

# Tiger troubles and tribulations

Wildlife tourism in Maharashtra is set to receive a much needed revamp.

Meena Menon

There were three places in India where the sighting of a tiger was guaranteed -- Kanha, Bandhavgarh and Ranthambore. "Now there is a fourth place--Tadoba," says Pravin Pardeshi, Principal Secretary Forests, Maharashtra, rather proudly. The state has emerged as a major attraction for tiger tourism with Tadoba, Pench, Nagzira and Melghat (though sightings here are rare), and two more tiger reserves which are to be notified soon.

The advantage in Tadoba, part of the Tadoba- Andhari tiger reserve created in 1995 with an area of 625 sq km, is that there are some eight to ten tigers in an area of 110 sq km. Since the area is small, sightings are common but the

number of vehicles allowed inside is restricted up to a maximum of 40. And therein lies the rub. With no online booking system, tourists have to go to Chandrapur and make their bookings with identity cards. Often at the Mohorli gate which is the most popular entrance to Tadoba, streams of tourists languish without being allowed to enter. The whole process is

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disorganized and chaotic. And the only way to enter sometimes is to call the genial field director of the reserve Vinay Sinha for help.

However, all that is set to change if the State Government's plans are implemented. Last December a government resolution proposed a major revamp and gave a boost to eco-tourism involving local villagers. The concept of homestead tourism is in the offing and with a modest budget of Rs 30 crores, 100 villages in the protected areas will be part of an eco development programme. Mr Pardeshi says while wildlifers object to tiger tourism, it is the pressure from tourists who want to see tigers that gives politicians an impetus to ensure forest protection. There is political

pressure to keep the forests alive and not lose it to various development projects. However, it is not only the tigers which need protection but also the adivasis who live off the forest and around the protected areas.

There has to be a quid pro quo to the people and the latest guidelines make sure a local guide accompanies each jeep and tourists living in a tribal homestead get priority to enter the park. The 100 villages chosen for the eco development programme will be given alternative fuels like LPG to reduce their dependence on forests and replacement of four heads of cattle with one stall fed cow of superior breed.

In Maharashtra there are more tigers outside the reserves, in protected forests and this could be 80 per cent of the total population, Mr Pardeshi says. Tadoba alone has about 43 tigers and the total in the State could be around 140. In all the 43 sanctuaries in Maharashtra villagers have to agree to reduce



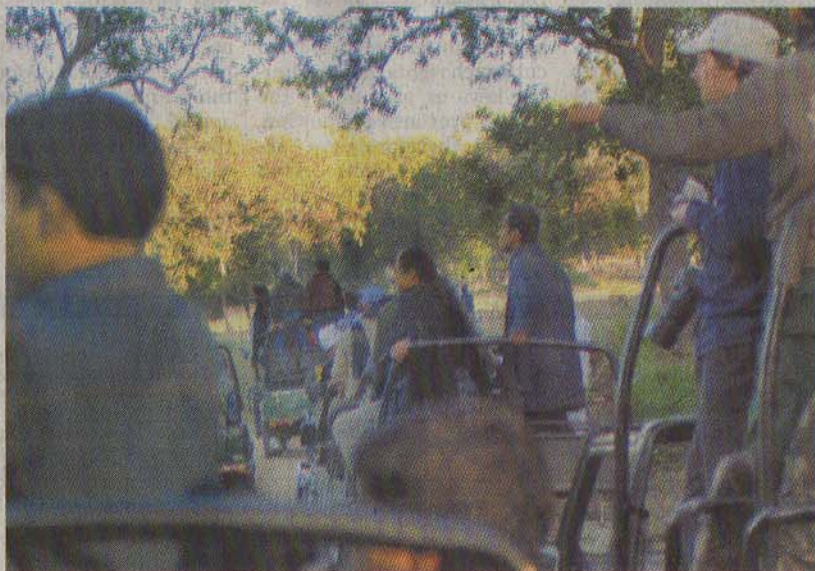
**BETTER SIGHTINGS:** At Tadoba there are some eight to 10 tigers in an area of 110 sq kms.

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their biomass needs from the forest. However, there is no policy of massive relocation of villages inside the protected areas. Of the 240 villages inside, only 16 or 17 will be relocated, Mr Pardeshi says. Of this about four are in Tadoba and the rest are in Melghat, where some villages have already been relocated, Pench and Koyna. The concept of homestead tourism is already gaining ground and the government will give a 75 subsidy for each proposal with a 25 per cent contribution from the people. A joint forest management committee in the villages will select and manage the homestead and a village in Melghat is en-

gaged in this activity. Emphasis is on waste disposal, recycling, using alternative energy sources, and sewage treatment.

Another village Chorkhamara near Nagzira will be ready to take on tourists in a few months. The government also proposes value addition so that the tourism is not tiger centric as it is now. In Tadoba, for instance, people wait for hours on the single main tar road that cuts through the forest from Mohorli for tigers to cross. There is little interest in other flora or fauna. There must be some value addition to spotting tigers, says Pardeshi. In Melghat, for instance, tourists can try rappelling or valley crossing. "In fact we want to now say, we guarantee you don't see tigers in these parks," he jokes. It is a joke that will not go down well, going by the multitudes who have little interest in wildlife but throng parks all over India to see a single, stunningly beautiful and highly threatened animal -- the tiger.



**WILDLIFE WOES:** Tourist obsession with tigers takes its toll. PHOTOS: MEENA MENON