

Tigers spell good news for Goa

Pug marks, droppings found in wildlife sanctuaries

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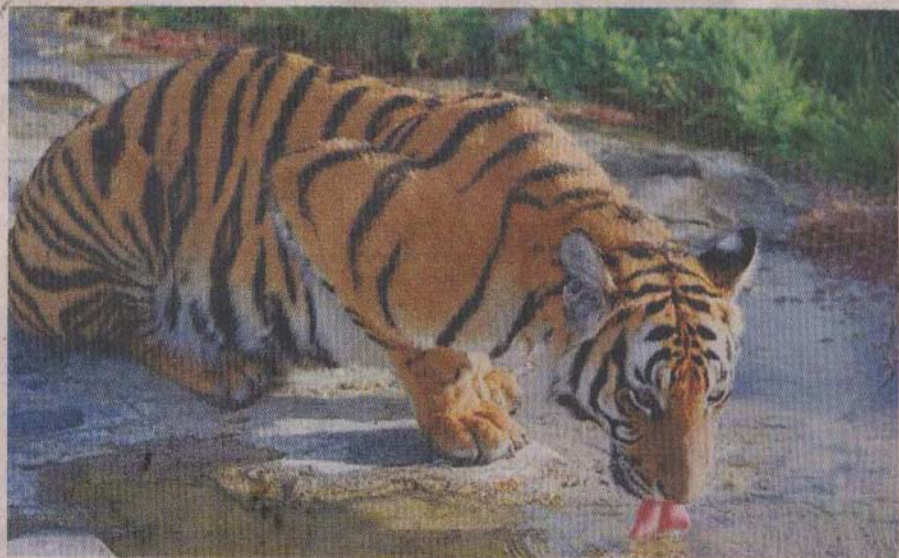
In what is being seen as a shot in the arm for green activists campaigning for setting up of a tiger reserve in Goa, the State wildlife census has stumbled upon direct and indirect evidence of at least four tigers in wildlife sanctuaries here.

A senior wildlife official told *The Pioneer* that tiger droppings were found at the Mollem National Park, which borders Karnataka on the eastern side.

"The tiger droppings were found in Mollem national park. We also found pug marks of a tigress and two cubs in the catchment area of the Anjunem dam (located near the Mhadei wildlife sanctuary in north eastern Goa)," said the forest official, on conditions of anonymity.

Despite the good news, no forest official was willing to comment officially on the development. Renowned wildlife activist Rajendra Kerkar stated that the Forest Department's silence was not surprising because its officials had been trying for years to suppress the fact that Goa's forests were ideal habitat for tigers.

"There has always been



proof that there are tigers found in our forests. But the Forest Department has been consistently denying the presence of tigers because they are hand-in-glove with the mining lobby," the activist added.

Kerkar had, last year, exposed a sensational tiger poaching incident in the Mhadei wildlife sanctuary. He had also repeatedly exposed the Forest Department's unwillingness to investigate, under pressure from the powerful

mining lobby in Goa.

"If Goan forests are declared tiger reserves, several mining activities — especially illegal mining — will have to stop. Powerful politicians who either run these illegal mines or shelter them do not want the official tiger presence recorded here," said Kerkar, adding that top Forest Department officials were linked to the mining mafia.

Goa's wildlife sanctuaries — namely, Mhadei, Netravali, Cotigao and the Bhagwan Mahavir — are a part of the

rich biodiverse Western Ghats but are surrounded by nearly 100 legal open cast mines, from which nearly 40 million tonne of iron, manganese and bauxite ore is extracted annually.

The BJP has repeatedly accused Chief Minister Digambar Kamat and several of his Cabinet colleagues of sheltering the mining mafia. According to former Chief Minister Manohar Parrikar, almost 20 per cent of the 40 million tonne ore exported from Goa annually is illegal.