

Land alienation also dismantles indigenous conflict-mitigation practices. Traditionally, spatial zoning, seasonal movement, and ritual observances regulated human–animal interactions. Sacred groves functioned as ecological buffers; hunting taboos preserved breeding cycles. Modern land-use planning, however, disregards these norms, replacing them with rigid boundaries that animals neither recognise nor respect. The result is a geography of collision, where highways slice through corridors and settlements encroach upon feeding grounds.

In *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India*, the Court expanded the definition of “forest” to include all areas recorded as forest in government records, regardless of ownership. While

environmentally progressive, this interpretation further complicated indigenous claims, as customary lands not formally recorded were subsumed under state control. The forest expanded in law, even as indigenous space contracted in practice. Human–animal conflict intensified within this shrinking human margin.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 was envisioned as a corrective a legal acknowledgment that historical injustice underpinned contemporary ecological crises. By recognising community forest resource rights, the Act sought to restore indigenous governance over forests. Yet, implementation remains uneven. Where rights are unrecognised or contested, communities lack authority to manage wildlife movement or mitigate conflict through traditional means. Law, instead of enabling coexistence, becomes an instrument of delay and denial.

This legal uncertainty fosters retaliatory violence against wildlife, not as malice but as desperation. When survival is criminalised and compensation delayed, the moral economy collapses. Animals become symbols of state indifference rather than co-inhabitants of shared landscapes. The tragedy lies not in the conflict itself, but in the law's failure to mediate it with empathy and equity.

Human–animal conflict, therefore, is not merely about animals entering human spaces; it is about humans being pushed out of legal consideration. It is a crisis where land is regulated without listening, where conservation is pursued without consent, and where coexistence is demanded without support. Until law learns to see land as lived space storied, sacred, and shared conflict will continue to multiply, echoing through forests stripped of both harmony and healing.

When the Healer Becomes the Accused: Criminalisation, Liability, and Survival

In the forest courts of survival, intent is rarely malicious. Yet the law, trained to see guilt before grief, often transforms the indigenous healer into the accused. In regimes governing human–animal conflict, criminal law intrudes not as a guardian of justice but as an instrument of erasure. Acts of subsistence, protection, and healing are reclassified as offences, and traditional ecological practices are stripped of legitimacy. The result is a jurisprudence where survival itself becomes suspect.

Forest-dwelling communities live at the intersection of competing legal claims: wildlife protection statutes, forest conservation mandates, and criminal liability frameworks that rarely account for structural vulnerability. When a wild animal is injured or killed in the course of defending crops, livestock, or life, the law often responds with prosecution rather than protection. Sections 9 and 51 of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 criminalise hunting and harm to protected species, imposing stringent penalties irrespective of context. The statute leaves little room to distinguish between poaching for profit and acts of desperation undertaken to avert immediate harm.

This rigidity has real consequences. In regions affected by persistent elephant or tiger incursions, indigenous villagers face a cruel paradox: tolerate loss and starvation, or resist and risk incarceration. Criminal law, in such settings, functions not as deterrence but as discipline, enforcing silence and

submission. The healer who once knew how to calm animal pathways or read forest warnings is now reduced to an offender in official records.

Judicial responses have been ambivalent. In *State of Bihar v. Murad Ali Khan*, the Supreme Court emphasised the importance of strict enforcement of wildlife laws to curb ecological destruction. The Court upheld criminal liability for illegal hunting, underscoring the state's duty to protect endangered species. While environmentally significant, the judgment did not engage with scenarios where harm arises from human–animal conflict rather than commercial exploitation. The absence of contextual differentiation renders indigenous survival practices legally invisible.

Similarly, in *Sansar Chand v. State of Rajasthan*, the Court adopted a stringent approach toward wildlife offences, characterising them as crimes against society at large. While the ruling targeted organised poaching networks, its language has been applied broadly, often ensnaring marginalised forest dwellers within the same punitive net. The law's failure lies not in its concern for wildlife, but in its refusal to see human vulnerability as legally relevant.

Liability regimes in human–animal conflict extend beyond criminal law into civil negligence and strict liability doctrines. Victims of animal attacks frequently seek compensation from the state, arguing failure of duty to manage wildlife. Courts have occasionally recognised this claim. In *Geeta Devi v. State of Bihar*, the Patna High Court held the state liable to compensate families of persons killed by wild animals, acknowledging that wildlife is under state protection and control. This reasoning situates liability within the state's custodial responsibility, offering a narrow but significant opening for justice.

