

# Where wildlife is safe

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**Brijindra Singh, whose mission in life is to preserve Jim Corbett National Park and protect its inhabitants, is feared by poachers and respected by the authorities, writes Rajeev Khanna**

**A**T the ripe age of 64, Brijindra Singh continues pursuing his passion — to preserve Jim Corbett National Park, and to protect its inhabitants. For him life without an association with the animals of the park would be like being a fish out of water. He is candid and blunt when he talks of the failures and remedies in the programmes and policies related to the park. One can expect this from him, given the fact that he was appointed honorary warden of Jim Corbett National Park in 1982, when, at gunpoint, he had arrested the entire top brass of the district administration while it was poaching right in the heart of the area.

The Commissioner of the district, the District Magistrate, the Superintendent of Police, the Subdivisional Magistrate and the SHO were arrested single-handedly by him. This set an unforgettable example for all poachers — high and mighty — as far as the park was concerned, as an arrest of this magnitude, made by a mere citizen, was unheard of.

Today, when the census of tigers is under way at the park amidst frequent reports of tiger deaths and various other controversies, he says: "The first concern must be to protect the tiger. Other issues can be dealt with later." He is particularly pained about the growing instance of the man-animal conflict, and says that a lot needs to be done at the political, social and administrative levels if the tiger population is

to be kept thriving.

He says: "The economic development programme has not managed to trickle down to the people living in the periphery. They need to realise that they, too, are stake holders in the entire process. The setting up of the park has also provided them with sources of livelihood." He points out that more compensation needs to be given to the people who lose their cattle to tigers. He is particularly harsh at the "hypocritical" approach towards the issue. "On the one hand there is a resolve to protect the tiger, and on the other the same people bay for the blood of the tiger when it carries away their cattle. The tolerance level of the villagers is low and local politicians ignite the fires."

He is clear on the point that the state government will have to show the political will to check the uncontrolled growth of resorts and excessive tourism in the areas around the park. Singh's views cannot be taken lightly as he has been amongst the longest serving members on the Indian Board for Wildlife (IBWL) and the steering committee of Project Tiger. He has also been a member of the Society of the Wildlife Institute of India, the governing body of the Wildlife Institute of India and the Forest Conservation Act Committee.

Son of the late Raja Harmahendra Singh of Dada Siba in Himachal Pradesh, Raja sahib, as he is popularly known in the area, had started his association with the park as a schoolboy in



Brijindra Singh combing Jim Corbett National Park along with volunteers

1957. His attraction and love for Jim Corbett National Park grew with each visit, which, with each passing day, grew more frequent. His active involvement with park matters was to start with his successful campaign to stop the construction of a three-star hotel at Khinnanauli by the Tourism Department of UP in 1968. This area today is the prime tiger habitat and the pride of the park.

Having come from a background where hunting was a part of life, Brijendra Singh grew up as a hunter and is well known in the hills around Mussoorie for having shot many cattle-lifting and man-eating leopards. His guru was none other than the famous Colonel ANW Powell, a contemporary of Jim Corbett.

The first meeting organised by the WWF, attended by Sir Guy Montford and chaired by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi — to put an end to tiger hunting in 1968-69 — influenced him greatly, and the realisation dawned on Singh that it was not the hunters' lobby that was going to save the tiger in India.

Singh then decided that he would only kill the man-eating leopards or troublesome, confirmed cattle lifters at the request of the poor and desperate villagers. But in 1970 this was to come to an end, too. A near fatal accident, while hunting, was the turning point.

Singh decided to put away his guns and take up the camera instead.

He has been often called upon by the Forest Department in a crisis to put away rouge elephants and man-eating leopards and tigers, a task which he reluctantly undertakes. Some of these man-eaters have been trapped alive by him and sent to zoos. An incapacitated tigress, unfortunately, had to be dispatched by him, while carrying off two mahouts right in the heart of the park at Dhikala in 1988.

He was instrumental in getting the park area increased from a mere 520 square kilometres to 1319 square kilometres with the addition of the Sonanadhi sanctuary and buffer areas. The idea was to establish a corridor for the migrating elephants and wildlife right to Nepal. He continues to be concerned about the future of elephants. "Elephants need to have an uninterrupted corridor between the Yamuna in the west and the Sharda in the east," he says.

Singh spends most of his time patrolling Corbett Tiger Reserve, organising sting operations to nab tiger and elephant poachers, and purchasing boats, vehicles and communication equipment. He spends his spare time in photographing animals. Films, books, audio-visuals, slides, photos for brochures and postal stamps have been presented free by him to the state.



Brijindra Singh is one of the seniormost members of the Indian Board for Wildlife