

Bitter truth about tiger conservation

Not just poachers, Ranthambhore's tigers are facing a threat from a weed

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ON ENORMOUS billboards, in cities and on highways, a strategically planned campaign recently announced that there are only 1,411 tigers left in the country. The cute cubs shared space with prominently displayed identities of the corporate sponsor, while on national TV celebrities mouthed their sensitive side by endorsing the campaign.

Yet, within the premises of protected national parks, under the gaze of the authorities, two cubs and three adult tigers lost their lives after the campaign hit the headlines.

Here is something more shocking: after the tiger census of 2007, which threw up the 1,411 headcount, India reportedly lost 32 tigers in 2008 and another 86 in 2009. And in the first 50 days of 2010, the country lost 62 leopards, the smallest of the "big cats".

Officials seem concerned, but largely clueless. But one man, Dharmendra Khandal, conservation biologist at Tiger Watch in Ranthambhore, India's best-known tiger sanctuary, has been fighting an almost lonely battle, even putting his life on the line. Not only does he face hostility from poachers but also an inexplicable disapproval of the

authorities.

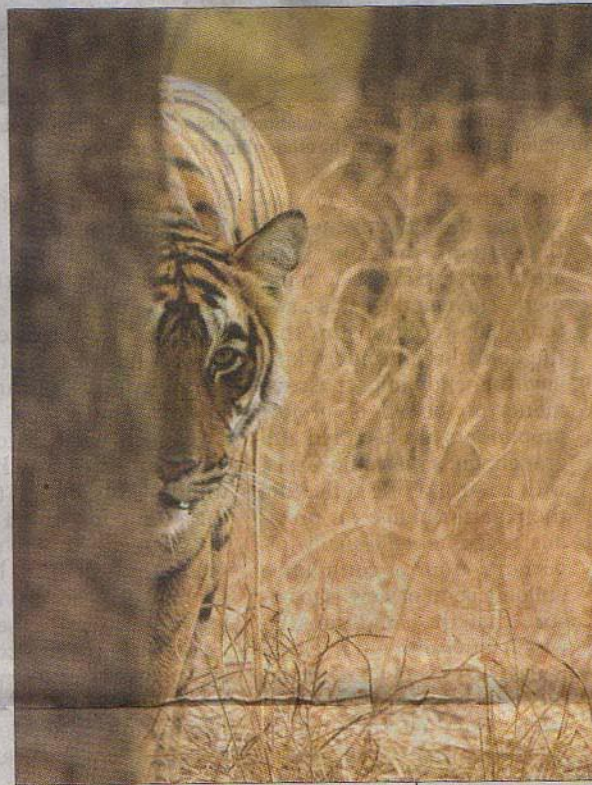
During a 2003-04 killing spree, a semi-nomadic tribe called Moghiyas, some of them excellent bushmen and trackers, reduced Ranthambhore's tiger population by half. They were a notorious part of the illegal international wildlife trade that generates some \$20 billion a year. Khandal went after them and in what turned out to be one of the most successful anti-poaching operations in the world, he got most of them arrested.

Around the same time, the news came out that Rajasthan's other tiger reserve, Sariska, had lost all its big cats to poachers!

Interestingly, till this setback, Project Tiger -- 27 reserves established in 1973 -- was making headlines as one of the world's biggest conservation stories. While other countries were losing their tigers, India's tiger population grew from 1,200 to 3,600. But after the startling revelation of the 2007 census, the government had no option but to pump in \$125 million to increase the number of reserves by 12 and beef up security at Sariska and Ranthambhore. Ranthambhore now has around 40 tigers. Recently, a couple of tigers were also introduced to Sariska.

But Khandal is not convinced. "They are siblings. It's impossible for them to produce healthy offspring due to inbreeding," he says.

Though poachers and



Dharmendra Khandal

WEED OUT: A weed named *prosopis juliflora* is wreaking havoc in India's best-known tiger sanctuary

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their highly efficient peripheral network around national parks are a continuing threat to wildlife, conservation experts feel that there are other immediate issues that the government needs to look into.

For instance, guard towers are being constructed in the core area of Ranthambhore National Park. Says Khandal, "There is no point in having towers in the core area. Unnatural presence disturbs the breeding pat-

tern of tigers and pushes them out of their natural habitats. The towers should be put up around the perimeter of the forest from where the miscreants make an entry. Monitoring should be done in constantly moving vehicles."

In another significant development, the ministry of environment and forests is planning to spend Rs 8,000 crore to relocate nearly 80,000 families from in and around forest areas. In Ranthambhore's case, Rs 100 crore is being spent to relocate nearly 1,200 families. Each family is being paid Rs 10 lakh to leave. But the problem lies in the way the operation is being carried out. "There are families that own land in these villages. So, even if some of them leave, others would want to carry on farming in the space left vacant. In fact, some of them have already started doing so," discloses a forest official who does not wish to be identified.

Livestock grazing, illegal cutting and collection of firewood and mining in the buffer areas of Ranthambhore are some of the other major concerns. Adding to the callous man-made dangers to the tiger population, a weed named *prosopis juliflora* is wreaking havoc in Sawai Madhopur's tiger territory. The battle to save the tiger is far from over.

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