



LONE RANGER

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Bittu Sahgal, editor of *Sanctuary Asia*, India's premier wildlife and ecology magazine, has been associated with Project Tiger since inception. He is also involved in several campaigns to save the tiger. Sahgal shares his views with **Sujata Dugar** on the immediate need to protect the animals or face the imminent danger of losing them forever

A government census indicates that only 1,411 tigers remain in India, a country which accounts for nearly 60 per cent of the world's tigers living in the wild.

Union minister of state for environment and forests Jairam Ramesh has pressed the panic button by calling it an "emergency" and efforts are being made to save the national animal from extinction — be it dedicating the year 2010 to the conservation of tigers; announcing Rs200 crore for the development of the Sunderbans biosphere — home to more than 400 Royal Bengal Tigers; or making a proposal to the Gujarat chief minister to reintroduce tigers in the Dangs region of Gujarat (where the big cats ruled the jungles 25 years back) in exchange for Asiatic lions which would be shifted to Kuno in Madhya Pradesh.

But is all this enough? Bittu Sahgal believes not. Excerpts from an interview.

Is the Year of the Tiger as per the Chinese calendar proving to be the worst year for the tiger population in India, with four tiger deaths in the beginning of the year?

Not just for tigers, but for elephants, leopards, bears, civets, deer and snakes too. Frankly, the Chinese Year of the Tiger could be the last straw on the tiger's back. We must convince people of Chinese origin across the world that killing tigers or eating tiger parts is bad "joss" and will do nothing for their virility, health or business.

What role are man-animal conflicts playing?

It's a key issue, but the main threat is the double barrel attack by illegal trade as well as mining, road and dam building and tiger habitat destruction by millions of agriculturists who may not eat tigers, but do eat the tiger's home. Wild animals are literally being forced into conflict with humans.

Why are the tiger numbers falling and why is Jairam Ramesh calling it a state of "emergency" for the tiger?

Thank heavens Jairam is pressing the panic button. For a decade-and-a-half, India's environment ministers have denied the tiger crisis. The reasons for the cat's decline are: 1. Lack of political backing for ecosystem and species protection; 2. Paltry sums allocated for field protection staff; 3. Extravagant sums allocated to destroy wildlife habitats; 4. Confused policy makers who do not understand that the illegal wildlife trade fuels insurrection, terrorism and violence. This is the third largest illegal trade in the world after narcotics and arms and there is a revolving door between the operatives of these trades, as *DNA* reported on its front page recently: "Animal skin traps BPO employee (nabbed by the Narcotics Bureau, on a drug bust).

People cannot meet their basic human needs in India. So do you think saving the tiger is so important?

The tiger is a metaphor for all nature. Should nature and ecosystem conservation have our attention? Over 1,000 of the world's leading scientists say that deforestation and ecosystem destruction is a key driver of climate change. They opine that unless we save tigers (and polar bears, and jaguars and pandas and lions) and their vanishing homes the water and food and economic security of nations such as India — all nations rich and poor actually — will be damaged beyond repair. The chaos would be unimaginable.

The recent 'Save Our Tigers' campaign saw over a lakh people signing their support for the tiger. Now, how can this movement do something tangible?

The actual figure of supporters as of the morning of February 19, 2010 was 141,462 — over 1,000 people per (supposedly) living tiger! Incidentally, Jairam Ramesh is correct to state that the 1,411 figure is an over-estimation. The actual number is probably below 1,000 today. The 1,411 figure was just a median based on surveys conducted by the Wildlife Institute of India as far back as 2007. The next step for supporters should be to influence political and administrative will to protect tiger habitats and keep poachers at bay. This done, the tiger will save itself.



Saturday INTERVIEW

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