

Kaziranga No. 1 in tiger density

Naresh Mitra | TNN

Guwahati: It's official: Kaziranga National Park, the only world heritage site in Assam, located about 250 km from the state capital, has the highest density of Royal Bengal tigers in the world.

This welcome news comes amid a growing concern over the number of tiger deaths in the park, as well as the fast dwindling big cat figures in other sanctuaries of India. Wildlife Crime Control Bureau found that between November 2008 and September 19, 2009, at least a dozen tigers had died in Kaziranga.

Last week, Assam environment and forest minister Rockyb Hussain announced that Kaziranga has as many as 32 tigers per 100 sqkm. He said this while releasing the findings of a joint study by the state forest department and Aaranyak, a biodiversity conservation group in the north-east. The study had been conducted between 2008 and



AT HOME, AWAY FROM HOME

March 2010, using the camera-trapping method.

"After an analysis of all parameters involved in camera-trapping methods, we can safely say Kaziranga has the highest density of Royal Bengal tigers in the world, surpassing even Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand," Hussain said.

The minister officially an-

nounced Kaziranga's name after the findings were scrutinised by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

Chitwan National Park (Nepal) — one of the major Royal Bengal Tiger habitats in the world outside India — has a density of 8.70 tigers per 100

sqkm. Corbett National Park in India has a density of 19.6 tigers per 100 sqkm.

The density in other tiger reserves in India are Bandipur (11.97), Nagarhole (11.92), Kanha (11.70) and Ramthambore (11.46). M Firoz Ahmed, Aaranyak's wildlife biologist and team leader of the study, said the tiger density of the Sunderbans in West Bengal is not known yet, while the density in SE Asian countries like Myanmar is much lower.

The revelation brought much cheer among wildlife enthusiasts and activists. Sanctuary Asia editor Bittu Sehgal said: "It's the highest density of tigers in the world. But it's an estimate. Nevertheless, it is a tribute to the wildlife protection staff of Kaziranga whose blood has been spilled in defence of its rhinos, tigers, elephants and wild buffalos. Kaziranga's example should be emulated by all other tiger reserves and they should get the same political backing Kaziranga gets today."

Poaching, apathy dent tiger population

Radhika M | TNN

Numbers of the charismatic and endangered national animal continue to dip despite its endangered status. And the reasons are many. Inter-state and international poaching, human intrusion in forest habitat and untrained manpower have pushed tigers further towards extinction, and way below the 2006 official figure of 1,411, say experts.

Union minister Jairam Ramesh's admission in Lok Sabha that Uttarakhand and Kerala had the highest mortality of three tiger deaths each this year, calls for an urgent attitudinal shift in protecting tigers across India's tiger reserves, say experts.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has written to chief ministers of three states including Uttarakhand, asking them to take urgent measures to protect the tiger. In the case of Uttarakhand which houses the Jim Corbett national park, unregulated tourism in the na-

Living on the edge

► Uttarakhand and Kerala have the highest tiger mortality, with each reporting three deaths this year

► In Uttarakhand, which houses the Jim Corbett National park, unregulated tourism in the national park's vicinity led to tiger deaths

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"A tourism ministry report had specifically said that lodges and hotels around Jim Corbett national park were disturbing the tiger corridor," says Rajesh Gopal, member secretary of National Tiger Conservation Authority. "Patrolling should be active in the

forests. None of the states have done it," he complains.

Kerala too has witnessed a spurt in resorts that intrude tiger habitat, prompting Jairam Ramesh to express concern. Anil Kumar Singh of Wildlife Trust of India says large scale industrialization by Tamil Nadu and Kerala, building of roads and canals between the habitat corridors of tigers, lead to tiger movement, triggering territorial conflict among tigers.

"In Uttarakhand though, poaching incidents are occasional. It is the quality of tiger habitat that's on decline," says Singh. Poaching of tiger parts however remains the single largest threat to tigers, rue experts. A common grouse among officials is that while the forest departments are short-staffed, training of wildlife officials including in the use of firearms is pathetic. "Wildlife crime is a transnational activity. Yet there is no uniformity in the rules for firearms' use. Even if forest

guards and rangers carry firearms, they wouldn't use them out of fear," says Samir Sinha of TRAFFIC India that is part of the international wildlife trade monitoring network TRAFFIC.

Echoing this, a forest official from Kerala requesting anonymity complains about lack of incentives. "We get no promotions though we work hard to protect forests. Our forest guards end up using only sticks as arms. We also need basic training on how to go about legal proceedings when we nab poachers."

Transfers within the forest departments are a hindrance too, adds wildlife expert Ajay Desai. "Range officers chasing poachers through forests and ending up in a neighbouring state would land in trouble instead of getting rewards. It leads to ego clashes among the inter-state forest officials," he says. Experts say seeking help from tribals who "know forests the best", is the right approach.