

that urban foxes generally are getting bigger or bolder, or that they pose more of a risk to people.

With all the misinformation around, it may be surprising to hear that we know more about urban foxes in the UK than rural ones – far more. There is also far more published data on urban foxes in the UK than on foxes anywhere in the world. This makes misleading media coverage even more puzzling and worrying.

That isn't to say there is not a growing problem: there is. But it is human rather than fox behaviour that is the issue. More and more television programmes show people handling wildlife; macho presenters have to touch, catch or wrestle animals. When people follow their example, such as by encouraging foxes to come into their kitchen to be fed, perhaps even eating out of their hands, problems are inevitable.

Urban wildlife conflicts are also on the rise in the US, where coyote attacks are more common. Being larger than foxes, coyotes cause nastier injuries and have killed one toddler. But the problem is recognised as being 95 per cent due to human behaviour, and the focus is on educating people, not culling. In Australia, where dingo attacks are an issue, the focus has also been on changing people's behaviour. Both are model examples of conflict resolution.

In the UK the response is far less rational: the media publicises people showing off "tame" foxes, then goes into a frenzy over the inevitable problems such misguided behaviour brings.

For 24 hours after the Bromley baby was bitten, my phone never stopped ringing. Then it suddenly fell silent. An 85-year-old man in Rome announced his retirement and the media circus moved on. n

Stephen Harris founded the Mammal Research Unit at the University of Bristol, UK. He studied foxes in London for six years and launched an ongoing study of Bristol's foxes in 1977

One minute with...

Susmita Mohanty

The founder of India's first private space company talks about her dream of "cabbing it" to the moon – or Mars

How active is India's space programme?

The Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), which was founded in 1969, launches rockets, builds and uses satellites extensively for earthly applications and has recently started planetary exploration. It tested its first astronaut capsule for atmospheric re-entry in 2007, and is planning to build a residential astronaut training facility. ISRO is also planning a lunar lander mission for 2014 and will launch a mission to Mars this year.

How does your company, Earth2Orbit, fit in with this programme?

We want to commercialise India's space capabilities, in particular the Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle. It is one of the world's most reliable in its class. I want to make it the rocket of choice for international satellite-makers looking to get to low Earth or sun-synchronous orbits. India could build and launch up to six each year, but currently launches only two. We need to step up to full throttle. The same goes for satellites and ground equipment. Over the next decade or two, I think India should be aiming for at least a quarter of the multibillion-dollar global space market, if not more.

What do you think of the way spacecraft for carrying humans are currently designed?

The way the world aerospace industry is set up, it is closely linked to the defence sector – they share the technology, the tooling and the cumbersome contractual processes. Unlike commercial automobile or consumer-product companies, where the end user is the primary design driver, aerospace companies tend to please government customers. As a result, we often end up with over-engineered, under-designed crew craft with an exorbitant price tag.

How can we improve on these designs?

I want us to push the boundaries of technology and design and build intelligent spaceships – spaceships that think. Imagine if an international consortium of companies such as Apple, Samsung, Pinfarina, Space X and MIT Media Lab got together to design and build a spaceship! What



PROFILE

Susmita Mohanty is CEO of Earth2Orbit, which recently launched its first client satellite. She has worked at NASA and Boeing, and holds a PhD in aerospace architecture

would it look like? Could it think? Could it self-repair or self-clean? Would it challenge the crew?

The private sector is changing how we get into space. How has the X Prize contributed?

It created a tectonic shift in mindsets and showed how we can accelerate innovation in space exploration without having to spend taxpayer money. The first X Prize led to the first privately funded and designed spaceplane built by Burt Rutan. Then Richard Branson seized the opportunity: if all goes well, Virgin Galactic could fly more people to space in a year than the Russians or Americans have over the past 50 years!

What is next for space travel?

It barely takes 10 minutes to reach low Earth orbit. It probably takes longer for most urbanites to commute to work. I want to be able to "cab it" to low Earth orbit. I am dreaming of private astronaut taxis. The first generation will take paying passengers into orbit. The second generation will ferry us to the moon and Mars.

Interview by Vijaysree Venkatraman