

Ignorance is not bliss

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...Tiger se jungle,
jungle se baarish
Baarish se nadiya,
Nadiyo se hai hariyali
Tiger hai toh hum bhi hain...

THIS is the official Tiger anthem released by the environment and forest minister with a punch line: 'If the tiger goes, he will not go alone. You may soon follow'. This is no rocket science, but the very 'circle of life' taught to us in school books. Unfortunately, this very philosophy is absent from the consciousness of civil society, as well as machinery of successive elected governments. Not only is there total apathy, but also ignorance towards our natural history, conservation and its management.

A classic example of the government's attitude is the case of Sariska. In 2008, two tigers were airlifted from Ranthambhore National Park to Sariska Tiger Reserve. The Rajasthan forest officials arm-twisted their way to get the two tigers from Ranthambhore by ignoring all recommendations of the NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority, formerly Project Tiger) and the Tiger Task Force. Without DNA testing they picked up siblings, which have refused to mate till date.

A year later, the state officials disregarded the NTCA guidelines of only translocating transient tigers (tigers which do not have, at present, any fixed territory or are looking for one) while bringing in the third tiger from Ranthambhore. Experts say removing a tiger from its territory creates an ecological imbalance as a vacuum is created in the range. But for the officials, trapping a territorial tiger is easier than a transient tiger. Add to that the relocation of villages from the core critical tiger habitat, as recommended by the Tiger Task Force, which still plagues officials.

The reintroduction of tigers in Sariska necessitates relocation of villages. Of the four strategically located villages — Kankwari, Kraska, Umri and Bagani — only Bagani, the least populous of the lot and with least impact on wildlife, has been relocated. The rude shock only came last month, when the Rajasthan government did a complete U-turn by first issuing new mining leases in the vicinity of Sariska and



refusing to cancel them despite Jairam Ramesh requesting CM Ashok Gehlot. The Supreme Court ruling was also ignored. In fact, the idea of tiger relocation came into being just to ward off pressure from the mining lobby that was targeting the tiger reserve to be denotified.

For a long-term conservation strategy, the NTCA has repeatedly stressed on creating and maintaining active buffer zones surrounding core areas and re-establishing corridors for free flow of gene pool, avoiding in-breeding amongst species. Except for

a handful of cases, none has bothered to understand the problem. For example, Rajasthan officials claimed that Ranthambhore National Park does not have the capacity to hold more tigers and tigers are straying from the park for want of space. Needless to say, Ranthambhore hardly has any buffer area.

A straying tiger loosely means one which goes where it is not supposed to. Now how do we know where a tiger is supposed to go? Do we expect tigers to know their demarcated 'protected areas'? A tiger is either pushed by

stronger rivals to find its territory or simply wander away while hunting for food. Recently, a sub-adult tiger from Ranthambhore was spotted 200 km away in Mathura and now has taken refuge inside the Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary.

There is enough policy and management guidelines, what we need is proper implementation and able leaders, besides, of course, widespread awareness and civil society movement.

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