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Protected Area Update

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EDITORIAL

A tale of two tragedies

Two wildlife areas that hit the headlines in the last few months, both for the wrong reasons, were the Sambhar Lake in Rajasthan and the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Goa.

A series of reports in November informed us, first, of the unprecedented and mysterious death of thousands of migratory birds in Sambhar Lake. Then, in early January came another series reporting the death, possibly by poisoning, of four tigers including cubs, in the Mhadei WLS. While the context of each - the landscape, the species involved and the specific triggers - are distinctly different, common threads are visible in the backstage of what may have transpired. When developments reach the front page of newspapers and/or become the subject of prime-time television news, one thing is certain - it is only the outcome of a series of events that have happened in the preceding days. The news item is the tip of a giant iceberg that lies barely concealed.

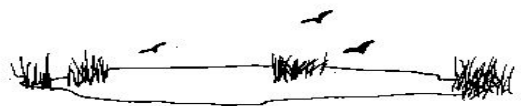
In the Sambhar lake case, it is now being surmised, the deaths had started to happen sometime in late October. It is instructive that the first reports started appearing only a couple of weeks later. No one had spotted the mass die-off for days. More recent reporting by *The Indian Express* points to the possibility of a serious failure of the governance and law enforcement mechanism as a result of which thousands of borewells continue to operate illegally in the region for the salt pan industry. These illegal connections, many of which leak current, the report suggests, may have led to the initial deaths by electrocution. This then created a fertile ground for the onset of botulism and the thousands of deaths that were caused by it.

In the Goa case too the first stirrings of trouble were reportedly visible nearly two weeks before the tragic deaths of the striped cats. Cattle herders had complained to the forest

officials of the death of a cow in a tiger attack but nothing was done to compensate them for their loss. A few days later a second animal, a buffalo this time, was killed and this is alleged to have led to the retaliatory killings by the community. Surely, there are a host of inter-related and complex reasons in both the cases and ongoing investigations will hopefully present a clearer picture in the days to come.

What is also quite clear in both the cases is the huge deficit in the institutional capacities of monitoring these large areas, leave alone having in place response mechanisms that might be able to intervene to limit damage when that is possible. It is conjecture, but maybe the problem in Sambhar Lake would not have arisen at all if the illegal borewells had not been allowed in the first place. It is also worth asking what may have happened if a rigorous monitoring system was in place. Is it possible that an early detection of the initial deaths may have prevented the thousands that happened subsequently? The same in the Mhadei case. If it was known that tigers are roaming the forests and the community has also reported kills and loss of their prized assets, could a quick response and compensation mechanism not have helped the situation? This too is conjecture, but there is a good chance that none of the tiger deaths would have happened and this tragedy could have been avoided.

Our clamour for more protected areas and also increasing the size of existing ones is meaningless unless we ask simultaneously for increased capacities of and accountability from the establishment that has the power to govern and regulate. The legal, institutional, social and ecological landscapes that constitute the conservation enterprise are deeply and complexly inter-related, and the two tragedies of Sambhar Lake and Mhadei WLS are eloquent if grim reminders of that reality.



NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Kaiser-i-Hind declared the state butterfly of Arunachal Pradesh

The Arunachal Pradesh state wildlife board recently accepted a proposal to declare the Kaiser-i-Hind *Teinopalpus imperialis* the state butterfly. The butterfly is one of the most elusive swallowtail butterflies, with a 90mm to 120mm wingspan. It occurs in Bengal (Darjeeling), Sikkim, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, the Khasi hills of Meghalaya as well as outside India in Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, southern China, Vietnam and Laos.

Source: Roopak Goswami. 'Tourism hopes float on butterfly's wings', www.telegraphindia.com, 18/01/2020.

Locals seek reorganization of boundaries of the Dibang WLS

Local organizations, including the Idu Mishmi Cultural & Literary Society (IMCLS), have called for re-demarcation and a review of Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) before it is declared a tiger reserve (TR). The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has asked the state government to form a panel to look into the concerns of the public and for the re-fixing of erroneous boundary pillars, if any. The proposal for assigning TR status to the sanctuary came recently after the Wildlife Institute of India recorded presence of 11 tigers in the sanctuary and the Mishmi Hills.

