

CATMAN

Tirna Ray/ TNN



Joseph Vattakaren

JOSEPH Vattakaren was part of the first study in India that used advanced technology like GPS and satellite radio-collars to generate crucial data on tigers. As part of an intensive monitoring programme, he followed — for several days and nights at a stretch — individual tigers that were habituated to observe aspects of their behaviour and gain new insights into their lives. That was when Vattakaren was doing his PhD study at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun.

His research has been a contribution towards enhancing existing knowledge in the field of tiger behaviour and ecology — particularly predation ecology, their habitat needs, and dispersal behaviour.

Vattakaren did his BSc in zoology from Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala. Subsequently, he did a Master's in forestry (management and economics) from the Forest Research Institute, Dehradun. "However, I was interested in wild animals. Hence, I did my Master's dissertation on radio-collared wolves and ungulate abundance in Velavadar National Park, Gujarat," he says.

As to how he developed an interest in the area of tiger conservation, Vattakaren says that he has always been intrigued by carnivores and big cats in particular. Therefore, when the opportunity to study tigers and live in close proximity to them arose, he grabbed it.

At present, a senior co-ordinator for tiger conservation at WWF, Vattakaren's work entails developing and monitoring tiger conservation strategies for various tiger landscapes across India as well as liaising with the international tiger network.

Elaborating on the fieldwork, Vattakaren says that it entails visits to various tiger landscapes in India, especially the buffer and corridor areas between neighbouring tiger reserves. "My focus is on co-ordinating and training of field staff and chalking out feasible areas for tiger dispersal outside the boundaries of existing tiger reserves. It also involves contributing towards tiger monitoring and conservation in these tiger landscapes," he says.



At present, the priorities of the projects that Vattakaren is involved in includes identifying corridor areas between neighbouring tiger reserves; mitigating human wildlife conflicts by incorporating fair compensation and alternative livelihood practices for park adjacent communities; improving protection measures as well as motivation levels of forest guards and field staff; monitoring tigers and prey in critical corridor areas in the landscapes.

As to the immediate challenges that India is facing in the area of tiger conservation, Vattakaren says, "Dwindling forest cover and increasing human dominated landscapes are leading to habitat degradation and fragmentation. Consequently, there is a decline in prey base due to poaching of prey."

He believes that in order to work towards a solution, better protection measures should be taken by using technology for better estimation

and monitoring of tigers in these areas. Further, he adds that isolated parks should be connected by securing corridor areas. Also, fair practices should be adopted and socio-economic

FIELD WORK

development of park adjacent communities should be the focus. There should be increased patrolling for better protection. Also, severe penalties should be imposed for wildlife trade offences.

When National Geographic aired a documentary on George Schaller recently, Vattakaren was featured interacting with the legend. Looking back, he says, "It was a dream come true. Schaller is a true pioneer who has made monumental contributions in the field of wildlife biology. Schaller admits that an emotional involvement in one's subject is required for an enduring professional commitment to the cause of conservation. This is something I myself subscribe to."

Ugni Mitra was part of the pioneering project 'Monitoring Tigers, Co-predators, Prey and their Habitat' as a junior research fellow

The tiger, being a cat, is a fecund species. Given a degree of protection, it would be able to not only maintain current population levels but also colonise new forests. What is of interest is that though in many of our tiger reserves, the females are breeding freely, the numbers do not show an overall increase. Then where exactly are these dispersing tigers going? A lot of interesting research waits to happen in this direction. Corridors, which are forest areas connecting tiger populations in protected areas, need to be protected so that a few tigers are occasionally exchanged among the existing populations to ensure their long term genetic and demographic viability.