

The regal move: T2, one of the tigers at the Ranthambhore National Park



Who will save the cat?

Have tigers in your head and heart? Then it's time you did something to save them, says **Ayesha Banerjee**

PHOTO: DIVYA SHRIVASTAVA KHANDAL

then the situation need not get ugly and the police and courts can deal with the poachers." It helps, he says, if you keep a low profile and make a sincere effort to bring the poachers back into the mainstream or help their children get educated, learn new skills etc.

As part of an outreach programme, Tiger Watch runs a hostel for the Moygas, a traditional tribe of poachers. "Some poachers have joined our NGO and help us now," he says.

Khandal, who stirred up a controversy after joining Tiger Watch and compiling data on the tiger population to find 18 animals missing, has virtually no time to breathe on the job. "I'm up by 5.30 most days, and do a round of the forest. We also keep an eye on about 80-90 suspicious people (poachers) and stay alert if any of them go missing. We are constantly on the lookout for informers or for new names that pop up when it comes to poaching activities. Then there are volunteers who come to work with Tiger Watch, or journalists investigating a story. We have to take them around." Sometimes the NGO is involved in filing PILs on issues, such as building of a road or dam, which might adversely impact the park, and he has to oversee the paperwork. A man fascinated with lesser-known species, he's doing research work on the Indian hyena too with filmmaker and conservationist Mike Pandey.

Divya, too, finds herself neck deep in Tiger Watch work - surprisingly enough for a nutritionist who worked and lived in Mumbai "all through". She got married to Dr Khandal last year, and now runs a blog, *ranthambhorediary.blogspot.com*. "Post the blog many National

Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) directives came into action...like making NTCA personnel presence mandatory during post-mortem of tigers," she says. Divya also looks after an alternative livelihood programme, Dhonk (a tree common to Rajasthan) for the Moygas, a traditional poaching community in the Ranthambhore area. They and the local villagers are taught handicraft skills and given work to do. Through this work, for which her "own small savings have been used up," Divya aims to spread goodwill among the locals and make them aware of preserving the precious forest resources.

"Anyone," says tiger conservationist Bittu Sahgal, "can work for tigers. You could choose any profession and do a lot for wildlife. A poet could write poetry. A journalist could inform. A politician can change policy. A bureaucrat can implement policy. A judge can uphold the law. A businessperson can channel money and influence. A student can voice concern. A teacher can change minds. Saving tigers per se need not be a profession. The best habitat for the tiger is in your head and heart."

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When I call Divya Shrivastava Khandal for the mobile number of her husband, Dr Dharmendra Khandal, a conservation biologist and anti-poaching coordinator with the Ranthambhore National Park-based NGO Tiger Watch, she cannot conceal the note of worry in her voice. "He has left in the morning, at about six, his cellphone is unreachable, and I am told he'll be back by 11 at night." "Are you worried," I ask her.

"This happens almost every alternate day. Yes there have been threats to his life from poachers, he has recently had a heat stroke, but this is part of what he does, I try not to let it worry me too much," says Divya.

Dr Dharmendra Khandal, a PhD from Rajasthan University, who initially researched spiders before joining conservationist Fateh Singh Rathore's Tiger Watch, has been quoted by *National Geographic* as being someone who has, "over the past five years successfully busted

dozens of poachers, many connected to an illegal international wildlife trade that generates some \$20 billion a year... His efforts even helped trigger the most significant change in Indian tiger policy in a generation."

Khandal, however, has no interest in being a hero. "There is no point in doing herogiri in this profession. At the moment, anti-poaching is my main job." This means busting gangs of poachers with police help. Experience has also taught Khandal how to deal with these people.

"We have had nasty face-offs with the poachers at times." Once their vehicle was involved in an accident during a raid in which a very senior person of a village had to be arrested, and Khandal was attacked by the villagers. "One keeps getting threats, but I have learned that trouble can be avoided during raids if we are careful. We made mistakes earlier. We were too aggressive when we went for the arrests and people got agitated. If we are calm and sensible, keep a tight rein on our tempers,

✂ cut out and keep

1 TIGER CONSERVATIONIST

career

WHAT'S IT ABOUT?

A tiger conservationist is someone who works for the protection of the endangered cats, the population of which has dwindled down to about 1,411 in India (the good news of the three cubs at the Panna Reserve notwithstanding). One can work at administering the tiger's habitat as a forest official, or as a scientist study various ways in which the animal can survive. NGOs do anti-poaching work and educate people near forest zones about saving resources

CLOCK WORK

6 am: Leave for safari, check out the forest area and see if everything is in order.	1.30 pm: Lunch
11 am: Back at Tiger Watch offices, check out data we have been compiling for the Kailadevi Wildlife Sanctuary	2 pm: Work with volunteers who have come to train with the NGO
	4 pm: Check information on poachers
	9 pm: Back home

THE PAYOFF

■ A wildlife scientist will be paid Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000 a month at the entry level in the private sector	■ around Rs 80,000 a month
■ An IFS officer gets a salary of Rs 15,600 at entry level. The salary of the principal chief conservator of forest can be	■ An IIFM graduate's salary at the startup level can be Rs 4.6 lakh per annum
	■ A fresher at an NGO can start off at a salary or Rs 15,000 a month

SKILLS

■ Scientific temperament	■ Good communication skills for reaching out to hunting tribes and villagers living around the forests
■ Good knowledge of finances as you might have to raise funds for your NGO	

HOW DO I GET THERE?

The Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, is an option if you wish to make a career out of wildlife protection. You can join the Forest Service (IFS), the Indian Institute of Forest Management (IIFM), the Wildlife Institute of India, or do a course with the Wildlife Conservation Society (write to volunteers@wcsindia.org). Entrance to the IIFM's PG diploma in forest management and fellow programme in management is through the Indian Institute of Management's CAT. Recruitment to the IFS is through the annual civil service exams conducted by the UPSC. A number of NGOs train volunteers for short courses (write to tigerwatchindia@yahoo.co.in for details)

INSTITUTES & URLS

■ Indian Institute of Forest Management, Bhopal www.iifm.ac.in	Dehradun www.wii.gov.in
■ Wildlife Institute of India,	■ Forest research Institute, Dehradun www.icfri.org

PROS & CONS

■ You get to protect endangered species - can anything be more satisfying than that?	■ You get to live and work in forests - and who doesn't love the outdoors?
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THE INFORMATION IS INDICATIVE

Hindustan Times New Delhi 12.05.2010