

Straying of animals remains a challenge

Unmonitored areas outside reserves become nascent poaching zones, writes Lavkumar Khachar

ST/WS/CM/9
Sometime back, on television tiger bone whiskey was being touted for sale in China! Earlier the same day Satyendra Tiwari, a wildlife guide had posted a blog on a tiger having killed a girl from a village bordering the Bandhavgarh National Park in Madhya Pradesh. Both these episodes bring into focus, in a stark way, disturbing questions which we need to ask ourselves.

Are we in India really contemplating issues of protection of our wildlife in general and the large carnivores in particular with any degree of seriousness? It is a sad reality that today the Indian tiger, the Asiatic lion and for that matter other larger mammals like gaur, rhinoceros

and elephant are not secure.

Beyond the rhetoric of saving the big cats, we have failed to see the value of a living tiger to the communities around our national parks. And how communities can be co-opted and oriented towards protecting this wildlife heritage. In Gujarat, there has been a ray of hope. Lions in Brihad (Greater) Gir are gradually spreading out well beyond the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary and being accepted so far with a measure of proprietary pride by the people. This kind of human-wildlife interface needs to be defined, expanded and established to provide the existing population of wild carnivores with absolute security.

However, tigers have vanished from Siraska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. The figures from



the Ranthambhore also do not seem to augur well. What really happens on the ground? Much of it remains shrouded in mystery but we can take a calculated guess.

Assuming that an area is well-managed, the wildlife population will continue to grow until such time it reaches an optimum.

The animals would typically begin to spread out well beyond the protected area as happened in Brihad Gir and sure to come into conflict situations with human beings. Moreover, it is this unmonitored area that becomes the nascent poaching zone.

It would be worthwhile to track the diminishing numbers

and overlay it with the available land reserved for them. Ranthambore, one of the first nine reserves at the launch of Project Tiger, has 13 adult male and three male sub-adult tigers while female adults are 17 and female sub-adults three. Of this total of 36, one male and three female have been sent to Sariska and two females have died. This leaves only 31 tigers at Ranthambore. The adjacent Sawai Mansingh Wildlife Sanctuary is known to have five tigers with two more in outside protected areas. The total of 38 tigers may be a conservative estimate, subject to correction but there is an implicit message there.

Five hundred square miles would seem to be adequate for 12 adult males. It would be natural for the stronger and more dom-

inant males to hold the largest, prime territories while the younger males and the displaced older ones would spill over to peripheries outside the reserve. These males would then come into conflict with human habitation. It is precisely at these intersections that the greatest danger to these big cats lies. It is here that the temptation and the opportunity to kill tigers for economic considerations fructifies.

Do our authorities have any advance planning for such outward movement resulting from success of their protective measures within the reserve? This would need a creative and sage thinking process to keep the twin objectives in focus, protection of the wildlife and human habitation.