

# Promoting tourism in MP... at a cost too dear

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BHOPAL, 13 DEC: Minutes before midnight on 14 September, Chief Wildlife Warden of Madhya Pradesh Mr HS Pabla sent an e-mail to resort owners and tour operators. He asked them to join the state government in opposing the PIL (Ajay Dubey v National Tiger Conservancy Authority & others) filed in Jabalpur High Court, which seeks, as per the Wildlife Protection Act, a bar on tourism in core areas, notification of core and buffer zones, and implementation of a tiger conservation plan for tiger reserves.

The e-mail, subsequently leaked, contains phrases like "if you want to be sure the PIL does not succeed" and "kindly take whatever steps you think will be appropriate to protect your interests".

Speaking to The Statesman, Mr Pabla said there is nothing inappropriate in him sending the e-mail and reiterated that the state government is for pushing tourism and that it can be promoted in a sustainable way in even in core areas. Mr Pabla's

"pro-tourism" credentials are well established. In May he was awarded by the state government for being the "tourism friendly forester" of the year. His department pushed a proposal created by the tourist lobby — Travel Operators for Tigers (TOFT) — to allow South Africa style safaris, i.e. conversion of parts of tiger reserves into enclaves for high-end tourism.

In August, a "shocked" Union environment minister Mr Jairam Ramesh wrote to chief minister Mr Shivraj Chauhan quashing Mr Pabla's initiative of allowing tourist outings in core areas of tiger reserves. That these "initiatives" come despite the Prime Minister having written to states to reduce tourism pressure and Mr Ramesh's stand that "unregulated tourism is as much a threat to the tiger population as poaching and poisoning" is par for the course in Madhya Pradesh, though.

In fact, allegations have now been made by Bhopal-based wildlife activist Ms Shehla Masood that personal/financial interests are at play behind officials' support for mushrooming wildlife

tourism in and around tiger reserves, with top officials' kin allegedly employed by CC Africa, rebranded recently as & Beyond, a leading safari operator in Africa that has joined hands with Taj Hotels to open several lodges in Madhya Pradesh. CC Africa has also been involved in the government's attempts to translocate animals from one reserve to another.

While no officials have been publicly named thus far, sources in the NTCA have confirmed that they have specific complaints and names with them. Mr Pabla's leaked e-mail, incidentally, was addressed to members of TOFT and the Taj-CC Africa joint venture.

Whatever the truth of the allegations, it is a fact that in the past decade tiger numbers in MP have dwindled and, according to the Governor's reports to the Centre, atrocities by the forest department against tribals have continued while wildlife tourism has boomed. The central SIT report on Panna Reserve tiger deaths between 2002 and 2008 shows that the forest

department shifted focus to tourism and went into a complete denial mode on rampant poaching. "I do not have any personal interest and no family member of mine is involved in wildlife tourism in Madhya Pradesh, Africa, or anywhere in the world," Mr Pabla told The Statesman. State chief secretary Mr Avni Vajsh dismissed as "too general a statement" the allegation that bureaucrats have vested interests in wildlife tourism.