Yet compensation mechanisms remain inconsistent and discretionary. Delays, inadequate amounts, and procedural barriers render relief largely symbolic. Moreover, compensation addresses loss after the fact; it does not protect those who act pre-emptively to prevent harm. When indigenous persons erect barriers, light fires, or use traditional deterrents that inadvertently injure animals, they may still face prosecution. Preventive action is not recognised as a legitimate defence.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 complicates this landscape. While it acknowledges the rights of forest dwellers to protect and manage community forest resources, its interface with criminal law remains underdeveloped. In theory, recognised community rights should empower indigenous governance over conflict mitigation. In practice, unresolved claims and administrative reluctance mean that communities operate in a legal grey zone responsible for conservation outcomes but excluded from decision-making authority.

This legal precarity intensifies the criminalisation of traditional medicine. Collection of medicinal plants within protected areas, once routine and regulated by customary norms, is now policed through permit regimes inaccessible to many indigenous healers. Failure to comply transforms healers into offenders under forest and wildlife laws. Knowledge transmitted across generations is interrupted

by fear of arrest, fines, and confiscation. The forest pharmacy is sealed not by extinction, but by enforcement.

Courts have rarely addressed this epistemic loss. However, a glimmer of recognition appears in *Samatha v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, where the Supreme Court acknowledged the integral relationship between tribal communities, land, and livelihood. While the case focused on mining leases, its reasoning affirms that economic and cultural survival cannot be severed from territorial rights. Applied to human–animal conflict, this principle suggests that criminal liability must be tempered by recognition of indigenous dependence on forest ecosystems.

Ultimately, the criminalisation of indigenous survival reflects a deeper moral failure. Law punishes outcomes without interrogating origins. It condemns acts without addressing displacement, poverty, and ecological disruption. The healer becomes the accused not because harm was intended, but because law lacks the language to recognise coexistence as a legal value.

If coexistence is to be more than rhetoric, criminal law must learn restraint. Defences rooted in necessity, proportionality, and customary practice must be meaningfully incorporated. Liability must shift from individual survival acts to systemic governance failures. Until then, the forest will continue to witness a quiet injustice where those who once healed its wounds are prosecuted for trying to live within it.

Courts at the Forest's Edge: Indian Judicial Reflections on Rights, Conservation, and Conflict

Indian courts often stand at the forest's edge close enough to sense its urgency, yet bound by doctrines that struggle to hold its complexity. Judicial engagement with forests has historically been shaped by a deep ecological conscience, but one that frequently speaks the language of protection more fluently than that of participation. Human–animal conflict cases reveal this tension most vividly, where rights, conservation, and survival converge without a settled grammar of coexistence.

Environmental jurisprudence in India has been celebrated globally for its expansive interpretation of Article 21 of the Constitution. Forests have been read into the right to life, and wildlife into the right to ecological balance. In *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India*, the Supreme Court transformed forest governance by broadening the definition of “forest” and placing conservation under continuous judicial monitoring. The ruling marked a watershed moment, signalling judicial resolve to arrest ecological decline. Yet, the forest that emerged in law was largely abstract mapped through records and expert committees while forest-dwelling communities remained juridically peripheral.

Human–animal conflict cases expose the consequences of this abstraction. Wildlife protection is often enforced through restrictions that intensify indigenous precarity. In *Centre for Environmental Law, WWF–India v. Union of India*, the Court emphasised the sanctity of wildlife corridors and the inviolability of protected habitats. While ecologically necessary, such pronouncements seldom address

how displaced or restricted communities are to survive within shrinking legal space. The judiciary's silence on livelihood transitions and traditional medicine is not hostile, but it is consequential.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 sought to recalibrate this imbalance by recognising individual and community rights over forest resources. Courts have acknowledged its transformative intent. In *Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. v. Ministry of Environment & Forest*, the Supreme Court affirmed that indigenous consent is central to forest governance, recognising cultural and religious ties to land. This judgment came closest to allowing the forest to “speak back” through its people. Yet such moments remain exceptions rather than norms.

Human–animal conflict litigation often frames communities as victims or violators, rarely as governors. Compensation cases, such as *Geeta Devi v. State of Bihar*, acknowledge state responsibility for wildlife-caused harm, but do not address preventive indigenous practices or governance rights. Courts respond after injury, not before erosion. The healer appears only after harm, never as a legal actor capable of averting it.

