



ST-6 WS

It is still dark when we set out beside the swift and silently flowing Tamraparni. The only sound is the rumbling of forest department jeeps moving towards locations across the velvety-green dark ranges, carrying student volunteers and forest watchers. The first phase of the 2010 tiger census in the Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR) has just begun.

Created in 1988 by combining the Kalakad and Mundanthurai sanctuaries in the southern Western Ghats (in the district of Tirunelveli), this reserve is Tamil Nadu's second largest protected area. To scan for the 'tiger signature', 84 teams — comprising one volunteer, anti-poaching watcher and a forest guard — will comb the ranges over the next three days with the 89,500 hectares of the KMTR divided into 42 units for strategic operations.

KMTR chief conservator of forests (CCF) A Ramkumar, who is also the field director, says the first phase will involve students and NGO volunteers from nearby districts. "This year, the response has been overwhelming; we received 320 applications. But we took only 92, because we cannot host more volunteers." The volunteers will be involved each day in recording carnivore signs along a five-km trek (generally around an animal path/ghat road/stream line) and the herbivore encounter rate along a two-km transect line.

KMTR deputy director D Venkatesh gives the volunteers an exhaustive briefing. "By carnivore signs, we refer to signs of tiger and co-predators (that include panther, wild dog, wild pig, bear and civet cat). Indirect signs to look for are scat and pug marks, scratches on tree bark. Plant species recording, of tree/shrub/ herb/ grass, the density of canopy cover, even signs of human disturbance need to be observed and recorded. Herbivore encounter includes sighting of elephant, sambar, Indian gaur, common langur and nilgiri langur."

Eager student volunteers learn about the diverse habitats that tigers are found in across the Indian subcontinent, the decline of populations and reasons, the genesis of Project Tiger and the National Tiger Conservation Authority, the need for participatory conservation and scientific management. Also that a tiger always attacks from behind, kills only about once in 12 days, needs to drink water often, can climb trees and swim easily and sometimes eats mud, grass, and even *elandha pazham* (wild berries) for digestive rejuvenation!

The questions fielded are diverse. First-timer Karthi, a computer science

On the trail, for the record

The first phase of the 2010 tiger census in the Kalakkad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve has begun and volunteers are streaming in, notes **Shobha Menon**

student from Palayamkottai, asks, "How different is a kill of a tiger, panther or a hyena?" Mani, a Zoology undergraduate, wants to know whether the scat of a leopard looks different from that of a tiger. And Kavitha, a college student from Tirunelveli, is eager to know about how one would record the pugmarks of a tiger.

The explanations are even more fascinating: we learn among other things how tiger (or any of the cat family's) scat is found on the grassy areas is different from wild dogs' and of each one's specific nature, how tiger scratches on their prey are deeper than a leopard's, how cubs accompany their mothers till they are a year and half old, and so on and so forth.

Says ranger Pillai Vinayagam, "A pugmark with a diameter greater than 12.5 cm means it has to be a male tiger; the imprint of its pad will be squarer than the females (whose length is 11.5 cm to 12.5 cm)." An experienced forester can even tell, with just one look whether the tiger was on a slow, normal or quick walk!

Mostly students, participants are from across professions and cross-sections. Vignesh, a PWD contractor, has been volunteering for some years now during the census every year. Krishnakumar, who has an estate in Kerala and is part of the Wildlife Association of Rajapalayam, is also an old-timer. So is an advocate from Chennai.

Every morning, teams set out at 6 am with survey forms to record details meticulously. They carry GPS monitors to record exact locations, tapes to measure, transparent glass-sheets (to trace pugmarks) and water



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cans (to mix plaster-of-paris where a pugmark-cast is needed). Each member has an allotted task — one to look for scratches on trees (big cats like to scratch to keep their claws clean of meat remnants), another to scan the ground for pugmarks, and scat (samples are taken for DNA analysis) and the third to record carefully. Young volunteer Ayyappan explains enthusiastically, "Our starting point into the Kannikatti core area could be reached only after crossing the Tamraparni by boat. There was no direct sighting, but we saw a lot of tiger-scat which we transferred with leaves or twigs into sterile polythene covers for DNA analysis."

C Badrasamy, deputy director and wildlife warden of KMTR, says the second phase will involve details being cross-checked with WII officials to ascertain the carnivore area distribution. "In the last phase, cameras will be positioned in strategic locations across every 4 sq km over 45 days to ascertain how many tigers are actually in the reserve."

Involving students in the tiger census has proved a remarkable awareness exercise to reach out to the community and encourage their participation in conservation. Says CCF's Ramkumar, "A keen eye for detail, an alert mind and a feel for nature is all that is required." And as one tired but happy youngster put it, "Participating in the tiger census combines both fun and adventure. I know that I am making a small step towards saving the tigers in India."

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