

TIGER ROAR FADING IN ORISSA

Mindless Mining, Industrialization Leading To Largescale Destruction Of Forests Spell Doom For Big Cats

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by Maoists. While forest officials no more venture into Similipal, the government has shut down this favourite destination for tourists.

The situation is no better at the 600 sq km Sunabeda sanctuary, which, too, poses a serious danger for tourists. Satakosia, which is not far off from Bhubaneswar, has all but become a haven for poachers and timber smugglers.

Amid all this, the helpless tigers are witnessing a steady decline in their numbers. Five years ago, tiger population in Similipal, going by the state census, was 101. But in 2006-07, when the WII conducted a camera-trap census, the number was found to be abysmally low around 20. The number was not to the liking of the state government, which last year conducted its own survey again and could not take the number beyond 60. All this notwithstanding, the government's ongoing "Project Tiger" and over Rs 12 crore spent on



the conservation programme at Similipal.

The Sunabeda sanctuary, where Maoist writ runs after they repeatedly attacked forest offices there last year, is claimed to have 34 tigers. Sa-

takosia has now hardly 10 tigers, which, environment activists say, is not a "viable population" to let the animals survive for long. More so, a 2000 MW thermal power plant has been proposed on the borders

The nearly 6,569 sq km Similipal biosphere in Mayurbhanj has now turned into a Maoist hideout. While forest officials no more venture into Similipal, the govt has shut down the favourite tourist destination

of the sanctuary. Orissa had counted 226 Royal Bengal Tigers in 1993, which subsequently fell to 192 (M-57, F-75, cubs-60) by 2004. If one goes by the WII's camera-trap census, from out of the 1,411 tigers counted across the country, Orissa accounts for not more than 54, including 20 in Similipal actually.

"Fall in tiger population is a countrywide phenomenon. There is no point singling out Orissa. We are alive to the problem and taking steps accordingly for effective conservation of the animal," said a senior forest official. "Tall talks do not protect animals. Nor generalization of a problem would lead to solution. Wildlife conservation is not a priority in Orissa where the government is obsessed with acquiring land for industrial houses," said Biswajit Mohanty of Wildlife Society of Orissa (WSO).

"There is rampant destruction of animal habitat all over the state. Large-scale mining has worsened the situation. The government is so callous that it, under the pressure of the industrial lobby, even sabotaged its own plan to create an elephant corridor for which the Central government had given the green light. In an environment like this time seems to be running out for tigers in Orissa," he said.

Even as the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) prepares to launch a special tiger census, the news has failed to cheer environmentalists in Orissa. They said regardless of the outcome, the future of big cats in Orissa is all but doomed because of the large-scale destruction of forest land due to "mindless mining" and industrialization in the state.

Orissa, thanks to its sizeable area of forest cover, has all along been regarded as a major tiger habitat in the country—Similipal in the north, Sunabeda in the south and Satakosia in Angul district. But the ground reality in these places has worsened over the years, resulting in a sharp decline in wildlife population, including tigers. The nearly 6,569 sq km Similipal biosphere in Mayurbhanj district has since been run over