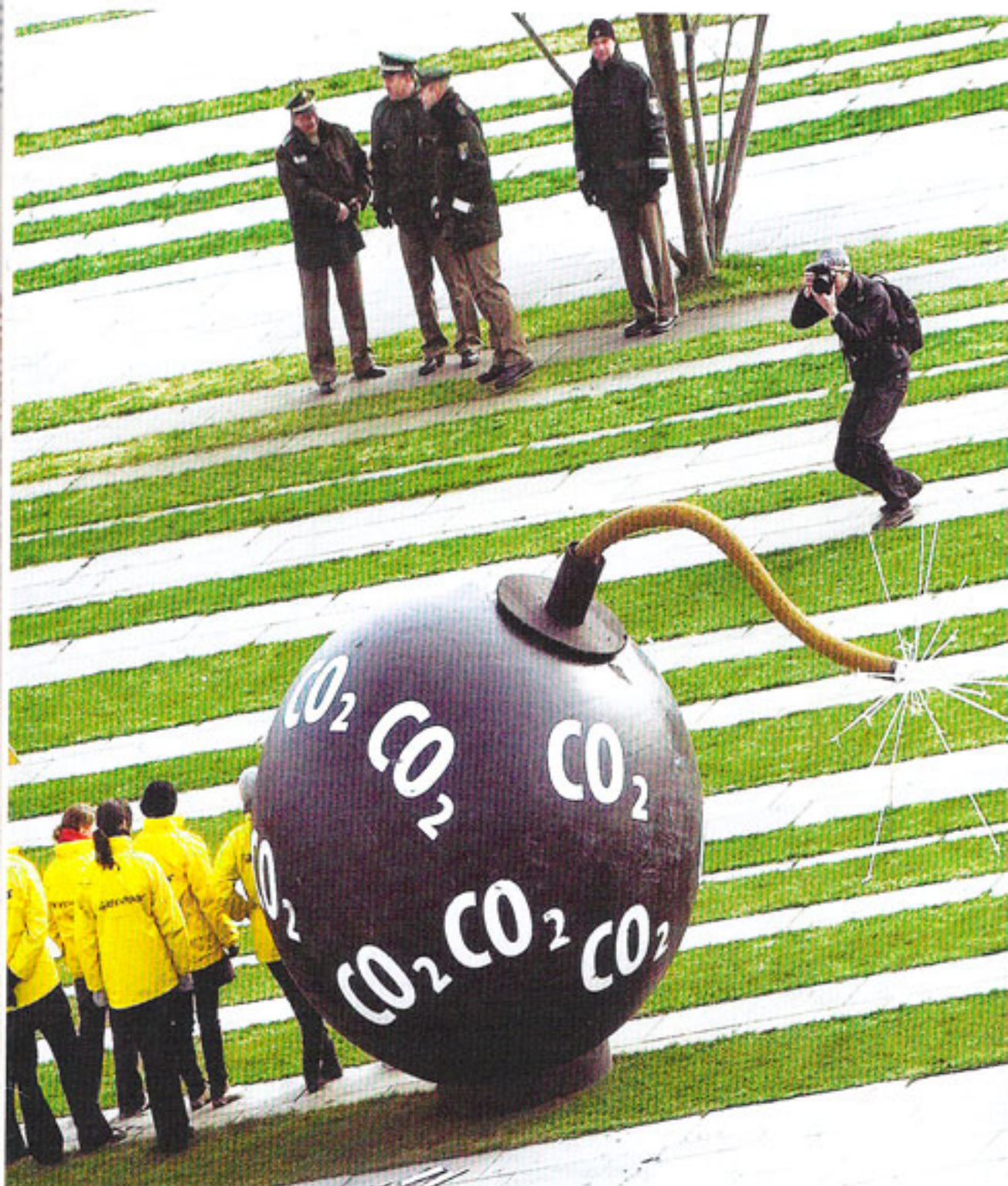


THE HINDU

# SURVEY OF THE ENVIRONMENT 2009



Rs.60



## Trouble in tigerland

### Why do we get conservation so wrong?

Panna lost its tigers because the Forest Department went into denial as they started disappearing. Central India is the heartland of the tiger, but populations here are suffering a worrying decline. Joanna Van Gruisen looks at the weakest links in the conservation plan for the big cat and proposes remedial measures.



*A pair of courting tigers in Panna National Park. PHOTO: JOANNA VAN GRUISEN*

This is a tiger tale and many may feel that tigers have already had too much exposure in the media but in reality this concerns not only tigers but all of us — you, me and everyone we know. For we are not only talking tiger here — far from it: the tiger is merely a symbol, a charismatic flagship species representing the full gamut of life from the lowliest worm to the tallest tree, from the most minute bug to the largest mammal, the slimmest reptile to the highest flying bird. The tiger here is itself but an example: this majestic and compelling creature with universal appeal is also a peg on which to hang arguments concerning our natural world. Ultimately we are talking of our own survival too, for the tiger represents those wilderness areas and ecological processes that provide the planet with enough clean air, water, soil and other services to sustain human life. If we cannot or do not have the will to save the tiger, then what can we save?

