

Changing pugmarks

The new department for forests and wildlife can change the way India governs its natural wealth, says VALMIK THAPAR

Twenty-four years ago when the Year of the Tiger dawned in the Chinese calendar, wildlife conservationists were euphoric. We were seeing the fruits of the Indira Gandhi era: tiger populations were up and in Ranthambhore, I remember seeing 16 different tigers in one day. We seldom thought of the severe threats that tigers might face in the future.

In 1998, when another Year of the Tiger dawned, it was as if we were living in another world. Tigers were dying and our wildlife landscape was besieged with problems. The decade of the '90s was probably one of the worst years for those dealing with wildlife. The Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF) created endless crisis committees to deal with the crisis but all in vain. Before the end of the century many of us offered new ideas to the government — one of these was about creating a new department of forest and wildlife within the MoEF, a stepping stone for a dedicated ministry of forest and wildlife.

I think this must have been also on the minds of both Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi before the MoEF was first created in 1985. For the first six months, the MoEF had two departments but later became a one-department ministry thanks to ego problems of the then secretary. The bureaucratic lobby was opposed to any change in the system and by 2004 we had to live through the nightmare of the extinction of tigers in Sariska. By 2008, tigers went extinct in Panna and at the beginning of 2010, another Year of the Tiger, we were ready to

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write off at least six to eight tiger reserves including Sanjay National Park in Madhya Pradesh, Indrawati National Park in Chhattisgarh, Palamau National Park in Jharkhand and so on.

But the need for change and reform had travelled right up to the Prime Minister's Office during the first decade of the 21st century. I think both A.B. Vajpayee and then Manmohan Singh were

both concerned and interested in creating the change necessary for better governance in India's forests but somewhere the senior bureaucrats scuttled all these ideas.

But 2010 was going to be different. Fortunately the MoEF was being spearheaded by one of the most dynamic ministers, Jairam Ramesh. And he was determined to change everything around. An unusual man, because he has the ability to call a spade a spade, and in the same language as all of us used. He insisted on transparency and truth, and he was desperate to overhaul this sector. But this is not easy. We live in a federal polity that gives all power to the state governments to rule forests and wildlife. The federal government provides advice and money. So Ramesh's task was highly complex, he had to find necessary leverage within his ministry in order to cajole the state governments into action.

The first place where this change was required was in the MoEF. With a meeting of the National Board of Wildlife (NBW)



■ SAVING THEM BY THEIR WHISKERS

about to take place under the chairmanship of the PM on March 18, I knew that all of us required a tangible result from this meeting. And the only doable thing for the PM would be an approval for a new department of forest and wildlife, which could focus on issues that we had been fighting for so many decades.

The reality of wildlife landscapes in India has never been so grim. Ramesh had long discussions with the members of the NBW before the PM's meeting and because he is a strategist he knew the immediate priorities that required resolution.

When we went into the meeting, none of us knew what the outcome would be. As a group of members coordinated by the minister, we achieved one of the long-standing demands of conservationists when the PM turned to Ramesh and said "Do it!". Thus a new department within the MoEF was born.

This is a great opportunity for someone like Ramesh to structure and organise the mechanisms for a new department, which will lead to high focus and better governance of wildlife-related issues. The team in the ministry is also euphoric and conservationists must help so that this new department can trigger the necessary changes. State governments must create their own focused departments for better and efficient governance. In many of our states, forest ministers are also ministers of mining — this leads to a serious conflict of interests. This must end.

I believe this is a moment of hope and optimism and the younger generation of conservationists and wildlife scientists must engage with these developments with a new burst of energy. In my opinion, for the first time ever we have a minister who is ready to support and respect us. He has a vision for the future and that's why we have a new department that can further the interests of wildlife in this country. I am certain that one of the next steps will be to bring in young wildlife scientists to gauge the pulse of forests in India. This will be vital if we want to change the course. So far, it has been the rule of the spin doctors, this must end. It must become the era of the informed wildlife scientist and manager.

It took us 25 years to get a department of forests and wildlife even when forestland makes up 21 per cent of the country's landmass. It's been an exhausting battle but let's not wait another 25 years to reform the processes of governance across the forests of this country.

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The views expressed by the author are personal*