

For the tiger's sake

The success of the resettlement project in the Bhadra Reserve is a shot in the arm for conservationists. But is it in time to save the tiger, asks **S. NANDA KUMAR**.

If you have seen a tiger in the wild, you are very fortunate indeed. There are not many left in India's forests. Those that remain lead a precarious existence. Poaching is the most obvious threat the tiger faces, but it is not the only one. Human settlements inside a tiger reserve also spell trouble. These villages — or a highway or railway line cutting across a forest — fragment wildlife areas, and pose a great danger to the flora and fauna within. Wildlife experts believe that core tiger areas should be completely inviolate in order to allow tigers to multiply.

Boon in disguise

The construction of the Bhadra reservoir in Karnataka in the 1960s, near what is now the Bhadra Tiger Reserve, was a boon in disguise to tiger conservation. The reservoir served as a buffer against further development. But the number of villages in other areas of the Reserve continued to increase. People have lived in the forests of Bhadra for generations. According to a 1917 report, Bhadra had "a village of 88 people and 186 cattle occupying 4.19 sq km." Villagers in the 16 hamlets of Bhadra were mainly agriculturists, cultivating paddy and coffee on cleared forest land. They also reared cattle, which shared grazing space with the tiger's natural prey like deer. But the cattle could also spread disease among wildlife. Clearly man and nature were on opposing sides, with wildlife on the losing side.

For the tiger's sake, the humans needed to leave. But it was not easy for the villagers living in the reserve area, sometimes for over three generations, to leave the place they considered home. Apart from the emotional angle, the other main issue was the suspicion that, if they did re-locate, the

Government would leave them in the lurch. This was because relocations from other wildlife sanctuaries had been handled badly. But rehabilitation from Bhadra seems to have worked.

In what has come as a shot in the arm for wildlife conservationists, and a glimmer of hope for the tiger, 432 families from 16 villages from within the Bhadra Tiger Reserve in Chikmagalur district of Karnataka have been successfully rehabilitated. The villagers were rehabilitated in two areas: M.C.Halli, about 100 km from the Reserve and Kelagur, about 15 km from Chikmagalur. But all this did not happen overnight. The process began in 1987, when a preliminary survey of families eligible for resettlement was conducted. But the project picked up momentum only in the late 1990s with the active involvement of the forest and revenue departments and, more importantly, the participation of village representatives and NGOs.

Working together

Government agencies in India do not always work well together. Inter-departmental files are delayed in transit, and

Voices

- **Conservationist Dr. Ullas Karanth:** "As a person from the Western Ghats, I know that the people want to relocate in favour of a better life. Why should they live frozen in time when the rest of society is developing? And if they move out, it is good for the tiger; it is a win-win situation."
- **Sushilamma, re-settled in M.C.Halli:** "It had been my home for 32 years. Who can leave the place that had become one's home? But the Government has given us five acres here, and we have started cultivating crops."
- **H.D. Sudhakar, re-settled villager at Kelagur:** "The rocky land prevents anything from growing. It is as if giving up our homes has landed us in hardship. I hope the Government gives us alternative land, and digs bore wells quickly."



LAST CHANCE: Will he still roar in India's jungles? S. NANDA KUMAR

bureaucratic procedures add to the problem. And NGOs are often considered 'outsiders', interfering with government procedure. So, what went right in Bhadra? A rehabilitated villager called it "the aligning of good planets resulting in excellent people coming together". Less dramatically, much of the credit goes to Yatish, then Deputy Conservator of Forests, and Gopala Krishna Gowda, then Deputy Commissioner. Committed wildlife NGOs, who had been holding earnest dialogues with villagers inside the Reserve, also played an important role. Perhaps the most active was a local activist, D.V. Girish, who works with the NGO Wildlife First.

And, of course, credit goes to the villagers themselves. Many sensed the time had come to move. As S.R.Nagaraj, a resettled villager now residing at M.C.Halli, put it,

"To say we moved out so that the tiger could live would be a lie. We moved out because there were no facilities for a normal existence inside the Tiger Reserve. But we ensured that the Government acquired land for resettling and personally visited the places before agreeing to shift. I must admit that the Government has provided all that it had promised." What was vital here was that village representatives worked closely with other Government agencies and NGOs.

The Deputy Commissioner helped by cutting through bureaucratic hurdles, often dealing directly with the forest department, the village representatives and NGOs. Politically motivated hurdles were overcome with daily strategy meetings between all the agencies and the village representatives.

The villagers in M.C. Halli speak well of the facilities they have been provided. Those at Kelagur are taking longer to settle, as they depend on the rains for water. Some of the land distributed is rocky, and bore wells are yet to be dug. If this is taken care of, and authorities have said that these villagers are also eligible for aid under other Government schemes, then the Bhadra project will be a benchmark in resettlement. It will also be a model of successful partnership between Government agencies and NGOs.

This move gives the country's wildlife a chance, a slim one, but definitely a chance. Perhaps then the tiger would still roar in India's jungles in the years to come.