

New tiger reserve sparks a debate

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ENVIRONMENTAL activists and filmmakers here have locked horns in a heated debate over how best to protect wildlife, specifically tigers. They form two distinct groups — those who believe that tribal people kill tigers so they should be allowed nowhere near the animal and those who hail activists as the natural protectors of wildlife.

The latest debate has been sparked off by the news that Tamil Nadu government is planning to make Sathyamangalam forest a tiger reserve. The forest on the Nilgiri foothills that lies contiguous with the Biligirirangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary in Chamarajanagar district

People must be able to co-exist with tigers

of Karnataka which is an elephant corridor, besides being a tiger habitat. It has provided a rich field of research for many wildlife scientists. It was also part of the territory of poacher and sandalwood smuggler Veerappan.

Across the border in Karnataka, at the tiger reserves of Bandipur, Nagarhole and elsewhere too, the debate has been hot. The 'pro-tiger' activists argue that the only way to make the jungles safe for tigers — and other animals — is to drive away forest-dwellers and resettle them in faraway hamlets. The 'pro-people' lobby views this argument as a lot of cattle excreta, saying that activists know best — how to protect the forests, live safely and to keep tigers from poachers.

There is little empirical evidence available in India to prove either case. Many tribals have been caught killing tigers that devour their cattle. And there are cases of activists being driven out of land earmarked for tigers and paper tigers — only to find poachers, smugglers and tourists hav-



Crowded: Denizen of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve (above) and tribals facing displacement (below)



ing a field day. Usually the displaced tribal people slip into poverty without access to forest resources. Common sense and logic would place human rights over the rights of the animals, however rare they may be. Cur-

rent national laws actually place people over animals in forests. Forest dwellers have a legal right over the resources of the jungle. Diehard conservationists are not very happy with such a law. Foresters often find it a bit hard not being able to book a tribal for felling a tree to build a hut. According to social workers, in Karnataka forests now they are being booked under the Indian Penal Code on charges of threat, assault, theft and so on.

International experience also suggests that driving people away from forests often serves only the interests of conservationists, not necessarily the people being driven out, or animals in whose name this circus goes on. Scientists give two compelling arguments in this regard.

Firstly, since virtually all eco systems include an element of human use and intervention, artificially excluding this aspect runs the risk of reducing biodiversity rather than preserving it.

Second, the technical and logistical costs of excluding human activity from protected areas are very high and such efforts almost certainly fail. Such moves will alienate the local people from conservation objectives and in turn would require an ever increasing and, eventually unsustainable levels of spending — on surveillance and policing.

Still, a lot of people are displaced from their forests. Conservation is a major cause for development-induced displacement in India that involves millions of people.