Local organizations have, however, asked for reorganization of the boundary of the sanctuary from the current 4149 sq km to 2500 sq km. They have claimed that the notification of the sanctuary in 1998 was done unilaterally by suppressing, misleading and misrepresenting the indigenous habitants. In a consultative meeting held by NTCA and state forest department officials in October 2019, local

community representatives said that they are not against the constitution of the sanctuary but wanted assurance that their traditional values and ancestral lands would not be disturbed.

They also noted that the TR would not be welcome until the matter of the sanctuary itself is not amicably resolved.

Source: Archana Jyoti. 'NTCA proposal on DWS as tiger reserve fails to convince local bodies', www.dailypioneer.com, 07/12/19.

Three new frog species reported from Tale Valley WLS

Three new species of frogs have been discovered from the Tale Valley Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) by scientists of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI). The species that have been named *Liurana himalayana*, *Liurana indica* and *Liurana minuta*, were collected by Bikramjit Sinha of ZSI in Itanagar in 2015-16 as part of the documentation of faunal diversity in the protected area.

A study, co-authored by Bhaskar Saikia and Sinha describing the new species has been published in a recent issue of the journal, the *Records of the Zoological Survey of India*.

Source: 'Three new frog species discovered in Arunachal Pradesh', www.republicworld.com, 15/01/2020.

GOA

Four tigers found dead in Mhadei WLS

Four tigers including two cubs and a female were found dead in the forests of the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in the first week of January. The carcass of a four-year-old male tiger was first spotted in the Golauli forest in Sattari taluka on January 5. The carcass was found in a decomposed state on the bank of a seasonal stream that flows from Surla to Golauli. Villagers of Golauli had gone to a cave dedicated to the folk deity Sidhda to perform an

annual ritual called 'Bhugut', when they spotted the dead tiger.

A combing operation by officials that followed discovered three more carcasses - one tigress and two cubs - in the next couple of days. While some reports suggest that the cats might have died after feeding on a poisoned buffalo, a confirmation of this was still awaited. The claws had been found missing in the case of the first carcass but not the subsequent three, giving rise to multiple explanations of the possible cause of death.

One explanation offered is that these were retaliatory deaths following cattle kills made by the tigers, first a cow on December 22 and then a buffalo of December 30. The herding community that lives here may have poisoned the buffalo carcass leading to the eventual deaths of the tigers. No compensation was paid to the community for their losses and this could have led to the building up of resentment against the wild animals and the forest staff. After preliminary investigation, the authorities arrested Vhito Zipo Pawane (60), Malo Nago Pawane (55) and Gomo Nago Pawane (46), all residents of Golauli village. A local court remanded them to police custody for three days.

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change constituted a two-member team comprising Rajendra Garawad, AIG, NTCA, RO Bengaluru, and the Regional Deputy Director (western region, Mumbai) to probe into the deaths and present their findings in a week.

The latest was not known at the time of going to press.

Source: 'Tiger found dead inside Mhadei sanctuary', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 06/01/2020.
'4th tiger found dead in 4 days in Sattari forest', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 09/01/2020.
Tushar Majukar. '4 tigers found dead in Goa sanctuary, Centre names 2-member probe team', www.newindianexpress.com, 10/01/2020.

GUJARAT

10,000 cameras to be used for lion census in May 2020

Nearly 10,000 cameras will be used to carry out the 2020 lion census in Gujarat, which will take place in the month of May. The area to be surveyed will be 25,000 sq km spanning seven districts and is substantially larger than the 15,000 sq km area covered in the last census in 2015. The Wildlife Institute of India will also participate in the census for the first time.

The 2015 census had counted 523 lions in the state and the number is said to have gone up substantially since then. Internal assessments of the forest department indicate that their population may have crossed the 1,000-mark.

The government is likely to adopt the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)'s methodology for the lion census. In the first phase the census area will be divided into a three-km grid each. Field officers will first carry out surveys to recover hair, teeth, nails etc. of the animals as per methods laid out by NTCA. Physical forms will also be filled out noting the description of the lions. Around 1,500-2,000 field personnel will be employed for the exercise.

This will be followed by the 2nd stage where nearly 10,000 cameras will be deployed in the field.

Source: Himanshu Kaushik. '10,000 cameras to be used for 2020 lion census', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 01/01/2020.

