

Karnataka gets special tiger protection force

Mix of well-trained forest personnel as well as locals



PUG MARKS ACROSS INDIA

State	No of tiger reserves	State	No of tiger reserves
Andhra Pradesh	1	Maharashtra	4
Arunachal Pradesh	2	Mizoram	1
Assam	3	Orissa	2
Bihar	1	Rajasthan	2
Chhattisgarh	3	Tamil Nadu	3
Jharkhand	1	Uttarakhand	1
Karnataka	4	West Bengal	2
Kerala	2	Uttar Pradesh	2
Madhya Pradesh	6		

(Source: Project Tiger)

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Ravishankar, 29, Assistant Conservator of Forests (ACF) and posted at the Bandipur tiger reserve in Karnataka, is holding down a historical first. He is the first head of the first Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) in the country. The hiring is just over and the training commences soon.

It's a rather delayed programme. In 2008, the government had given a one-time grant of ₹50 crore to the National Tiger Conservation Authority

(NTCA) for raising, arming and deploying STPFs in 13 sensitive tiger reserves — Dudhwa-Katerniaghat, Corbett, Ranthambhore, Pench, Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Pakke, Bandipur, Tadoba Andhari, Mudumalai, Kaziranga and Simlipal. In fact, ₹93 lakh each were released to Corbett, Ranthambhore and Dudhwa for this.

"Initially, the plan was to have STPFs only in these 13 reserves but now the forces will be set up in all 39 (wildlife) reserves. However, we need about ₹25 crore per annum for the 13 reserves," says Rajesh

Gopal, member-secretary, National Tiger Conservation Authority.

Hopefully, the process will be speedier. For now, Karnataka has made a start. It houses four reserves — Bandipur, Bhadra, Dandeli Anshi and Nagarhole — and it has constituted a 112-strong STPF.

Comprising 80-odd forest guards and other personnel, with the rest being local dwellers. This sort of mix is what has been recommended for all STPFs, with a reasonable salary — Ravishankar's own has risen from ₹24,000 at his earlier posting as

ACF, Bijapur, to ₹40,000 a month; a forest guard in the Force is to get ₹18,610 a month. Which ensures a company each for all the 13 initial reserves would cost at least ₹34 crore a year, likely to be a problem with finance departments.

"I have been patrolling the area for the purpose of anti-poaching besides collecting information. We are also getting local dwellers in," says Ravishankar. Bandipur is also a test case, with a tiger density of 11.97 per 100 sq miles. It was among the first nine tiger reserves created at the launch of Project Tiger in 1973.

"Karnataka recruited people in the force last month and it will start undergoing training. Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu may be next in line to do so, as they have expressed interest," says Gopal of the NTCA.

An STPF company is to also get special training from the state police department and central paramilitary forces, based on a syllabus for skill development, combating poaching, and enabling intelligence-based enforcement in a forest terrain. The syllabus draws on the one prescribed for the India Reserve Battalion.