

In The Forests Of The Night

Tigers are not safe even in the best of India's reserves

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The tiger has become the latest expression of political correctness. Look around: schoolchildren on roads, national icons on screens and big brands in campaign mode. The government has pumped in additional funds. Conservation NGOs are mushrooming in all corners of India. Green blogging is catching on like wildfire.

Under the spotlight, tigers are still dying frequent, unnatural deaths. To understand why, let us focus on India's most pampered tiger reserve. The crown jewel of dry, deciduous tiger forests, Rajasthan's Ranthambore generates huge tourism revenue and attracts billions in government and non government funding. This was the reserve the prime minister visited to assess the conservation crisis in 2006 after the infamous extinction of tigers in Sariska. Within a few months, two top forest officials were shifted out of Ranthambore when poachers arrested by Rajasthan police admitted to killing over 20 tigers there. Then, a beleaguered state forest department channelled its energy to Ranthambore to stage a face-saver.

Unlike many other tiger reserves, Ranthambore never fell off the radar. And still, tigers have been dying here with alarming regularity. The latest is the case of two young males, poisoned to death. The Rajasthan forest department was not short of explanations. First, officials told the media

that there were too many tigers and when the surplus tigers moved out, their future became uncertain. Then they rued that such tragedies could have been avoided had the Centre not suspended shifting tigers to Sariska after the first three animals were moved. (For the record, the tiger relocation drive was put on hold after three siblings were arbitrarily picked up for rebuilding a population and the Centre ordered DNA tests to ascertain the breeding compatibility of Ranthambore tigers before selecting right individuals for Sariska.)

The Ranthambore tiger reserve spans 1,300 sq km and

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has about 40 tigers. This is hardly anywhere near the saturation mark. Corbett tiger reserve has four times as many tigers in as much area. So how do forest officials claim saturation tiger density in Ranthambore? Well, when they say Ranthambore, they refer to the 300 sq km national park that is only a small part of the 1,300 sq km tiger reserve.

Most of Ranthambore's tigers are inside this prey rich,



A tiger in Ranthambore: That sinking feeling

well protected 300 sq km national park area. The remaining 1,000 sq km of the reserve - Sawai Man Singh sanctuary, Kela Devi sanctuary and reserve forests - has little natural prey and no protection. One would have expected the forest department to take control of the entire reserve, stop grazing, reclaim encroachments and re-settle villages but the authorities have washed their hands of more than 75 per cent of the tiger reserve.

So when we hear them say tigers are going out of Ranthambore, the big cats are in fact moving from one part of the reserve to another. The latest killings were reported from Talakhhet, a village of just five large families in Kela Devi sanctuary, hardly a kilometre from the national park boundary, well inside the tiger

reserve. Yet the media was told the deaths occurred because the tigers were pushed out of a saturated Ranthambore.

About 300 sq km of the national park area may not accommodate more than 30-40 tigers but the remaining 1,000 sq km of the reserve has the potential of absorbing thrice as many. Active management demands the forest department to secure the sanctuary areas of the reserve and then focus on reclaiming the corridors - Kuno in Madhya Pradesh to Ramgarh Bisdhari sanctuary near Bundi - for natural dispersal of big cats. Instead, the authorities conceded three-fourths of the reserve as a death zone and now seek to save "surplus" tigers by airlifting them to Sariska.

Of seven tigers forest authorities claim to have now

moved out of Ranthambore, five are in Sawai Man Singh sanctuary, one in Kela Devi sanctuary and only one has actually moved out towards Kota. Two sub-adult tigers moved out of the reserve last year, not because of overpopulation but because the cubs were left directionless after their mother was poached. Despite receiving Rs 95 lakh from the Centre during 2008-09 to set up a special tiger protection force, Ranthambore remains vulnerable to poisoning or commercial poaching. The latest victims were poisoned close to a village deep inside the reserve.

This brings Ranthambore's ongoing village relocation drive under the scanner. With Rs 194 crore released by the Centre, state authorities have so far listed about 1,200 families in half a dozen villages and started with the biggest village, Hindwar. It is not clear why removal of big villages on black-top roads became their priority when small, strategically placed villages like Talakhhet or Mordungari (where a tigress was poisoned in 2006) pose a far greater danger to wildlife.

Common sense says it is easier to relocate small villages where public opinion tends to be less divided and chances of half the village staying back (as is happening in Hindwar) are far less. But small villages also mean fewer families and a smaller relocation budget - a factor that could have influenced some enterprising minds.

The writer is a journalist and film-maker.