HIMACHAL PRADESH

1.57 lakh monkeys sterilised in HP

The Himachal Pradesh government has sterilised 1.57 lakh monkeys at eight sterilisation centres of the forest department (FD) to provide relief to farmers and check the monkey menace in the state. The information was provided recently by state forest minister, Govind Thakur, while presiding over a

workshop on 'Human Wildlife Conflict' in Shimla.

He announced that the FD will be training people to capture monkeys, for which an incentive of Rs. 1,000 will be given. 548 panchayats of the state are affected by this issue and the FD has identified 1,100 monkey hotspots where the problem is severe.

Source: '1.57 lakh monkeys sterilised in Himachal Pradesh: Forest minister', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 04/12/19.

KARNATAKA

160 species of butterflies reported in Kali Tiger Reserve

More than 4,500 individual butterflies of 160 species were spotted in the Kali Tiger Reserve (TR) during a two-day exercise conducted in the month of December by the Karnataka Forest Department (FD) and the Bangalore Butterfly Club.

A team of 20 members from the club along with members of the FD divided themselves into teams of five and surveyed butterflies in Ganeshgudi, Dandeli, Castlerock, Kulgi and Anashi.

The species spotted included the Blue nawab, Onyx, Tree flitter, Golden tree flitter, Southern birdwing, Southern duffer, Tawny rajah, Black prince, Common man, 6-Lineblue, and Toothed sunbeam.

Source: Iffath Fathima. 'Kali Tiger Reserve home to 4,500 individual butterflies, reveals survey', www.newindianexpress.com, 21/12/19.

Concern over roadside safety pillars on elephant movement in MM Hills

Conservationists have expressed concern that the proposal to install roadside safety pillars along a highway stretch passing through the MM Hills area will negatively impact animal movement here.

The precast cement pillars are to be installed along a portion of the highway that passes through the Doddasampige-Edyarahalli elephant corridor in Kollegal taluk of Chamarajanagar district. The corridor is a vital link between the Biligiri Rangaswamy Tiger Reserve and Malai Mahadeshwara Wildlife Sanctuary, and is frequently used by elephants and other wild animals. The FD has reportedly stalled the work temporarily but there is said to be tremendous pressure for it to be allowed.

The installation of the barrier comes at a time when the department itself has removed solar fences and filled up trenches bisecting the elephant migratory path so as to ensure that connectivity is not broken. This corridor is approximately 1.6 km wide and is divided by State Highway 38 connecting Kollegal in Karnataka and Hasanur in Tamil Nadu.

There are legal issues involved as well. Any construction on this part of the road must be undertaken with permission from the State Wildlife Board, the National Board for Wildlife, and the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Karnataka. No such permission is reported to have been taken thus far by the public works department that is executing the project.

Source: R. Krishna Kumar. 'Activists see red over move to put up roadside pillars along wildlife corridor', www.thehindu.com, 19/12/19.

Bannerghatta NP ESZ to be reduced by 36%

In his letter dated November 27, 2019, additional chief secretary to the Karnataka department of forests, environment and ecology has conveyed to the centre that a cabinet sub-committee has approved a draft final notification fixing the area of the Bannerghatta National Park (BNP) eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) at 168 sq km. This is roughly 36% less than the original proposal of 2016 wherein the ESZ was slated to be spread over an area of 268 sq km.

The 2016 proposal had envisaged that a 100 m to 4.5 km wide area around the park boundary would be protected and where mining

would not be allowed. Such a zone is maintained under Rule 3(2) of Karnataka Minor Mineral Concession Rule 1960. The current proposal limits the ESZ to a width of one km.

Activists say reducing this area will open the floodgates to stone quarries and crushers around the park. Such operations have not been allowed in the region for over a year now (*PA Updates* Vol. XXIV, Nos. 4 & 3). In June 2018, the department of mines and geology had stopped operations of about 45 large quarries around Bannerghatta. The move followed a union government directive to maintain a 10km wide area around national parks and other protected areas as de facto buffer zone till the actual ESZ is declared.

A senior official from the forest department said that while activities like mining are banned in this ESZ, also referred to as a 'safe zone', development of resorts, hotels, buildings and roads is allowed, provided the owners have permission from the departments concerned. A monitoring committee, to be formed once the final notification is out, will screen such proposals. The district deputy commissioner will be the committee chairman and deputy conservator of forests, BNP, the member-secretary.

