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# 'Assam doing little to protect tigers'

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AT a hurriedly organised meeting of wildlife enthusiasts and environment activists on 30 December at Guwahati Press Club, speakers expressed concern over increasing cases of poaching and killing of animals in various parts of Assam. In a resolution, they urged the Assam government to activate its forest department and its public relation wing to fight superstitions about the aphrodisiac value of animal organs.

Last month, villagers killed a tiger at Goreswar in Kamrup district and some among them reportedly even took the meat home for cooking. This has shaken conservationists in particular and people in general because tigers are not usually eaten. In another incident, Assam police personnel killed a full-grown tigress at Bochagaon in the Kaziranga National Park vicinity. They are said to have fired 14 rounds from two AK-47s after the animal entered a nearby village and created panic. State forest minister Rockybul Hussain has already ordered an inquiry.

Initiated by activist-journalist Mubina Akhter, those who spoke at the meeting included Soumyadeep Datta of Nature's Beckon, Bibhab Talukder of



The full-grown tigress that was killed by Assam police personnel at Bochagaon in the Kaziranga National Park vicinity.

Aranyak, Purnima Sarma of Early Birds and Satyaranjan Bora of Seuji Dharani Dhunia.

According to the countrywide census of tigers in January 2008, there were only 1,411. In 1997, the number was 3,508. However, there is good news that the big cat population in India has risen to 1,875 in the last three years. Assam has nearly 15 per cent of the country's total tiger population — in 2010, there were 100 tigers compared to 70 five years earlier. Unfortunately, poaching is rampant in Assam and also in West Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttaranchal, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala. "Tigers and other wildlife are being regularly poached for use in some Chinese traditional medicine. There is the need to educate people against this," said Soumyadeep Datta. He also criticised the state forest department for its ineffectiveness in making the common people a partner in the conserva-

tion effort. He regretted the department's publicity wing had done precious little in this respect.

India adopted the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, to prosecute poachers and associated elements. The same year the tiger was selected as the national animal of India. The following year, the Centre launched tiger projects. Many forest reserves were upgraded to protect tiger status and some of these are Manas National Park, Kaziranga National Park, Nandapha National Park, Nameri National Park (all in Assam); Packey Wildlife Sanctuary (Arunachal Pradesh); Dampa Wildlife Sanctuary (Mizoram); Sunderbans National Park; Corbett National Park; Kanha National Park; Sariska National Park; Pench Tiger Reserve; Tadoba Tiger Reserve; and Periyar Tiger Reserve.

Biplab Talukder said, "We have wildlife protection rules but at the same time we need to sensitise forest officials. The people living near wildlife reserves should also be enlightened on the process of conservation."

Purnima Sarma and Satyaranjan Bora stressed the need for the community's involvement in the mission to preserve nature and conserve wildlife. Mubina Akhter expressed unhappiness over the authorities' failure to take proper action against those police personnel responsible for killing the tigress near the Unesco World Heritage site. She suggested there be more trained reporters to focus on environment and wildlife issues.

The writer is a Guwahati-based freelance contributor