

THE TRUTH ABOUT TIGERS

If we cannot save our national animal, what can we save?

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Interview with Praveen Bhargav, Managing Trustee, Wildlife First

In an exclusive interview, **Praveen Bhargav, Managing Trustee of Wildlife First**, a proactive, Bangalore based conservation NGO, talks to Shekar Dattatri about poaching and its prevention. Bhargav is a seasoned conservationist with over 20 years of field experience and a special interest in enforcement issues and wildlife law. Along with K.M. Chinnappa, a former Range Warden who now heads Wildlife First, he has conducted more than 30 field training programmes for forest and police personnel in several states.

Can you tell us how tigers recovered from the brink of extinction in the 1970s?

Tigers would be long gone but for the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 – two powerful laws ushered in by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi – that provide protection to tigers and their prey from illegal hunting, and buffer tiger habitats from the impact of development projects. The remarkable recovery of tigers between the 70s and 90s happened because, under a new initiative called Project Tiger, which was started in 1973, many dedicated forest officers began enforcing the tough new wildlife laws. Habitats began to recover, prey populations increased and tigers bounced back

But we seem to back to square one now. Why?

The reason for this is simple. The zeal that marked the first two decades of Project Tiger, as well as the level of protection on the ground in terms of systematic patrolling by fit, well-equipped personnel has plummeted. It is little wonder that in Reserves with reduced protection capabilities, tiger populations are being pushed over the edge by organized tiger poaching and prey depletion.

Is there a time-tested protection system that serves as a model to control poaching?

A few reserves, like the Nagarahole-Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, Corbett in Uttarakhand and Kaziranga in Assam, have a reasonably effective multi-tiered protection system with foot patrols, routine and intelligence based day/night mobile patrols, a network of permanent anti-poaching camps, and manned check posts along public roads. The very fact that these Reserves have some of the highest tiger densities in the world is an indicator of the effectiveness of this time-tested system. We need to replicate and further improve this system in all Reserves. It is imperative that foot patrols, which are the key, should include expert trackers from local tribal communities, wherever possible. Without this crucial element of foot patrols no protection system can be fully effective.

What else is required to make all this more effective?

A vital ingredient is strong leadership from officers. Enforcement being a tough and inherently risky job, frontline staff need constant motivation and quality leadership. It is this, rather than just weapons or equipment that can achieve results. Wherever Forest Officers have led from the front and set an example to their field staff, things have improved dramatically.

You can do your bit to motivate field staff too. The next time you visit a Tiger Reserve and come across a foot patrol or pass by an anti-poaching camp, stop and talk to the protection staff. Tell them how you respect the important job they are performing at great odds. Or support efforts to improve the working conditions of frontline staff by interacting with senior officers and NGOs.

What about deploying Ex-Servicemen to guard our forests? Surely, they have what it takes to root out poaching?

Not necessarily! An ex-serviceman hired on contract cannot 'loosely' operate with forest staff and open fire on poachers when ordered to. The Wildlife Protection Act does not empower even serving army officers to do this, leave alone ex-army personnel. Furthermore, just because a person is an ex-service man does not automatically qualify him for this specialized job. For instance an ex-service man from the supply corps or one trained to fire howitzers, tanks and other tactical weapons will be ineffective for forest patrols. Only if we can find sufficient ex-servicemen who have served in infantry combat units or have been trained in jungle warfare, and recruit and deploy them in Forest departments in their home states will this seemingly effective solution work.

How do we deal with extremist insurgents who have taken over many Tiger Reserves?

To effectively tackle armed insurgents in Wildlife Reserves, a highly trained and well-equipped strike force is necessary. In the Nagarjunsagar- Srisailem Tiger Reserve in Andhra Pradesh, well-entrenched left-wing extremists were systematically pushed out by the elite Greyhounds – a special anti-naxal police force raised and specially trained to operate against insurgents. Armed and empowered Greyhound units continue to operate in the Tiger Reserve carrying out area domination patrols to prevent re-infiltration of insurgents. The proposed Special Tiger Protection Force must be modeled along the lines of the Greyhounds to recover Tiger Reserves overrun by extremists.

What about equipping Forest Guards with automatic weapons?

Rapid-fire automatic weapons are neither necessary nor effective in encounters with poachers in forest

Analyse the Crisis

Why are tigers disappearing from our forests, and what do we need to do to reverse their decline? This section provides a clear analysis of India's tiger crisis and the solutions that are available to prevent the needless extinction of our national animal.

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Understand the Tiger

The tiger is a large, territorial, meat-eating animal that needs about 3000 kg of live prey every year and undisturbed forests to live in. Any attempts to save this charismatic predator will only succeed if we have a clear understanding of what tigers need.

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Defend the Tiger

Passion without action is of little use. If we are to save this priceless gift of nature, thousands of well-informed citizens must raise their voices and actively participate in conservation efforts. Learn about what you can do.

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Experts speak!

Read what some of the world's leading experts on tigers and their conservation have to say. Their distilled wisdom can transform you from a sympathizer to a true defender of wild tigers.

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areas with thick cover. Also, most forest staff are not trained to handle such weapons. Therefore, equipping forest staff with a mix of good quality 12 bore shotguns, .315 rifles and ammunition in sufficient quantity will provide enough firepower to deter poachers.

You have mentioned 'foot patrols' several times? Why is this so important? Surely, you can cover more ground in a jeep?

Although they may be viewed as a 'low tech' method, foot patrols are actually an indispensable component in any anti-poaching effort. Forest officers who have successfully recovered wildlife Reserves have effectively used this method to ambush poachers, who primarily sneak into Reserves on foot and set up jaw traps and wire snares and even use country made muzzle loading guns to kill tigers and prey animals. They often penetrate deep inside Reserves using forest trails, cleverly avoiding roads and jeep tracks. Only foot patrols with expert trackers tasked with the objective of detecting such intrusions can track down and ambush poachers. A vehicle borne patrol may be able to cover long distances but it cannot detect a poacher screened by vegetation hiding right next to the jeep track or detect a cleverly camouflaged jaw trap embedded on a forest trail.

Is it only the 'guns and guards' approach that can save tigers and other wildlife? Aren't there any other means such as through involving local communities?

It must be recognized that there is a transnational illegal trade in wildlife, which cannot be wished away. Poaching mafias with links to local wildlife criminals can only be stopped by the guns and guards approach. Involving the local communities is a powerful second line of defence. They can be provided gainful employment as expert trackers and for fire protection duties in the forest department, as well as recruited as informants. Interested individuals from the community can also be trained as naturalists for low intensity tourism. Creative, site-specific ideas of involving the local community in activities not involving forest produce extraction but which offer other livelihood opportunities must be explored.

So what's the bottom line?

After nearly four decades of tiger conservation, there is a body of knowledge on how to tackle the problems. We now know that for most Reserves, the time tested multi-tiered protection system of foot patrols, mobile patrols and anti-poaching camps with sufficient trained staff, properly equipped and operating under motivated leadership can effectively deal with poaching. As for Reserves which are affected by armed insurgency, a highly trained, special force duly empowered is necessary to recover the area and restore normalcy. We must focus on strengthening institutions – forest, police, forensics, prosecution... at the State level with the Centre fully underwriting the costs incurred by cash strapped State Governments.