



SHOBA NARAYAN THE GOOD LIFE

Be a conservationist, the simple Indian way

Here is how a tiger is killed in Ranthambore. First, the poachers lay leg traps on the tiger's usual routes. They scatter small stones around the trap, knowing that the fastidious tiger will try to avoid

these tiny stones. Its leg gets caught in a trap; when it moves, the second trap snaps shut. Now the tiger is in pain so it sits down. The poachers tie a spear to an 8ft-long stick and appear. When the tiger roars, they spear its mouth so it begins to bleed. It roars again. More bleeding. When the tiger's pain gets too much, when it tires from the roaring, they beat its forehead with a stick strengthened by pouring lead on it. They may use a small knife to blind the tiger so that they can spear it to death more easily. The tiger dies an agonizing death.

For the poachers, too, it is a life-and-death game as this magnificent animal—the *Panthera tigris*—is a killing machine. If a trap gets loose, it is a quick death for the poachers, who are usually Moghiya tribals. The poachers will do anything not to spoil the skin of the tiger, which can fetch \$20,000 (around Rs9 lakh) across the border. "In India, they export tiger bone and skin to the Chinese," says Dharmendra Khandal, conservation biologist with Tiger Watch, an NGO. "The Chinese use the tiger's penis and liver but that they get from the Russian market, which has figured out how to export the flesh of the tiger as well."

It is the Chinese Year of the Tiger but the big cat is in danger like never before. Khandal recounts the twisted tale of how they work with Moghiya tribe informants to save the tiger from extinction. Founded by the legendary Tiger Man of Ranthambore, Fateh Singh Rathore, Tiger Watch has recently started turning

the tables on the hunters by hunting them and getting them arrested.

Indians are natural conservationists. The Hindu religion worships animals as God—Hanuman, the monkey God; Ganeshji, the elephant God; the lion-headed Narasimha; and so on. We have a natural reverence for trees and life-giving herbs. Our culture is not iconoclastic but encompassing. We see ourselves as part of nature, not above it. Still, the poaching and encroachment continues, in part because of the poverty of those who live at the rim of wildlife sanctuaries. "Conservation is not only about protecting animals. It is about managing humans and their behaviour," says Ravi Chellam, country director, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)—India Program.

I had called Chellam to help me solve a simple problem. I had read in that morning's *Deccan Herald* about hundreds of *Bende* trees (*Kydia calycina*) at the Biligiriranga Swamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary (BRT Wildlife Sanctuary) that were going to be axed in preparation for the car festival of Lord Ranganatha on 27 April. The felled trees would be used to build a car for the deity, an annual tradition. It seemed like an eminently avoidable practice, especially since these fibrous trees are prime fodder for the elephants that roam BRT Sanctuary. Although felling these protected trees was illegal, the forest department officials had adopted an "enigmatic silence", said the paper.

To me, this was a no-brainer. For



Cornered: In this year of the tiger, there are very few of the magnificent beasts left.

once, I wished I was Jairam Ramesh or at least one of his local officials who could issue an ultimatum that heads would roll if a single *Bende* tree was touched. This was not about tribal livelihoods or farmer safety against rampaging elephants. This was just tradition. All that needed to be done was to inculcate a different mindset in people. Rather than cutting fresh trees every year, they could build a permanent car for Lord Ranganatha using existing timber. I called Chellam mostly for ideas. Who could I write to about this? Could I petition the Union government? Did he know the forest officer in charge of BRT?

Chellam was in Bannerghatta National Park watching elephants when I reached him. His first response was urging me to ascertain the facts: the number of trees that were going to be axed and so forth. He felt that many media reports on wildlife, ecology and conservation were poorly informed, inaccurate and tend to sensationalize issues. I swallowed all that and finally asked him what I should do. His response surprised me. "I see this as a huge opportunity for advocacy even at the cost of sacrificing a few trees," he said. "Such cultural occasions when thousands of people gather can be used effectively to communicate to them the value of nature and ecology and the need for conservation by linking the use of wild

grown trees for making the temple car."

Conservation is written into the Indian Constitution. "It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife and to have compassion for living creatures," it says. Starting in 1935 with the Jim Corbett National Park (then called Hailey National Park), India today has more than 600 protected areas, including parks, sanctuaries and Ramsar sites—wetlands of global significance, according to the WCS' website. Its range of fauna is at an impressive 7.3% of the world relative to its area of 2.4%. But for reasons that are blindingly obvious to anyone who owns a dog, wildlife conservation has become distant from the very urban Indians who not only enjoy wildlife, but also have the power to do something about it. You own a dog; you become fond of all dogs, even stray ones. You become more compassionate towards these creatures. How can urban Indians become conservation advocates when—barring an annual trip to Corbett or Ranthambore—we are physically so distant from it? Conservation has to connect people to wildlife, not simply paint people as villains. Not my words. Chellam's.

So what of these car festival devotees, I persist? This is a small, solvable

problem, one that even I can handle, say I. "You know, we always go after the small guys—the tribals, the poachers, the farmers," he replies. "If the army wants to set up an arms depot in the middle of a sanctuary, who is going to stop them? If a major industry wants to set up a factory of hundreds of acres of forest land, who is going to stop them? A port is being built at Dhamra in Orissa, which is a major nesting site for Olive Ridley sea turtles. Those are the more important wars worth fighting, not the one when a few trees are cut down for a temple car festival."

His words bring up something that is close to my heart and has been in the news recently. The Reddy brothers and their blighted mines that are shamelessly and ruthlessly encroaching into forests without heeding the mitigating factors that have been written into their contract. The Supreme Court is after them, thank God, but after reading a mining report by the activist organization Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) about how mining in the last decade has been destroying the forest cover, watershed and ecology, I hope that someone will have the courage to go after all the illegal mines and put an end to this pillage and destruction of our land, nature and ecology.

Meanwhile, I am chasing the forest officer in charge of BRT Sanctuary to hug the trees before 27 April as it were.

Olive Ridelies or a Tata seaport that gives hundreds of jobs? It is a vexing problem but like everything worth fighting for, wildlife isn't easy.

Shoba Narayan has never seen an Olive Ridley, which she thinks is part of the problem. Write to her at thegoodlife@livemint.com

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