

From 63 in '90, tiger population down to 3 in Bihar reserve

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SANTOSH SINGH**VALMIKI TIGER RESERVE
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IN THE backdrop of concerns regarding the dwindling number of tigers in the country, the ongoing tiger census has brought some more alarming news from Bihar. At the Valmiki Tiger Reserve—Bihar's only national park—only three adult tigers have been caught by the trap cameras so far. The census is set to wrap up in June.

While the reserve, spread over 880 sq km, including 340 sq km core area in West Champaran along the Nepal border, boasted of 63 tigers in 1990, the number had fallen to 13 in the last tiger census in 2006.

Ironically, the Valmiki reserve, which was declared a national park in 1991, was categorised as a 'level I' reserve on account of the large area, ample vegetation and abundant availability of species of tiger prey. The authorities claim that the tigers may have slipped into Nepal.

"Phase-I data collection on indirect sign of carnivores, encounter rate and concentration of prey species is encouraging. Trap cameras might have shown just three tigers, but the figure should go up from last time. If that does not happen, we will have to assume that some tigers slipped into contiguous Chitwan forest of Nepal," said J P Gupta, conservator of forest-cum-field director of the reserve.

On March 18, a four-year-old tigress was allegedly poisoned to death and buried near Kanti Tola in Madanpur Range. Forest officials, who claim they have "no wherewithal for enforcement of forest laws", have asked for a CID probe.

With two months still to go for completion of the census, reserve authorities are optimistic that more tigers will be sighted in the trap cameras. It is the nodal census agency—the Wildlife Institute of India—that will arrive at the "final estimate", studying pictures taken over a period of time through capture-recapture method introduced in 2006. It is supposed to be a far more accurate method than the earlier pug-mark one.

The Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), a voluntary group, is the partner of the Wildlife Institute of India in carrying out the census.

Explaining the new method, WTI assistant manager at Valmiki Nagar field station Samir Kumar Sinha, who recently got 40 trap cameras fitted in Raghia range, said: "We place film cameras using 24-hour mode in thick forest areas and night-mode in human disturbance area. The camera using infra-red sensor method automatically clicks when an animal within its focus emits body heat. As every tiger has distinct body lining, we can avoid overlapping in case the same tiger gets clicked by cameras again and again."

He, however, said that 141 villages adjoining the forest create obstacles as the inmates sometimes steal or destroy the cam-



TIGER POPULATION AT THE VALMIKI RESERVE

1990	63
1997	53
2005	33
2006	10
(plus/ minus 3)	



eras. Thirteen cameras have been stolen since 2005, including two during the current census.

Gupta pointed out the need for a dedicated and armed task force to take on poachers. The reserve has a sanctioned strength of 171 staff but the actual strength is down by nearly 40 per cent. There is not a single armed staff member. Of the 40 unarmed Special Auxiliary Police personnel, 22 left last year after not getting their salary for a year.

Besides rampant poaching from the Nepal side, human disturbances are a serious obstacles in tiger protection. While residents of Kanti Tola village, where a tigress was killed in March, claimed to know nothing about the killing, police said that villagers had left poisoned meat in the jungle for the tigress after a buffalo was killed.

SSB members deployed along the reserve's border with Nepal said that though seizure of animal skins, particularly of leopards, happens at regular intervals, poachers are not caught. "We also have inputs of poachers putting electric wires to target animals. We have intensified patrolling in reserve area to protect our animals," said officiating SSB commandant at Valmiki Nagar, Assistant Commandant Vaibhav Singh Parihar.

But foresters of six ranges have their own woes. Kouraha range forester Shivshankar Singh said: "I have been given a Rajdoot motorcycle with just five litres of petrol for a month. We have no arms."

The reserve receives a cumulative central and state government annual budget of about Rs 225 lakh. In 2009-10, it got central assistance of Rs 134.6 lakh as against Rs 93.9 lakh in 2008-09 and Rs 106.663 lakh in 2007-08.