

Getting to the 1,412th tiger

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Want to increase the number of tigers? Pay people quickly and generously for the crops destroyed or the cattle killed



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Only 1,411 tigers are left. So says the latest advertisement campaign of a new telecom company and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). It is powerful. It plays to our emotions. But it does not tell us what is being done, or should be done about it. It does not tell us how

we, the consuming class, can be part of the solution to protect the tiger.

The reason is simple. One must gloss over the bitter, inconvenient truth that India cannot have more than 1,411 tigers — the figure is the mid-range of the last census — unless one imagines conservation differently, very differently. In fact, if there are these many tigers, that's amazing. Forget more.

Let me explain what I have learnt from some reputed wildlife experts in the country: Tigers are territorial. They literally need land to roam. With the birth of a new male tiger, this search starts. Either the old tiger

gives way or the new male tiger looks for a new ground. But where is that ground? All around our parks, forests are destroyed. People who live in areas adjoining tiger reserves resent this animal, which kills their cattle. They have no use for the reserve forest, which protects the herbivores and the wild boars that eat their growing crop. They get nothing in return for living around tiger land. They want no tigers on their land.

At Kanha tiger reserve, for instance, I learnt how field managers keep count of tiger cubs. They know there should be an increase of 10 tigers each year to maintain a vi-

able and healthy population. They do much to protect the inside of the park. But the numbers do not increase. In search of a territory, the young tiger moves beyond the protected, and now increasingly guarded, area. When the outside world was forested, the tiger could expand its space. But now, forests are degraded. The people who live there are poor and angry. So, tragic incidents, as in Ranthambore, where two young tigers were poisoned just this week, usually happen.

Nobody wins in this bloody battle. This is why we have to make peace — between the tigers who need to roam and the poor people who need benefits from conservation. This is why we must practise coexistence.

The numbers are stark. Irrefutable. Over the past many years, tiger censuses have revealed that many more tigers lived outside tiger reserves. The 2001 census put the number at some 1,500 inside and as many as 2,000 outside. But, no-

body quite believed these numbers. In 2005, the task force I chaired to look into tiger conservation suggested the method of counting be changed in order to be more accurate. This was done. The next census found the numbers in reserves were about the same between 1,165 and 1,657 tigers. But between the two censuses, the tigers outside (if they ever existed) just disappeared. This is why the numbers fell. This is why we cry for the beloved tiger. Paper tigers.

This is not to say that poaching or sheer lack of protection isn't a problem. There are so few guards. These are crucial, as the task force report "Joining the Dots" showed. But the crisis of numbers will not go away unless we practise conservation differently.

Till now, policy has ensured people outside the reserve get nothing from protection. Over the years, with little investment and even less understanding of how to plant trees that survive cattle and goats, the lands

outside the reserves stand denuded. People have no option but to use the protected areas to send their cattle for grazing. At the same time, as the ruminants move into forests, the herbivores — deer and other animals — move out to farmers' fields to forage and destroy. It is also an inconvenient fact that the tiger often survives on easier and slow-moving prey, the cattle of the farmer.

The conflict is simply growing. In villages adjoining Bandhavgarh, people told me their lives were worse than birds. Why? Because birds could sleep at least for some hours at night. For them, the vigil to protect crops from wild animals was unending and fruitless. What an indictment of conservation.

So, if we want more land to protect more tigers, we must learn this reality. The answer is in, first and

foremost, paying people quickly and generously for the crops destroyed or the cattle killed. Currently, this doesn't happen. Second, we need to ensure that there is huge and disproportionate development in the

lands that adjoin a tiger reserve. People should be benefited from living in the buffer of the reserve. Third, people must get direct gains from conservation. They must get preference in jobs to protect. They must be partners, owners and, indeed, earners from

the tourism that the tiger brings.

This is the agenda for tiger conservation: For the 1,411 and many more. Otherwise, the media campaign will be nothing more than noise — drumming up support with a frantic chest-thumping that leads nowhere.

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