Activists have blamed the mining and real estate lobby for shrinking of the ESZ. Rajya Sabha member Rajeev Chandrasekhar, who too has been battling for retaining the entire 268 sq km area as the ESZ has said that he will write to the chief minister to reconsider the decision and to also hold an open consultation before taking a final call.

Source: Rohith BR. 'Karnataka: Govt proposes to reduce BNP's ecosensitive-zone by 36%; green activists worry', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 18/12/19.

Study highlights open wells as new threat to leopards

'Big cat in well: An unconventional threat to leopards in southern India' a paper by researchers from the Nature Conservation

Foundation and Kuvempu University has highlighted the threats faced by leopards from open wells in Karnataka. Published in the journal *Oryx*, the paper lists as many as 70 incidents of leopards falling into unsecured wells during the period between 2008 and 2017. These incidents were recorded from 10 districts in the state and the highest number was reported from Udupi district (36) followed by Tumakuru (9), Ramanagaram (8) and Uttara Kannada (8).

The highest number of falls occurred in the pre-monsoon and monsoon (53%) period, possibly as a result of lower visibility, especially in high rainfall areas like Udupi and Uttara Kannada. The falls in districts like Tumakuru and Ramanagaram were into dry wells.

In most cases, the study reports, the forest department (FD) rescued the leopards. Twenty-nine (41%) of these leopards were then translocated after medical inspection and treatment, 28 (40%) were released at the same site or were assisted to escape on their own, eight (11%) died as a result of the fall and five (7%) with serious injuries were sent to zoos.

All the wells that witnessed leopard falls were unsecured and open, and many did not have stairs or a platform that would allow an animal to escape. The study has suggested that the FD should take up the initiative of covering unsecured wells under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), eco-development committees and other community conservation initiatives.

The researchers also recorded 27 incidents of other wildlife species including sloth bear, elephant, gaur, sambar chital, muntjac, blackbuck, fox, mugger and small Indian civet falling into open wells during the same period. These incidents resulted in 11 mortalities.

Source: R. Krishna Kumar. 'Unsecure wells pose threat to leopards, says study', www.thehindu.com, 11/12/19.

LADAKH

Workshop to prevent illegal wildlife trade in Ladakh

Wildlife Trust of India, in collaboration with Ladakh Wildlife Department and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), recently conducted a workshop on 'Prevention of Illegal Wildlife Trade in Ladakh'.

Several officers from various enforcement agencies like Wildlife Crime Control Bureau, Indian Army, Indo-Tibetan Border Police, police department, forest department, officers from key stakeholder agencies like postal department, airport authority, excise department and representatives of NGOs attended.

The workshop was conducted under the Government of India-UNDP-Global Environment Facility's "Secure Himalayas" Project.

Source: 'WTI organises workshop on prevention of illegal wildlife trade',
www.dailyexcelsior.com, 04/12/19.

MADHYA PRADESH

Resident elephant population in Bandhavgarh TR

A herd of about 40 elephants is said to have taken permanent refuge in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (TR). The reserve has, over the years, played host to herds of elephants that arrive to graze and forage and subsequently travel back to neighbouring Chhattisgarh. The particular herd that had arrived here in December 2018, however, has stayed on.

The reserve authorities have had elephant experts and wildlife officials come from West Bengal and Chhattisgarh to train staff here to deal with elephant related issues. Patrolling teams have been set up to monitor the elephants round the clock and awareness camps have also been conducted in surrounding villages so that the locals are aware, and

situations of human-elephant conflict can be dealt with.

Source: Esha Roy. 'Bandhavgarh forests get a trunk call in elephant-less MP',
www.indianexpress.com, 26/12/19.

Villagers damage vehicles during anti-encroachment drive at Ratapani WLS

Villagers damaged an earthmover and a jeep in the Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) after authorities removed constructions - a hut, a cow shelter and a shrine - put up 'illegally' by a local godman at the point of origin of the Betwa river.

Authorities said that villagers hiding behind trees pelted stones causing damage to the vehicles when a joint team of foresters, the police and revenue officials was returning from the Jhiri Baheda village after carrying out the task. They also denied that they had fired at the protestors.

