

WHY WE CAN'T SAVE THE TIGER

CAT FIGHT India holds the key to the wild tiger's survival. But despite ad campaigns and Facebook evangelism in our cities, ground realities in our forests are defeating the cause

■ Praveen Donthi
praveen.donthi@hindustantimes.com

Some 50 men of Kuchwahi village and I are perched on mahua trees somewhere close to the edge of Madhya Pradesh's Bandhavgarh National Park. The agitated villagers are trying to catch a glimpse of Chakradhara, a tigress that had mauled to death a village girl, Anjana Tiwari, when she had gone to pick flowers earlier in the day. The 18-year-old had just written her board exams. "She was a 'computer mind'.... would've topped the district," says a villager perched on the same tree as I. All the villagers want now is revenge.

The area's forest department officials, on the other hand, are on a conflicting mission. A posse of them, who arrived that afternoon riding Gypsy vans and elephants, are trying to chase away the tigress.

But Chakradhara is still roaming the park. Her fate will depend on her 'report card' — if she kills more humans, she will be shot dead or shifted to a zoo by the same government officials who are now trying to 'save' her.

There are others trying to save tigers, too. 'Stripey, the cub' has 2,32, 410 fans on the social networking site Facebook. But in a democracy, the majority's will is key to the tiger's survival.

RETRIBUTION KILLINGS

Of the total unnatural tiger deaths revenge killings account for about half, says Ullas Karanth, an expert who has been tracking the tigers in Karnataka's Nagarhole National Park for more than two decades.

That's what had happened on March 7 in Talda Khet village near the Ranthambhore National Park. Two cubs aged 13 months died after eating a poisoned goat carcass. The villagers had injected the carcass with large doses of Aldrin, a pesticide that's easily available. The cubs had killed three goats. So, Ram Khiladi Gujjar, owner of the goats, procured the pesticide. Of late, Gujjars here have been rearing goats and sheep, which tigers fancy

a lot more than buffaloes, increasing the chances of antagonising the locals. Such minute changes in pastoral communities could decide the fate of the tigers of an area. Tigers kill as much as 12 per cent of the 450 million live-stock annually.

RELOCATION ISSUES

According to an estimate, out of India's 3.05 million sq km geographical area, with 70 per cent rural population, such conflict zones constitute less than 1 per cent. It seems like a localised management problem. So after *Project Tiger* was launched in 1972, a pet project of Indira Gandhi, it was decided to relocate the villages falling within core and buffer areas of the tiger reserves.

As of today, there are 762 villages in core areas and 3,678 villages in peripheral and buffer areas according to *Project Tiger*, now morphed into a statutory body: National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). About 80,000 families have been identified as critical. But only 3, 602 families have been relocated till February 25, 2010.

Every member above the age of 18 in a family gets Rs 10 lakh to relocate. But there's a shortage of funds. "We asked for Rs 5,000 crore but got only Rs 650 crore for the five-year plan period," says Rajesh Gopal, Director, NTCA. As on date, only Rs 200 crore has been received.

Even if there were funds, it's not easy. For example, Padra village inside Ranthambhore got funds in August 2001. But out of 111 families, 36 still remain there today.

Politics and tourism pressures also decide which village gets priority. Ram Ratan Meena became the sarpanch of Hindwar panchayat after making a poll promise to bring the lucrative relocation package of Rs 130 crore. He credits Namu Narain Meena, MP, Sawai Madhopur and former Union minister of state, Environment and Forests of helping him out. Local conservationists, however, allege it should be the last village to be relocated, as the benefits of its relocation can't be reaped unless the villages, which are closer to the sanctuary, are moved before that. In BNP area there is another example.

There are twin villages — Ghatpuri and Rancha — in the buffer zone but only one is being relocated as the other has a big tiger resort.

The solution of paying compensation for cattle killed by tiger is not working due to the massive scale of the problem, corruption and the heavy expenses incurred for claim verifications. Only half, or less than half, of the market price is given to the owner. Immediate payment, conservationists say, will go a long way in mitigating hostility towards tigers.

COMMERCIAL POACHING

The demand for tiger skin and parts from China and other South East Asian countries is essentially due to its role in traditional oriental medicine. According to Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), the profit margins could be as high as 900 per cent. If the poacher in India gets Rs 70,000 for the skin, it could be sold for as much as Rs 7 lakh in China.

The magnitude of the wildlife trade came into light in India in August 1993, when a raid conducted in Delhi's Majnu Ka Tila threw up 8 tiger skins, 387 kg tiger bones, 43 leopard skins, 128 otter skins, 7 chital skins and 8 fox skins.

As long as there is international demand, there will be targeted poaching. "In a healthy tiger population, there is always 10 to 15 per cent surplus. If they are poached there is no reason for alarm as they are high in reproduction. But the entire populations are being wiped out like in Sariska and Panna. Even if there's reasonable patrolling on the ground, they can't reach breeding population," says Ullas Karanth of Nagarhole.

But there is a severe shortage of forest guards, with no recruitment for over two decades now. The average age of the ill-fed and ill-equipped guards is 52. "They keep recruiting higher-ups but no guards. We are fighting a war with generals but no soldiers," says Ashok Kumar, Wildlife Trust of India.

The poachers, on the other hand, are highly motivated. For the hunting tribes like Bagheliyas, Pardhis and Moghiyas etc, it is a matter of survival. The government has made very little



■ A tiger skin seized from poachers set ablaze.

SHERWIN CRASTO/AP

efforts to rehabilitate them.

"If we deny that poaching is not happening we will be the biggest liars. This generation of tribals we can't do much. It takes time to wean people away," says NTCA's Gopal. Is there a way to curb demand for tiger parts from China? "No," says Jairam Ramesh, Minister for Environment and Forests. "I'm also guilty of blaming China for long. The international demand is going to be there forever but there's so much we can do here. The state governments should give the resources and focus. Forest department is not trained to deal with organised crime," says Belinda Wright, WPSI.

PEOPLE AND POLITICS

Seventeen states are home to tigers in India. In the era of coalition politics, with a different government at the Centre and in the states, implementation of policies for tiger conservation is quite a task. Madhya Pradesh was the last to sign a tripartite agreement on tiger conservation last year. The state had the maximum number of tiger deaths last year. Many funds earmarked for MP had to be sent to Rajasthan.

"We can't do much. We can show the way, make law and give the money but ultimately it's the job of the states," says Gopal. The biggest priority now is to get the states to appreciate the issue and get them to work with all the players says Wright. "If we have the CMs onboard, then there is still some hope," she adds.

A strong government at the Centre helps tigers. The tiger conservation establishment credits Indira Gandhi for single handedly saving the tiger from the brink of extinction. "Madam ka ishara hi kaafi tha (a sign from madam was good enough)," says a senior official from the environment ministry. "She was personally interested, so everybody was alert — the chief minister, chief secretary, forest department, bureaucrats etc."

"After Indira Gandhi, only now there is some concern from the central government. But nothing can happen if state governments resort to inaction. Political will is important for tigers to survive," he adds.