

TIGER TRAIL At the turn of the last century, there were an estimated 45,000 tigers in India's forests. GETTY IMAGES



Tiger, on its last leg

WILDLIFE Conservationists believe the number of tigers left in India may be little over half the official tally and that at the present rate of decline, the tiger will cease to be a viable wild species in India within five years, writes Gethin Chamberlain

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The poachers perch on the rough platforms they have built in the trees, waiting for the tiger to come. They have been searching the forests of Ranthambhore reserve for days, following the pug marks and other tell-tale signs. When they found the fresh kill, they knew it would only be a matter of time before the tiger returned to eat. They placed their traps on the path, scattering small stones across the sandy soil, knowing that tigers hate to walk on them and will pick their way around.

The tiger pads forward into the trap, which springs shut with a snap. Desperate to free itself, the tiger thrashes around. Another foot catches in another trap, then a third.

The poachers watch to make sure it cannot free itself. One man carries a bamboo stick into which he has poured molten lead to give it more weight. The other has a spear on the end of a 10ft pole. As the tiger opens its mouth, the poacher with the spear lunges forward, stabbing between its open jaws. His colleague smashes the tiger over the head with the stick.

When it is over, they draw their iron knives and set to work to skin it. Later, they are gone, melting away unchallenged into the jungle. It is always the same, says Dharmendra Khandal, sitting in the offices of Tiger Watch, established in Rajasthan 12 years ago.

Hardly any tigers left
At the turn of the last century, there were an estimated 45,000 tigers in India's forests. By the time hunting was banned in 1972, their numbers dropped to 2,000. In January, the World Wildlife Fund placed the animal in its list of 10 key creatures facing extinction, warning that while counting tigers is difficult, there might only be 3,200 left in the wild worldwide. The WWF has just launched a Year of the Tiger campaign to coincide with the Chinese year of the tiger.

The government claims 1,410 tigers are alive inside its borders. Few experts believe this. Last year was the worst since 2002 for tiger deaths. The MoEF concedes that its way of counting tigers is so vague that there may be only 1,165. Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh admits the fig-

ure of 1,400-odd was "an exaggeration". Conservationists believe the number of tigers left in India may be little over half the official tally and that at the present rate of decline, the tiger will cease to be a viable wild species in India within five years. If poaching and habitat loss continue, those reserves that still have tigers will be little more than open-air zoos. The ministry says there are 16 reserves where there may be no tigers at all or where the tiger is in danger of becoming extinct.

Are enough attempts being made?
Tiger Watch's approach is having an effect, but that has not been enough to save it from the wrath of the authorities whose indolence it has exposed. Its founder, Fateh Singh Rathore, was the government's field director at Ranthambhore from 1977 to 1996 and is regarded as one of India's foremost tiger experts. Sitting in his rebuilt office, he picks up a newspaper with the WWF advert, warning that there are only 1,411 tigers left in India. He shakes his head; the true figure is probably closer to 800, he says. He doubts there are over 20 tigers left in Ranthambhore.

"I am still optimistic because I feel the tiger has a lust for life. It can survive if it gets protection, but you have to be very strict if you want to protect the tiger," he says.

The last full tiger census in India - which claimed 3,642 tigers - was carried out in 2001, based largely on pug marks, an unreliable method of counting. Satya Prakash Yadav, deputy inspector general of the National Tiger Conservation Authority in Delhi, admits it was "seriously flawed". For the latest study, he says, officials switched methods, using a mixture of camera trap results and a survey of the habitat and prey base to produce an estimate of how many tigers might conceivably have survived. But he admits that problems remain.

Orissa's Simlipal reserve provides an insight into how problematic the official figures are. A 2004 report, based on pug marks, claimed there were 101 tigers in the reserve. Last year, Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh conceded that 40 tigers had been poached from the reserve over the last five years, but insisted there were 61

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tigers alive and well in Simlipal alone. Yet the government's figures claim there are only 45 tigers in the whole of Orissa, which also includes those in the Satkosia reserve. Something does not add up.

Then there is Panna. The latest report claimed that there were 24 tigers in the 974 sq km reserve. Last year, it was found that there were none. In Kerala's Periyar tiger reserve though, a group of women has been mounting their own fightback. Every day, members of Vasanta Sena venture unpaid and unarmed, in search of poachers.

Women's army to save the tiger
The forest is lush and green, a gentle breeze rustling the leaves of the sandalwoods and the swaying stands of giant bamboos arcing overhead. A stream runs beneath a roughly made wooden bridge. The women pick their way among the trees. At the front is Gracykutty, who says, "Here we breathe the best air in the world and we are dedicated to protecting it," she says. "I think if there is only one tiger left in the world in the end, it will be here."

Her colleague Jiji, 35, says they know that if the forest goes, so too will the tiger, destroying the tourist industry on which their economy depends.

"We keep a look out for trees that have been cut or signs that people have been in the forest. It is important because if the forest is cut then there is less space for the animals. If the forest goes and the tigers go then it will be terrible for everyone."

At the Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Chennai, the zoo's director, PL Ananthasamy, argues that the answer to the tiger's decline lies in a captive breeding programme. Tigers breed well in captivity, but releasing them into the wild is another matter entirely. Aditya Singh, 43, conservationist and tiger expert, worries that time is running out. What will finish off the tiger, he says, is the destruction of the remaining corridors of forest that link the parks. "There are still connections between the reserves, but in five years they won't be there. I think the tigers have five years. They will stay in isolated pockets, but they will have reached an evolutionary dead end. The Observer