

THE CORRIDORS OF DEATH

Karnataka HC comes to the rescue of the wildlife in Bandipur National Park, banning night movement of vehicles on two highways crisscrossing it



Number of animals run over by vehicles at night inside the park over the past 18 months

FOUND DEAD

3 tigers, including a cub	3 sloth bears
3 elephant calves	20 deer
3 leopards	13 langurs
12 striped hyenas	3 civets

Several monitor lizards & snakes also killed



By Aravind Gowda
in Bangalore

THREE tigers, including a cub, three elephant calves, three leopards, more than 12 striped hyenas, three sloth bears as well as several deer, langurs and snakes.

This isn't a mishmash of rare and exotic fauna housed in some zoo. It is the casualty list of animals crushed under the wheels of speeding vehicles inside the Bandipur National Park over the past 18 months.

Scores of tigers, elephants, leopards and many other endangered animals have been mowed down during the past few years on the two national highways that scythe through the park — one of the best managed tiger sanctuaries in the country.

Now, the Karnataka High Court has come to the rescue of the striped cats and other wildlife in the national park. In a landmark judgment on Tuesday, the court upheld a ban on the night movement of vehicles on the two highways.

One of these highway stretches (NH 67) connects Gundlupet with tourist hotspot Ooty in Tamil Nadu. The other national highway (NH 212) is the link between Gundlupet and Sultan Batheri in Kerala. While a 12.5-km stretch of NH 67 lies in the forest, 17.5 km of the NH 212 passes through it.

The number of wild animals killed by vehicles has been on the rise over the past two years owing to an increase in vehicular traffic. In an effort to save the wildlife, local conservationists had prevailed upon the government to ban the night movement of vehicles in the park. This was also stipulated by forest rules.

But the government is believed to have bowed to pressure from the politicians of Karnataka and

Kerala as well as travel firms, and withdrawn the curbs. The conservationists then took the matter to the high court.

After a number of hearings that lasted over six months, a high court division bench headed by Justice V. Gopala Gowda upheld the ban on the grounds that wildlife should be given priority.

The bench was convinced after the forest department, in asso-

Number of animals run over by vehicles is up

ciation with conservation group Wildlife Conservation Society of India (WCSI), arranged a special screening to highlight the issue.

The court recommended the restoration of the ban on night traffic. It also directed the authorities to identify alternative routes between the destinations to ensure that wildlife

was not disturbed.

According to forest department officials, the alternative road to Kerala (State Highway 88) is only 30 km longer. The other road to Ooty is already a national highway (NH 109) and involves a detour of 70 km.

The National Wildlife Action Plan (2002-2016), chaired by the Prime Minister, is unambiguous on the matter. It states: "The (ministries of) surface transport and railways should plan roads in such a manner that all national parks and sanctuaries are bypassed and integrity of protected areas is maintained. Wildlife corridors also need to be avoided, or measures such as restricting night traffic need to be employed."

But none of these guidelines was taken into consideration while allowing vehicular movement inside the park. Consequently, there was a sharp rise in the number of park animals run over by vehicles.

Among those snuffed out were sloth bears, langurs, Malabar giant squirrels, rusty spotted cats (smallest wild cat in the world), small Indian civets (nocturnal), mouse deer (nocturnal), monitor lizards, turtle species and scores of birds and snakes.

Concern grew among conservationists when a large number of chital deer — the tiger's staple food — began dying on the roads.

Sanjay Gubbi, assistant director (conservation and policy) of the WCSI pointed out: "The surface transport ministry data clearly shows that India's vehicular density is growing at the rate of 10 per cent annually. It is time to seriously think of realignment and decommissioning of roads passing through critical tiger habitats."

Gubbi added: "Wherever there are alternative links, the focus should be on realignment rather than improving the same stretches, even if this entails a slightly longer ride."

HC crackdown on Bandipur's killer highways