Indian judicial reflection thus remains incomplete. The courts protect forests robustly, animals increasingly, but indigenous knowledge only incidentally. Standing at the forest's edge, the judiciary has yet to fully step inside to listen to customary law, medicinal memory, and conflict mitigation practices rooted in lived coexistence.

Echoes Across Borders: Comparative Indigenous Rights Jurisprudence

Across borders, courts have begun to hear what Indian jurisprudence is still learning to translate: that land, culture, health, and knowledge are indivisible. Comparative indigenous rights jurisprudence offers not templates, but echoes resonant reminders that forests speak many legal languages.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights has been at the forefront of this listening. In *Yakye Axa Indigenous Community v. Paraguay*, the Court held that denial of ancestral land violated the right to life because it dismantled food systems, medicinal practices, and healthcare access. Life, the Court observed, is sustained not merely by survival, but by continuity. Similarly, in *Saramaka People v. Suriname*, the Court recognised indigenous stewardship as essential to biodiversity protection, rejecting conservation models that erase indigenous presence.

These decisions are instructive for human–animal conflict governance. They reject the assumption that exclusion protects nature. Instead, they affirm that indigenous knowledge particularly traditional medicine is a form of environmental governance refined through generations of coexistence.

The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, in the *Endorois* case, echoed this reasoning. Forced eviction for wildlife conservation was found to violate rights to culture, health, religion, and development. The Commission explicitly recognised the loss of access to medicinal plants as a violation of the right to health. Conservation, it held, cannot justify cultural extinction.

Canadian jurisprudence complements this approach by addressing epistemic justice. In *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, the Supreme Court recognised oral histories as valid legal evidence,

acknowledging that indigenous law lives in memory and narration. Later, *Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia* affirmed that indigenous title includes decision-making authority over land use. These judgments reposition indigenous peoples not as stakeholders, but as rights-holders and governors.

Together, these cases form a jurisprudence of listening one that Indian courts may draw upon to reconceptualise human–animal conflict not as a management failure, but as a rights discourse demanding plural legal engagement.

Silenced Pharmacopeia: Gender, Memory, and the Erosion of Living Traditions

Traditional medicine is often carried in women's hands through seeds saved, roots remembered, and remedies whispered across generations. When forests become inaccessible, it is not only biodiversity that suffers, but gendered memory itself. The erosion of indigenous pharmacopeia is thus not merely ecological or legal; it is profoundly gendered.

Women healers are rarely recognised by law. Forest regulations criminalise collection without permits, ignoring that medicinal knowledge survives through daily practice rather than institutional validation. Human–animal conflict exacerbates this silencing. Increased wildlife presence leads to restrictions on forest entry, disproportionately affecting women responsible for healthcare, food security, and caregiving.

Legal frameworks remain largely blind to this loss. Courts speak of compensation and corridors, but rarely of memory interrupted. Feminist legal theory reminds us that what law does not see, it does not protect. When medicinal practices disappear, the loss is not recorded as injury; it is absorbed as inevitability.

International human rights bodies have begun to recognise this dimension. The Endorois decision acknowledged women's role in traditional healthcare, implicitly recognising gendered harm. Similarly, UN instruments on indigenous women emphasise that cultural survival is inseparable from gender justice. Indian jurisprudence has yet to meaningfully integrate this insight into forest and wildlife cases.

The silenced pharmacopeia is thus a quiet casualty of conflict regimes. When women can no longer walk forest paths safely or legally, healing becomes memory, and memory fades without practice. Law, in failing to recognise this erosion, becomes complicit in it.

Law as Listening: Toward Restorative and Rights-Based Conflict Governance

To listen is not to surrender authority, but to exercise it wisely. Law as listening reimagines governance not as command, but as conversation. In the context of human–animal conflict, this shift is urgent.

Restorative governance begins by recognising indigenous communities as co-governors of forests. It demands legal pluralism where customary law informs statutory interpretation, and traditional

medicine is recognised as public health infrastructure. Criminal law must yield to necessity and proportionality. Conservation must align with consent.

Courts play a central role in this transformation. By admitting oral testimony, recognising customary practices, and enforcing participatory duties, the judiciary can move from adjudication to restoration. Comparative jurisprudence shows this is not utopian it is achievable.

