



SAVING THE BIG CAT People need to be educated about the long-term benefits of an increased tiger population

Tail end?

CONSERVATION There's so much more to be done if the big cat must roar again, writes

MEERA SHASHIDHARA

The walkie-talkie of our guide was suddenly on high alert. Messages continuously ran back and forth. Our Gypsy changed tracks, swerved onto another path, forged ahead with every new update.

The collective adrenalin in the jeep was pulsating at wild levels. Our eyes and ears peeled, we searched the jungle with anticipation. The sudden alarm call of a sambhar elevated our hopes.

The frequency of the alarm calls increased; patience prevailed. Then she emerged — this majestic, breathtaking beauty of our jungles!

She sauntered out of the woods, heedless of the humans gazing at her in admiration from a multitude of jeeps and canters. The cameras whirred non-stop as she ambled across her jungle path with familiarity.

Striking a pose

We soaked in this magnificent vision for three to four minutes. Then, as if on cue, she turned and posed beautifully, before disappearing into her mysterious abode.

To see a tiger in an Indian jungle is something! This was my first sighting after several disappointing trips to various Indian jungles; needless to say, T-17, at the Ranthambore National Park was my dream come true.

That night, over dinner and a splendid campfire at Ranthambore Bagh, the discussion was naturally over tigers.

After the initial animated exchange of our adventures earlier in the day, the topic moved on to the dwindling tiger population in our jungles.

All agreed that despite con-

tinuous efforts by various conservation communities, the census figures for tigers were far from encouraging; somewhere, poachers had gotten an upper hand. Not surprising, considering each time a dead tiger's parts exchange hands, the value goes up 10 times.

Improved efforts

As John Seidensticker, senior scientist at the Smithsonian National Zoological Park, had identified, unless the price of a living tiger significantly exceeds that of a poached one, conservation will be seriously hindered.

All the stakeholders involved — the forest staff, villagers, the tribals — must have a direct monetary benefit from protecting the tiger.

Stakeholders have to be educated about the long-term benefits of an increased tiger population. Tourism, for instance, can keep the surrounding community's economy going and provide employment.

Perhaps, bonuses and pensions of the forest staff should be tied to improved tiger population during their tenure. Provision of jobs, housing and education to tribal families will go a long way in harnessing support. A viable model will be one that covers the entire eco-system.

True, there are several ecological and biological reasons for preserving tigers in their habitat; structuring and preserving bio-diversity in our jungles is one.

There is a more simple reason — that our children and their children experience the thrill of beholding this fascinating being in the wild.