

Live and let live

By Jay Mazoomdaar

ALTHOUGH tigers are in the news, many of them are still dying unnatural deaths across the country. Like all living beings, tigers have the right to survive. Additionally though, we need to understand that the survival of the tiger is important for our own survival too.

At the top of the food pyramid, the tiger is indicative of an ecosystem's overall health. Everything is connected in an ecosystem and the intricate web of life flourishes on the strength of each of its delicate strands. If tigers thrive in a particular ecological system, chances are high that the entire system is in order.

Today, tigers are dying because of poaching, loss of forests and man-animal conflicts.

There is only one way to stop poaching and that is to ensure that the poor tribals who hunt the tigers are able to make a living by other means. Once poaching stops, illegal trade in tiger skin, bones and other parts will become impossible for the rich mafia that runs the racket in the world's smuggling capitals.

Tigers are losing their habitat because people are destroying their forests — from felling trees for firewood or timber to large-scale destruction for mining, industries or roads. There should be strict policies that forbid giving away lush tiger forests in the name of development.

But what about villagers who depend on forests? Today, most of us may live in big cities, but even these big cities were once built by cutting down forests. To protect our forests, we must help these villagers earn a decent livelihood. India's tiger tourism should help most of them get jobs around forests.

In India, forests are the source of 300 rivers and perennial streams. Forest



cover is essential for attracting rainfall and preventing soil erosion. If forests are destroyed, it will affect the food we grow and the water we drink. Therefore, protecting forests must be a priority.

Finally, we have to accept that wild animals do not understand the boundaries we set for them. Cats are territorial and as they grow up, need their own unique space. So if there are tigers in a forest, they will move out every now and then to create their own territories. We have to build and connect our forests for the safety of such wandering tigers. Otherwise, tigers straying into villages will continue to be killed out of fear.

All of this is not as difficult as it may sound. Compared to the West, India's population density has always been very high. We have traditionally shared space with many species of wild carnivores in India and only one of them — the cheetah — is so far extinct. In the West, almost all big carnivore species are lost. Tigers survived in India because of our traditional tolerance. Tigers still have a great chance if we live up to that tradition.

(The writer broke the Sariska story in 2005 and his first documentary in 2007 was on rehabilitating tiger poachers)