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FIVE MEASURES THAT MAY YET SAVE THE BIG CAT

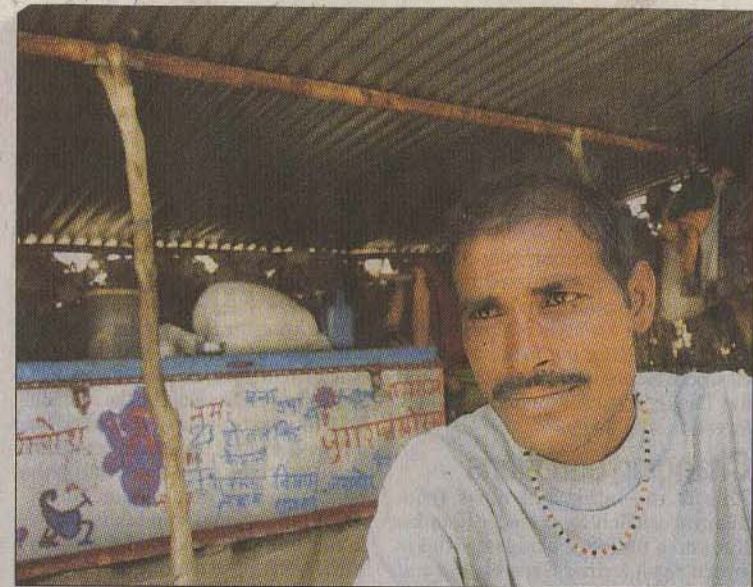
1 Tigers are obligate predators and need huge prey bases to survive. A tiger kills once every week or so and needs 70 prey animals a year according to Ullas Karanth, who studies tigers at the Nagarhole National Park. That's about 3,000 kg of food a year. For every 50 deer and pigs killed by villagers a year, a tiger loses his 'ration'. The key to a healthy tiger population is a healthy prey base, hence a protected forest area. There is need to prevent poaching of prey animals to save the tiger.

2 Villagers around reserves need to be made partners in conservation efforts. Cattle kill compensation policy should be evaluated and implemented. There is a need to develop the villages around reserves and provide them with: 1) Cooking gas to prevent them from going into forests; 2) high yielding varieties of cattle to reduce the number of cattle; 3) high yielding varieties of crops to deal with destruction by animals. A cess on resorts could be levied and used for the cattle kill compensation.

3 In India the tiger habitat has shrunk by 93 per cent. The total potential tiger habitat is 300,000 sq km. We should aim to maintain at least 100,000 sq km for future conservation of tigers. A healthy tiger population will always have a surplus but the breeding populations have to be saved. We should increase our patrolling for which we need to recruit forest guards on a priority basis.

4 Despite the high incidence of wildlife trade and crimes, the conviction rate is low. The biggest wildlife seizure case, made in Delhi in 1993, dragged on till 2010 and the accused have been acquitted for lack of evidence. Public prosecutors should be trained in the Wildlife Criminal Act and the government should make efforts to create awareness of the law. The weak law allows the offenders to repeat the crimes. The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau should be fully functional with no vacancies.

5 At the heart of tiger conservation is the need for reliable numbers. Lack of it is one of the most frustrating aspects of Tiger conservation. "Tiger census is like an ecological audit. There should be an independent scientific audit," says Ullas Karanth. The monitoring of tigers has to be continuous, due to their high birth and death rates. A five-year census is not deemed effective enough to capture the changes in the tiger population.



■ Jugraj of Moghiya tribe was asked to stay in his village, Halonda in Ranthambhore National Park, after he confessed to killing 3 tigers
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