

TIGERS SAFE UNDER 'LOCAL' EYES

ALL FOR A CAUSE

Photo: Vijay Pinjarkar



The canteen at Moharli has been handed over to a women's SHG. This keeps them from cutting trees illegally and destroying tiger habitat



A new souvenir shop too has been set up which will be run by the TATR Society. Its members consist of local villagers who are guides too



By roping in local women to man the kitchen and guides to run the souvenir shop, the TATR has shown the way to other tiger reserves. The localites, who could have otherwise been engaged in illegal activities, now have a source of income. By keeping the villagers away from the forests, the reserve is strengthening the tiger habitat.

Vijay Pinjarkar | TNN

Conservationists often say that tigers cannot be saved unless the stakeholders are benefited. The Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR), the breeding ground for tigers in the thick forests of Central India, has taken a small step in this direction by allowing women to run the canteen and the guides to man the souvenir shop at Moharli. The reserve had 40 tigers at the last count.

The TATR canteen has always been an all-male bastion. It is perhaps for the first time that the canteen has been handed over to a self-help group (SHG) from Moharli which borders TATR. Similarly, the TATR Society, comprising guides, has been asked to operate the souvenir shop called 'Smritigandh'. While 80% of the profits will go to the stakeholders, 20% will be deposited with the TATR Tiger Con-

servation Foundation. 'Smritigandh', situated in the newly-opened tourists complex, sells pickles, garlic, ginger pastes, food products, T-shirts with tiger posters, khadi kurtas, amla products and also handbooks promoting tiger conservation among other articles. These articles are purchased from Magan Sangrahalaya Samiti in Wardha which, since 62 years, is engaged in promoting indigenous skills of villagers since 62 years.

Assistant conservator of forests (ACF) Niranjan Vivrekar, who is president of the TATR Society, says setting up of 'Smritigandh' and allotting canteen contract to local women will go a long way in tiger conservation. "I'm confident that the women who would have otherwise been involved in felling trees illegally, would now have an alternate work. By being away from the forests, we are strengthening tiger habitat. The two ventures will also be profitable in the long run," he said. TATR field director SP Thakre

said that most of the guides are from the villages around TATR. "We have provided them a source of income by employing them as guides and they, in turn, are conservationists too," he said. Thakre added that he would also encourage locals to run the youth hostel in Moharli. The hostel is likely to start in 15 days. "There are similar offers to run accommodation facilities at Pangdi and Kolara but due to water problem, we are not hurrying with anything. Our basic aim is to send a message that tiger can bring in money for the locals and hence the need to save them," he said.

"We started 12 days ago and the experience is really encouraging. We've come out of our individual kitchens to the community one, where males have always dominated the scene and our role was just limited to making rotis. Now everything, including taking orders, marketing, accounting, cooking and serving the food is done by our group," said a delighted Shah-

naz Belg, chief of the Vanshree women's self-help group.

"We are thankful to Thakre who was firm on giving the canteen contract to local SHGs only," she added.

Belg says there may be many eyeing to run the canteen by offering more money, but Vanshree accepted the challenge when other SHGs said no. "To start with, each one of us in the 13-member group collected Rs 1,000 for buying grocery and other material. Department provided a refrigerator and a LPG stove while cylinder belongs to one of our group members. We pay Rs 1,000 to the department towards fee. We've also opened a bank account in Durgapur," she said.

This is the peak season and Vanshree is hoping to cash in on tourists flooding the TATR thanks to increased tiger sightings. "During the past 12 days, we've had good orders for snacks (poha) and food. There is competition from a couple of resorts and some locals," said Shahnaz.

Break rules, pay fine in Tadoba

Vijay Pinjarkar | TNN

To prevent tourists from going gaga and not adhering to forest rules after spotting tigers, the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) management will conduct surprise checks and impose spot fines on the lines of the traffic police. The move will come into effect from Friday.

Don't Go Wild

- ▶ Watch animals from **30 metres**
- ▶ Don't stand at a spot for more than **10 minutes**
- ▶ Sign an undertaking before entering the park
- ▶ Keep vehicles on the road meant for tourists
- ▶ Wrongly parked vehicles will be fined
- ▶ Don't get off your vehicle or open gates
- ▶ Avoid disturbing wild animals
- ▶ Keep park pollution-free and litter free by disposing off the plastic into the bag provided near the park
- ▶ Fine for tourists **Rs 200** for drivers and guides **Rs 100**

The decision was taken after a meeting between TATR officials and guides on March 31 at Moharli. It was attended by ACF Niranjan Vivrekar, foresters SR Langde and SK Sonawne, and 35 guides.

In the absence of range forest officers (RFOs), who are reluctant to join duty, park officials are grappling to enforce protection and ward off poachers. Rowdy tourists have only added to their woes.

"To curb the menace, surprise checks will be conducted by the field staff and those found violating the norms will be issued spot fines. The minimum penalty amount for tourists will be Rs 200 and for the drivers and guides it will be Rs 100 each. Everything will depend on the nature of the violation," said Vivrekar.

As per the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), a statutory body monitoring all the tiger reserves in the country, animals should be 'watched' from a distance of 30 metres and no vehicle is allowed to remain at one place for more than 10 minutes. The norms also state that there should be a distance of 500 metres between two vehicles.

Vivrekar says it is difficult to monitor the 500-metre violation especially when a tiger is sighted. "However, the other rules will be followed strictly," he said. On March 24, Vivrekar had suspended eight guides and had imposed a fine on vehicles for going too close to the tigers and also for parking their vehicles wrongly.