Recently, a panel set up by the state government had finalised the contours of a proposed tiger reserve, the seventh for the state. Nine of the 29 revenue villages in the sanctuary will fall in the reserve's 763.812 sq km core area.

Source: Sidharth Yadav. 'Villagers damage vehicles during anti-encroachment drive at Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary',
www.thehindu.com, 27/12/19.

Six arrested for electrocuting a tiger in Kanha TR

Six villagers from the villages of Manori and Bhamori were arrested recently for killing a tiger whose highly decomposed carcass was found in the Motinala buffer zone of Kanha Tiger Reserve.

The six had laid an electric fence to catch a wild boar but it was a tiger that was accidentally electrocuted. The accused told a forest official that this was the second time when they had laid an electric fence. Earlier, they were successful in catching a wild boar but this time it was a tiger. They then removed the

fencing and threw the carcass near Motinala. A forest patrol team alarmed by foul smell searched the area when they found the decomposed carcass.

More than a dozen tigers and tigresses were killed through electrocution and other methods of poaching in Madhya Pradesh in 2019.

Source: 'Six villagers in Madhya Pradesh arrested for killing tiger', www.hindustantimes.com, 08/12/19.

MAHARASHTRA

Ban on night cricket tournaments, loud party gatherings in Yeoor Hills area adjoining SGNP

The forest department (FD) has ordered the stoppage of night cricket tournaments in the Yeoor Hills area of Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP). Several environmentalists had complained about the impact of the lights and the sound that is on through the night during tournaments played here. Local residents and activists had also complained about loud parties.

Notices were issued to the Turf, The Pitch and Gurukul Cricket Academy to stop playing cricket at night. Further, if anyone hosts big gatherings or loud parties crossing 40 decibels, they will be fined Rs. 25,000 or will face imprisonment for three years.

In another related move, strict action has been proposed against those found entering the Yeoor forest without a valid pass. Morning walkers with the pass will be allowed in from 5 am to 8 am. The monthly pass fee for them has been hiked to Rs. 215 from the earlier Rs.195. Around 284 residents have availed the pass. Many residents have, however, claimed that though a pass system is in place, there is no strict checking of those entering.

Source: 'Ban on playing cricket at night in Yeoor Hills of SGNP', www.mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com, 12/12/19.

Priyanka Dhomse. 'Turn down sound at Yeoor or face music: Forest officials to clubs', www.hindustantimes.com, 12/12/19.

ODISHA

Sporadic nesting of Olive ridley turtles at Rushikulya

Marking the first nesting in the current season, two Olive ridley turtles were spotted laying eggs on the Rushikulya beach in November and early December, respectively.

In preparation for the nesting season, the forest department has set up 11 artificial hatcheries and begun regular sea patrolling with the help of two trawlers, two speed boats and a country boat. 11 on-shore camps have been set up on the five km stretch from Purunabandha to Prayagi. Two persons have also been deployed at each of these camps to regularly document the beach condition, protect the stretch, inform about debris deposited by the sea, stop the entry of predators like stray dogs and search for the possibility of turtle carcasses floating to the coast. This stretch of the mass nesting beach is also being cleaned every alternate day with the help of locals and various social organisations,

A large number of mating turtle pairs were also sighted at sea, at a distance of around six km from Purunabandha, near the Rushikulya river-mouth.

Source: 'Odisha's Rushikulya sees first olive ridley nesting', www.thehindu.com, 12/12/19.

1,757 crocodiles in Bhitarkanika NP

The annual reptile census carried out on January 3, 2020 has counted 1,757 crocodiles in the Bhitarkanika National Park. This is slightly higher than the number of 1,742 reported in the 2019 count.

The break-up is as follows: 620 hatchlings, 325 yearlings, 288 juveniles, 185 sub-adults (six to eight feet long) and 339 adults (more than 8 feet long). The team of 22 enumerators also sighted 12 albino crocodiles and four giant ones that were more than 20 feet long.

