

Cat got Goa babus' tongue!



Mayabhushan | Panaji

Any State that discovers the presence of unaccounted tigers would double up with joy. After all, the national animal is an endangered species and a massive countrywide campaign has been launched to revive its dwindling numbers. But strangely, forest authorities in Goa are desperately downplaying the recent discovery of four new tigers during the ongoing State wildlife census.

While the official response is that the authorities would wait for the analysis of the pugmarks and scat before endorsing the discov-

ery, wildlife activists allege that the Forest department was dragging its feet because official confirmation of tigers would directly hit the politically powerful Rs 6,000-crore mining industry that operates in several 'tiger zones'.

According to the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India (WII), the tigers — including a tigress with two cubs — had not been accounted for in the 2005-06 tiger estimation survey.

Although, wildlife activists and greens in the State are all upbeat, the Forest department has been lukewarm to the findings.

Speaking to *The Pioneer*, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Shashi Kumar, said it was premature to rejoice. "It would be too early to say. We shall await the results and then break the news." He added the evidence found — scat and pug marks — would be analysed at the Dehradun-based institute.

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"Suspected tiger faeces was found at Surla and Nandran, within the Bhagwan Mahavir Wildlife Sanctuary at Mollem and pugmarks of a tigress and two cubs along the water's edge in Anjunem dam near the Goa-Karnataka border," was all that the reticent Principal Chief Conservator of Forests ventured to say.

Shashi Kumar had earlier caused a furore when he claimed that tigers were not endemic to the State but were 'migratory', for which he was debunked by experts.

Wildlife and environmental activists in Goa have long been demanding that Goa's sanctuaries be notified as tiger reserves. They have accused the Forest department of denying the presence of tigers to appease the politically and economically strong mining lobby.

Goa's open cast iron ore and bauxite mining industry is digging through most of 'protected' forests of Western Ghats that feature in WWF's 12 topmost biodiversity hotspots of the world.

According to wildlife campaigner Rajendra Kerkar, "It is beyond doubt that these forests are a home for tigers. However, if the State's handful sanctuaries are notified as tiger reserves, mining — illegal and legal — around these, carried out with the blessings of the politicians and State administration would have to cease".

Kerkar, also a freelance journalist, recently brought to light the poaching of a tiger in the Mhadei Wildlife sanctuary through his articles. Ironically, Kerkar was made abettor in the poaching crime after the former accused the Forest department of sabotaging the probe into the killing of the Schedule 1 animal. The Forest department had to later drop his name after an uproar in the local media.

"Look, many places in Goa are named after tigers. The official census doesn't show any tigers from Goa when this is a tiger place. The tiger-poaching incident itself reflects that, which means the national count of 1,411 tigers goes up. The Forest department seems to be more concerned with conserving mining in the area than conserving wildlife," well-known environmentalist Claude Alvares caustically remarked.