Central India is tiger heartland; it is where historically a high percentage of India's tigers resided; now it is an area where much trouble is brewing, above and below the surface. In the detail of this 'tigerland' breakdown, some worrying truths lie exposed.

In 2004, the Sariska Tiger Reserve lost all its tigers. The resulting outcry led to the creation of a Tiger Task Force to look into the management of tiger reserves and suggest ways to strengthen tiger conservation. It was intended as an opportunity to "review the past and secure the future" (*Joining the Dots — Report of the Tiger Task Force 2005*).

One of its recommendations led to the countrywide survey undertaken by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA, as Project Tiger had become) in collaboration with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). The final report was published in early 2008: *Status of Tigers, Co-Preda-*





*A female in her prime, before disaster struck Panna.* PHOTO: JOANNA VAN GRUISEN

tors and Prey in India. This gave scientific credibility to the long-standing warnings of informed conservationists that the status of the tiger in India was not as rosy as claimed and that it was, in fact, seriously declining.

The survey revealed a total figure for India of only 1,411 tigers — even less than the population that had been estimated in 1972 (1,827) when Project Tiger was created. Initial efforts of the Project did yield success; the slide to extinction was stemmed and the tiger population more than doubled.

### **More than poaching**

So now what is happening? Why are we losing tigers again? Organised poaching has certainly increased in the interim and human pressures too have multiplied but this is not really a full explanation. These are critical issues that do need to be tackled but it is not impossible to do so. We have a large branch of the government — the Forest Department — in the Centre and at the State

level — whose mandate it is to protect and look after our wildlife and forests. It seems to be failing and we need to examine why.

A look at the recent history of a central Indian tiger reserve might shed some light. In 1995, in the Panna Tiger Reserve, scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India began the first ever study on the ecology of tiger in a tropical dry forest.

The study, led by Dr. Raghu Chundawat, wanted to ascertain the reasons why tigers have disappeared more from this type of habitat than from others and thereby gain the knowledge to better conserve them.

Over the initial years of the study, however, the scientists in fact documented one of the world's best recoveries of a tiger population: the density of tigers in the park increased from a meagre two to three tigers for every 100 square kilometres in the best area of the reserve when the

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project started, to almost seven for the same area six years later. So by 2002, it was estimated that there were over 35 tigers within the park's



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540 sqkm area. This recovery was mainly due to good park protection and management combined with the research project's constant monitoring of breeding individuals, helping to create a safe and stable environment that allowed a very high cub survival rate.

Unfortunately from late 2002 onwards, the situation altered drastically. There was a change-over in personnel at the top level of management in the park; protection became lax enough for poachers to move in and take their toll. Nilgai, wild boar and sambar could be seen injured and with snares around their necks; known breeding tigers were either found dead or had disappeared. Within two to three years the thriving population of tigers was decimated to less than there had been when the study project began.

The Forest Department's reaction was defensive; it went into denial mode and failed to take any action to deal with it. Instead the department held a census, in early 2005, to 'prove' — through the discredited, and easily manipulated, pugmark method — that all was well and that there were still 35 tigers in the park. It brought the tiger study to a premature close by withdrawing Dr. Chundawat's research permission and took every opportunity to discredit and undermine his scientific information.

Later in 2005, the police caught a poacher who admitted killing eight tigers in the Panna Tiger Reserve (and dealing in 30 leopard skins). But the department was unable to accept, even at this point, that there was a problem. Just a few months before the very last remaining Panna tiger disappeared (in the winter of 2008/09), the Additional PCCF Wildlife in Madhya Pradesh wrote, "I would like to assure the world that the tiger density in this park has never been better." (*Sanctuary Asia*, June 2008).

So Panna went the "Sariska way"; another premier tiger reserve was left with no tigers. Sariska happened almost unnoticed but in Panna, there was a scientist to observe and publicise the early warning signals; even so, no preventative action was taken.

Why was this? And how many other areas,

without whistle-blowers, are also at risk?

### **Kanha reserve is in danger**

Kanha has long been Madhya Pradesh's flagship Tiger Reserve. It is, or was, the best-populated, large tiger landscape in central India. If elsewhere tigers are lost, at least here we can be confident of a good population — or can we?

The official record of tigers in the Kanha Tiger Reserve between 1984 and 2002 indicate a density of five to six tigers per 100 sqkm. In 2002, the officially recorded figure for the 1,945 sqkm-reserve was 127 tigers. However in 2008, the all-India census report recorded only 89 tigers for the park and adjoining tiger landscape, a total area of 3,162 sqkm.

As a manager one might have been concerned at what was the biggest drop recorded in central India. But they seemed unperturbed and the situation has deteriorated since then: in the last few months between seven (official) and 16 (unofficial) tigers have been lost from this one reserve alone; it is said that some — previously thriving — ranges already have no tigers left. If this can happen in Kanha, central India's most prestigious reserve, it can happen anywhere.

Indeed unusual deaths and disappearances are being reported from most of the Protected Areas in central India: Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Ranthambhore, Tadoba, Melghat, etc. This is highly disturbing.