Following are the numbers for the crocodile count in Bhitarkanika from the year 2000 onwards:

Year	Number
2000	1,192
2001	1,330
2002	1,308
2003	1,342
2004	1,355
2005	1,449
2006	1,454
2007	1,482
2008	1,482
2009	1,572
2010	1,610
2011	1,654
2012	1,646
2013	1,649
2014	1,644
2015	1,665
2016	1,671
2017	1,682
2018	1,698
2019	1,742
2020	1,757

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXV, No 5)

Source: Ashis Senapati. 'Bhitarkanika census finds an increase of 15 saltwater crocodiles from last year', www.downtoearth.org.in, 04/01/2020.

Tiger translocation plan to Satkosia shelved for now

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has decided to recall the 40-month-old tigress, Sundari, who had been relocated from the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (TR) to Satkosia in June 2018 (*PA Updates* Vol. XXIV, Nos. 6 & 5). In a recent communication sent to the Odisha government, the NTCA has asked for the animal to be moved back to the Kanha TR. The NTCA also said that the Odisha Forest and Wildlife Department (FWD) had made a mess of the monitoring and management of the relocated tigress.

A male and a female had been relocated to Satkosia in June 2018 in a bid to augment the reserve's dwindling big cat population. Mahabir, the male tiger, allegedly died due to poaching. Sundari, the tigress, was then restricted to an enclosure in the reserve after she killed a 45-year-old woman and a 65-year-old man and later also attacked a TV reporter in September 2018. The alleged assault triggered violence by locals who burned the forest department's boats and beat house.

The NTCA letter notes that the tigress was captured in violation of the process laid down and also of the relevant provisions of the Wildlife Protection Act. The tigress has been kept in a small enclosure for more than one year without any effort to release it into wild as per the protocol. The NTCA said further that the FWD could not take steps for prey augmentation, creation of inviolate space, eco-development, capacity building of staff and enhancement of protection in spite of availability of sufficient funds and technical support. An allegation was also made that the funds provided under the central scheme of Project Tiger were diverted from specified items without authorisation and substantial release of funds has not showed any significant output.

A senior state forest official said, however, that it was not fair to blame only the state government for the failure of the initiative. The NTCA and the Wildlife Institute of India too had been involved and were to be held equally responsible. The Rs 19 crore ambitious tiger relocation exercise conceived by the Union environment ministry, National Tiger Conservation Authority and Wildlife Institute of India had envisaged the translocation of six tigers (three pairs) from different reserves of Madhya Pradesh to Odisha.

Source: Debabrata Mohanty. 'Tiger translocation plan shelved for now', www.hindustantimes.com, 20/12/19.
'NTCA, WII to blame for failure to translocate big cat, says Forest dept official', www.orissapost.com, 21/12/19.

PUDUCHERRY

Smooth-coated otters recorded in Puducherry

Smooth-coated otters *Lutrogale Perspicillata* have been reported in significant numbers for the first time in Puducherry. A bevy of 15-19 animals was spotted recently at a lagoon in Nallavadu by a team of wildlife researchers from Puducherry-based Indigenous Biodiversity Foundation (IBF) when they were conducting a bird count in the backwaters of the Thenpennaier River

An earlier team had spotted a pair of otters and a pup in the Sankarabaran River near Villianur in Puducherry in 2017 and the recent sighting provides evidence of a significant increase in population. Otters have also been recorded in water bodies in Kannikovil, Veerampattinam and Poornankuppam in Puducherry.

Source: S. Prasad. 'First sighting of smooth-coated otters in Puducherry', www.thehindu.com, 19/12/19.

RAJASTHAN

NTCA says no to male tiger relocation to Sariska TR

Citing various problems including the presence of villages and also incidents of poaching, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has refused a proposal for the fresh relocation of male tigers to the Sariska Tiger Reserve (TR). It has asked the state forest department (FD) to make improvements as per set protocol before the relocation can be done.

The proposal had been submitted to help ensure a better sex ratio of tigers in the reserve, which currently has three male and eight females. In April 2019, after a long wait of six years and several twists and turns, a seven-year-old male tiger was relocated to Sariska from Ranthambore TR. It died almost immediately, in June 2019, due to an alleged overdose of tranquillizers. In a span of two

years since 2018, Sariska has lost three fully-grown tigers due to poaching and ailments. In the last 11 years, 10 tigers have been relocated from Ranthambore to Sariska but only five have survived. Need has also been expressed to widen the genetic pool of the tigers present in Sariska by introducing animals from reserves other than Ranthambore.

