

## **Nature Watch Series for Dehradun Live Hindustan Times by Sanjay Sondhi**

Published on 23 June 2017

### Learning to live with leopards

A few months ago, I had written about “Leopards in crisis” in Uttarakhand. With one of the highest human attacks by large carnivores anywhere in the world, Uttarakhand has grappled to come to terms with dealing with this crisis. We began looking at this serious man-animal conflict in 2013, with an old friend of ours, Dr. Vidya Athreya, a wildlife biologist who has spent years studying leopards across the country. A social survey between 2013 and 2015 threw up many interesting facets of the conflict; and made us realize that many misconceptions prevailed. The Maharashtra Forest Department, supported by Vidya has done pioneering work in this area. Working with the Uttarakhand Forest Department, we held numerous consultations, workshops and exposure visits. All of this culminated in some very exciting and innovative on-the-ground work this week.

Can we learn to live with leopards to the benefit of people and the leopard? Can traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, which have involved killing or translocating leopards from conflict areas, be abandoned, especially as these have done little to reduce the conflict? Supported by a team of experts from Maharashtra, including Vidya, the Uttarakhand Forest Department launched two pilot programs at Tehri and Pauri. The program is undertaking an exciting initiative.

At both Tehri and Pauri, the Uttarakhand Forest Department has decided to create Rapid Response Teams of forest staff who are properly equipped and trained to deal with the leopard conflict. These teams are being trained with equipment and techniques that keep everyone safe, the forest staff themselves, the local communities and the leopard. The first workshop held at Tehri proved a tremendous success and I am writing this piece from Khirsu, in Pauri Garhwal, where the second workshop has already commenced. At both these locations, all stakeholders involved in conflict resolution, including local villagers, police, civic administration, animal husbandry vets and the media are involved in this workshop.

Along with creating Rapid Response Teams, an awareness program is being launched which will engage with all stakeholders. The awareness program, which focuses on “Learning to live with leopards” will build on successful programs already being run in Maharashtra, along these lines. The program will also involve children in a “Leopard’s Ambassador” program. We hope children will take the lead to explain to the older generation why the leopard needs to be saved. The program will run in two village clusters in Tehri and Pauri, and if successful, will be expanded to other locations.

These exciting first steps have created a great deal of enthusiasm and excitement amongst the entire team involved. Can Uttarakhand show the way to other hill states to deal with this serious conflict, ending in a win-win situation for people and the leopard? We certainly hope so, and first tiny steps in this direction have already been taken.

Feedback on this column is welcome at [sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com](mailto:sanjay.sondhi1@gmail.com)



Photograph caption: Rapid Response Team with trainers at Tehri

© Sanjay Sondhi