Letting the forest speak back requires law to slow down, to hear what has always been said. When law listens, conflict may not disappear, but injustice need not persist. Coexistence, then, becomes not a policy objective, but a legal ethic.

Conclusion: Let the Forest Speak Back — Listening, Learning, and Law's Responsibility

“What we do to the forest of the world
is but a mirror reflection of what we do to ourselves.”

— Mahatma Gandhi

Law has long spoken for the forest, about the forest, and often over the forest. Rarely has it paused to listen. This paper has traced how human–animal conflict regimes, shaped by fragmented conservation laws, technological control, and criminal liability frameworks, have steadily muted indigenous voices particularly those of forest healers whose knowledge sustains both human and ecological health. When traditional medicine is severed from land, and coexistence is replaced by containment, conflict becomes not an exception but a legal outcome.

Human–animal conflict is not merely an ecological collision; it is a jurisprudential failure. It reflects how law has prioritised species over systems, animals over relationships, and enforcement over empathy. Indian legal frameworks despite progressive environmental jurisprudence continue to struggle with recognising indigenous knowledge as law-worthy. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 promised restoration, yet its uneven implementation has left many communities suspended between recognition and removal. Wildlife protection statutes safeguard animals but often forget the humans who have coexisted with them for generations.

Comparative international jurisprudence shows that this silence is neither inevitable nor justifiable. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the African Commission, and the Supreme Court of Canada have articulated a rights-based approach where land, culture, health, and knowledge are inseparable. These judicial voices remind us that forests are not empty conservation units but inhabited moral landscapes. When indigenous access to medicinal plants is denied, the injury is not symbolic it is corporeal, cultural, and cumulative.

Letting the forest speak back, therefore, requires more than rhetorical inclusion. It demands structural change legal, institutional, and ethical. The following suggestions emerge organically from the analysis of conflict regimes, traditional medicine, and judicial reflection.

First, human–animal conflict law must explicitly recognise indigenous traditional medicine as a protected public health and cultural practice. Forest and wildlife statutes should incorporate exemptions or affirmative protections for subsistence-based medicinal collection, distinct from commercial extraction. Courts, while interpreting wildlife offences, must adopt a contextual approach that distinguishes survival and healing from exploitation. Criminal law should not punish care.

Second, the Forest Rights Act, 2012 must be implemented as a living framework, not a procedural hurdle. Recognition of Community Forest Resource Rights should be prioritised in conflict-prone regions, empowering indigenous communities to manage wildlife movement, medicinal harvesting, and conflict mitigation through customary norms. Legal recognition should translate into governance authority, enabling coexistence rather than surveillance.

Third, judicial reasoning in human–animal conflict cases must integrate indigenous knowledge as evidence, not anecdote. Drawing inspiration from Delgamuukw, Indian courts should accord legitimacy to oral histories, ritual practices, and ecological observation. Expert testimony should not be limited to technocrats; healers and community elders must be heard as knowledge holders. Justice, after all, is impoverished when it listens only to one language.

Fourth, technology-driven mitigation must be ethically anchored in participation and consent. Early-warning systems, corridors, and surveillance tools should be co-designed with local communities, ensuring that technology complements rather than replaces traditional practices. Algorithms cannot substitute for lived knowledge. Where technological interventions restrict access or alter land use, the duty to consult and accommodate must be meaningfully enforced.

Fifth, compensation and liability regimes must shift from reactive relief to preventive justice. Timely, adequate, and culturally sensitive compensation mechanisms are essential, but insufficient. Law must address root causes habitat fragmentation, displacement, and governance gaps rather than merely paying for damage after it occurs. Accountability should extend to institutional failures, not rest solely on individuals navigating impossible choices.

Finally, a jurisprudence of coexistence must replace a jurisprudence of control. This requires courts, policymakers, and conservation authorities to embrace legal pluralism recognising that customary law, ecological ethics, and state regulation can coexist. Coexistence is not the absence of conflict, but the presence of dialogue. It is the legal willingness to accept that forests are not silent, and neither are those who heal within them.

Letting the forest speak back is not an invitation to abandon conservation. It is a call to deepen it. When law listens to animal movement, to medicinal knowledge, to indigenous memory it may yet rediscover coexistence as a legal value rather than an aspirational slogan. The forest has always spoken. The question that remains is whether law is finally prepared to hear.

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