The department reports that many of the deaths are due to fights between tigers; but in normal circumstances this would happen only rarely. The injury descriptions sometimes hint more towards poaching. Poaching is now a well organised crime and is a threat that seems inadequately recognised by the forest managers. Disease is another possible explanation.

Other issues adversely affecting the tiger population are the threats to habitats from such 'development' as river-linking projects, mining, power projects and creation of six-lane highways. Human-animal conflicts and naxalite disturbances are further challenges affecting many central Indian areas.





*Gaur make their way along one of the vehicle trails in the Kanha National Park. PHOTO: RAGHU CHUNDAWAT*

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These many potential and actual disasters suggest that this is the last crossroad for central India's tigers.

The worry is that the Forest Department seems unwilling or unable to recognise the signs and is therefore not prepared or able to contain the coming catastrophe.

At a recent meeting of senior wildlife officials called to discuss the extraordinary number of tigers found dead over the last few months and to find ways to prevent them, there seemed little indication that more than a small minority thought that anything was amiss. And even if they did, they felt they were doing the best they could.

What conclusions do the events of Panna and reactions such as these lead us to?

Though it is necessary to fix accountability, it

is no longer enough to blame particular individuals and the leadership. The problem is more than this — we have a total system failure. Information does not emerge from those best-positioned to know; if it does become public, often leaked through those outside the system, the department either acts too slowly or not at all. The strident warnings for Panna went unheeded for six years! Only now, when all is lost, when it is too late for the Panna tigers, has the Ministry of Environment and Forests constituted a Special Investigation Team to look into the tiger deaths.

It seems that in the interest of trying to protect our forests and the species within them, so much power has been given to the forest department that, as so often happens, this has sullied the system to an impasse; sullied to an extent where



meritorious officials often cannot thrive and are sidelined, and ill-informed, negligent officers are promoted.

Stemming forest degradation and saving species is too huge a task for a government agency alone. But attempts to forge partnerships between the department and those outside have rarely progressed happily even when they have occurred. For wildlife sanctuaries, there is a statutory provision formalising people's participation through Sanctuary Advisory Committees but this is largely ignored by the State governments. It seems that the department is moving more towards being an insular, self-protective system. There appears to be little desire for dialogue outside the department — or even within it. If the boss says there are 35 tigers, how can field personnel say different? Imagine what this does for staff morale!

Those living in and around our protected and forest areas have no say, scientists and other experts are given scant respect, the system is closed, discussion is not encouraged, the truth is obfuscated and dissenting opinions or concerns are perceived as criticism and defensively rejected as suspect.

It is this depressing scenario that has led many, even some bureaucrats, to strongly argue that we need a more professional and an entirely new dedicated wildlife service for the job.

### **Transparency and accountability**

Overcoming the resistance and creating a totally new service may not be possible to achieve in the short term. Nevertheless we must at least work towards opening up the present anachronistic system. India is known as the world's largest democracy, but often missing are those two essential democratic pillars — transparency and accountability. These pillars are certainly missing from the mainstream operations and ethos of the Forest Department, yet their presence could transform it.

The solutions are frighteningly simple and well within our means. Tigers are a wonderfully resilient species and can bounce back — as Panna showed us. India has an enormous wealth of expertise, will, enthusiasm, ideas, vision, knowledge, ability and the technical knowhow to save the tiger and to tackle the most complex environmental problems. It needs to be utilised. We have some good policies and programmes but there are enormous gaps between these and the field realities. The answer is not more of the same from an



*What snares do to predator and prey. A 'nilgai' bull killed by a trap set by poachers. PHOTO: JOHANNA VAN GRUISEN*

**It seems that in the interest of trying to protect our forests and the species within them, so much power has been given to the forest department that, as so often happens, this has sullied the system to an impasse; sullied to an extent where meritorious officials often cannot thrive and are sidelined.**

outdated organisation, not more guns and guards and fences and isolation. What we require is an overhaul of the system and its methods; only with a truly inclusive approach will we find the vision and dedication to achieve our aims.

Political commitment could help bring about these much needed changes but the focus now is on 'economics', rapid 'progress' and 'development' and a sound environment is not accorded the pivotal status it deserves. Contrary to the way it is often presented, the two are not conflicting. Development, poverty alleviation, employment, all affect, and are affected by, the state of our forests, wildlife, mountains and rivers; progress can only occur in any meaningful and sustainable manner in conjunction with a healthy environment.

We need to properly plan our use of available land, recognising that a certain percentage does need to be kept with nil, or minimal, human use, that some has a fragility that needs extra care and importantly, that the majority rural population,





*This male tiger was the last one sighted in Panna. A flourishing population of over 35 tigers has been allowed to collapse to zero in the national park. PHOTO: JOANNA VAN GRUISEN*

the first to feel the effect of damaged natural resources, should not be left struggling and paying the cost of the urban minorities' "rapid economic growth."

To achieve this, open dialogue and debate is essential, transparency of action is critical and accountability of those entrusted with implementing the decisions is imperative. This is required on a national scale but is surely long overdue for the forest departments.

The sands of time are almost through for the tigers in central India and for many other species

countrywide. We need to act urgently and cannot afford to concede so much power to the unenlightened who trample our futures.

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