

'All is not lost'

Prema Naraynen speaks to conservationist and leading tiger expert Dr Ullas Karanth about the challenges faced in conserving the tiger in India, and the steps being taken to save the animal



Dr Ullas Karanth

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Dr Ullas Karanth is one of India's most admired conservationists. A scientist who has won critical acclaim for his rigorous and cutting-edge field research, he has also, for many years now, taken on the additional roles of conservation activist, outspoken and candid analyst of conservation policies, and author. In 2007, he was awarded the J Paul Getty Award for Conservation Leadership, an award that has earlier been given to — among others — Salim Ali and Jane Goodall.

Karanth has two specialised books for release this year: *Camera Traps in Animal Ecology*, co-edited by him and published by Springer, and *The Science of Saving Tigers*, published by Universities Press.

The tiger was voted the most loved animal on the planet in a survey by a popular documentary channel a few years ago — just above the domestic dog and dolphin. Clearly the tiger is surging in popularity right now. Do you believe conservation can benefit from this momentum?

Obviously, if this public appeal is channelled into the right conservation actions on the ground, the tiger can benefit hugely. However, if all this leads only to talk shows on TV, huge commercial billboards and futile exchanges on the Internet, it will be a sad waste. There does not seem to be a sound mechanism to direct this popularity of the tiger into much-needed action.

However, I believe that the new film *The Truth about Tigers* with its linked website www.truthabouttigers.org, launched recently by filmmaker Shekar Dattatri is a good step.

In 1971, you received a degree in Mechanical Engineering. Twenty-two years later you had a PhD in Applied Zoology. What was it that impelled you to make conservation a career?

I was interested in wildlife from a very young age... I took up engineering only to earn a living, because in the '60s, there were no careers in wildlife biology. But I did spend a lot of time wandering in the forests of Nagarhole, Kudremukh and other places in the mid-60s. I was actively involved in conservation from the 1970s. In the early 1980s, the Smithsonian Institution and University of Florida gave me opportunities to retrain myself as a wildlife scientist, eventually leading to a professional career in the Wildlife Conservation Society under the tutelage of Dr George Schaller.

What was your opinion of field research in India vis-a-vis western conservation scientists like Mel Sunquist, with whom you began your scientific work?

Dr Mel Sunquist is one of the most outstanding carnivore biologists I have met. He pioneered radio-tracking techniques in the '60s at the University of Minnesota, and also the study of tigers using that technology in the early '70s in Nepal. The radio-telemetry study of tigers that Sunquist and his colleagues did in Chitwan in the '70s is unmatched so far by any radio-telemetry study in India even after three decades. A major problem here is official hindrance to such studies, and more recently, the attempts to monopolise tiger

research by government institutions.

How much has this situation changed in India?

Wildlife field research has progressed, but the quality of the science is generally not high as judged by peer-reviewed publications.

You have been insistent that conservation initiatives must be informed by science-based field research. Is this happening now in India?

Judging by the scientific publication record, there is some good conservation research going on in academic/research institutions, mostly outside the *sarkari* domain. However, forest managers show scant interest in knowing about it or applying it. They do their own 'seat of the pants' wildlife management, largely divorced from conservation science or the ecological needs of tigers.

What is your opinion of the reintroduction programmes currently underway in the country: repopulating parks where tigers have become locally extinct?

I think they are mainly a distraction from implementing serious recovery efforts on major surviving populations of tigers in the country... a disproportionate amount of money and attention is going into these efforts which have very little impact on tiger population viability, taking the country as a whole.

What of the plan of reintroducing cheetahs that have been extinct in this range for at least 60 years?

It is a grand, worthy vision: I am not sure it is practical given the pressure on land and the fragile nature of the cheetah as a species... all the pressures that wiped the cheetah out nearly a century ago are operating even more intensively now. I am not sure the feasibility studies of the project have been as solid as one would desire...

Do you think such initiatives put international pressure on countries like China where tiger parts have a ready market? I do not think so. China went ahead with the Three Gorges Dam despite all such pressures. The pressure to suppress demand and trade in tiger parts has to come from within China primarily, I think.

Poaching, tiger ranges being reduced to small fragmented pockets, prey depletion, a bureaucratic forest service: what is the biggest challenge conservationists face in saving tigers?

All these are problems. However, I think the mission-drift in the Forest Departments — away from focused protection of tigers on the ground — towards eco-development and other expenditure-oriented activities is the biggest problem of all, followed by the lack of science in managing and monitoring tigers to reliably assess results of all conservation interventions. There is the urgent need to plan and implement generous and just voluntary village relocation programmes at critical tiger areas. Simply spending money won't do. Money has to be spent wisely, although it is very welcome that the Central Government is seriously committing funds to tiger conservation.

I believe all is not lost for tigers, as some conservationists think — economic growth and development are offering people new opportunities and livelihoods away from forests and in non-land based sectors... therefore technology, modernity and progress offer new opportunities for conservation also. I believe there is some room for hope for tigers.

You once said, "Conservationists must learn to function independently as small NGO groups without looking for government

Do you have one most fulfilling moment — for you personally — in your career as a conservation scientist?

Many moments: the first time I caught a tiger and put a radio-collar on it and was able to follow and virtually live with it was very fulfilling... working with dedicated conservation partners who have implemented successful village relocations, or shut down destructive mines and other negative impacts, is equally rewarding... the excitement of doing science, say developing camera-trapping or a new statistical model had its own rewards.

A lot of adjectives have been used to describe the tiger: noble, powerful, even gentlemanly (presumably even tigresses share this quality!). You've worked with tigers for decades. How would you describe them?

I am usually speechless in the presence of a tiger...

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"Most top-down, big money, flashy conservation schemes end up doing more damage than good. The last round of the World Bank-GEF Eco-development Project in India was a good example of a planned disaster"

The Global Tiger Initiative (GTI) set up by the World Bank has popular movie stars from Hollywood endorsing its objectives. You have referred to the GTI as a "problem that cannot be ignored". Why?

Most such top-down, big money, flashy "conservation schemes end up doing more damage than good. The last round of the World Bank-GEF Eco-development Project in India was a good example of a planned disaster. I see not much change in the way the World Bank is functioning so far in this GTI, and, because of its potential to have negative impacts on critical tiger habitats, the GTI cannot be ignored. If it goes well, however, some positive outcomes, particularly in terms of containing the negative impacts of the Bank's infrastructure projects such as mines, highways, dams, etc, might emerge. But a planned review of such past mistakes was promised two years ago and has not been delivered... if they do not learn from mistakes they will only cause more damage.

doles and jobs." Can you elaborate on this for young students looking at conservation as a career? Except for jobs in the Forest Departments, there are a very limited number of openings in the government sector. However, with increasing opportunities for doing conservation assessments of developmental projects, teaching jobs etc, opportunities are open in large and small NGOs, colleges, consultancy firms and even for young conservationists to start their own effective NGOs as the Mysore-based Nature Conservation Foundation has demonstrated. All these opportunities must be explored and exploited aggressively by young wildlife biologists.