Currently there are 26 villages in the critical tiger habitat and their relocation has seen zero progress due to lack of political will and bureaucratic apathy. Wildlife lovers and authorities claim that the presence of the villages here is a major factor behind poaching and human-animal conflict. Dinesh Verma Durani, founder and general secretary of the Sariska Tiger Foundation and a member of the advisory committee of Sariska noted that many families were willing to shift out but this cannot be done without government support and relaxation in some policies.

Lack of funds is also an issue due to which the relocation of villages has seen negligible progress. The compensation package is still as per the 2008 guidelines due to which villagers are not motivated enough to leave the area.

(Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXIII, No. 2; Vol. XXI, Nos. 4 & 3; Vol. XVIII, No. 5 and Vol. XVII, No. 5)

Source: 'Sariska reserve won't get male tigers for now', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 26/12/19.

TELANGANA

48.83 ha of land sought from Amrabad TR for highway widening

The Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has sought wildlife clearance for 48.83 ha of forests to widen National Highway-765 that passes through the Amrabad Tiger Reserve (TR). The road connects Hyderabad to Thokapally via Srisailem, an important pilgrimage destination. Of the 48.83 ha over which clearance has been

sought, 46.8 ha falls in Amrabad forest division and 1.9 ha falls in Achampet division.

As per the proposal, the highway is to be widened to 11 metres from 4 metres between Mannanur and Farahabad and from zero metres to 12 metres between Farahabad and Eagalapenta. As the proposal involves wildlife clearance of area less than 50 ha, no biodiversity impact assessment report has been submitted.

Source: V Nilesh. ' Highway widening to eat into Amrabad Tiger Reserve',
www.newindianexpress.com, 04/01/2020.

UTTARAKHAND

Uttarakhand FD western circle awarded at the Pacific Asia Tourism Awards

The western circle of Uttarakhand Forest Department (FD) was recently awarded the 'Baagh Mitra' award at the Pacific Asia Tourism Awards for its "remarkable tiger conservation efforts". The Western circle comprising of five forest divisions - Terai East, Terai West, Terai Central, Ramnagar division and Haldwani division has recorded a remarkable presence of 125 to 150 tigers.

Spread around 2.70 lakh hectares, the circle has seen innovative scientific interventions ranging from 'habitat restoration' by grassland creation in Nandhaur Wildlife Sanctuary, Terai East and Ramnagar division to implementing the most modern drone-technology driven initiatives for controlling rogue wildlife in the landscape. Similarly, as per senior forest officers, this circle has also succeeded in generating maximum revenue of around Rs 3.32 crore in the previous financial year. This is now being invested in various initiatives for developing the entire landscape.

Source: Shivani Azad.' Western circle of Uttarakhand forest dept wins prestigious national award',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 21/12/19.

State wildlife board approves proposal for introduction of rhinos to Corbett TR

The Uttarakhand State Wildlife Board has cleared a proposal by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) (*PA Update XXV*, No. 6) to introduce rhinos to the Corbett Tiger Reserve (CTR). 10 rhinos will be brought in in the first phase and another 10 would be added later. The animals will be brought either from Assam or West Bengal and the capture and translocation process is likely to cost about Rs 15 lakh per animal. The proposal will now be sent to the centre for approval.

The sites in Corbett said to be ideal for the rhinos are the valley habitats bounded on either side by the lower Himalayas (north), Shivalik Hills (south) and the Ramganga Reservoir (east). These would also act as natural barriers to rhino movement outside these areas, thereby minimising conflict with people.

Each of the founding population animals would be fitted with a GPS radio-collar and a team of researchers would be created for monitoring their ranging patterns, foraging habits, demography and habitat use.

Source: Lalmani Verma. ' Bid To Boost Tourism: Rhinos to be re-introduced in Uttarakhand', www.indianexpress.com, 20/12/19.

Awareness sessions in schools in 'leopard-dominated landscapes' in Uttarakhand

In a bid to sensitise students and allay their fears regarding leopard attacks, the Uttarakhand Forest Department (FD) has started awareness sessions at government schools in Rudrapur. Three people have lost their lives here in past three months in leopard attacks. Several incidents of wild bear attacks have also been reported in recent months.

In these special sessions, students are shown documentaries and laser shows and are also sensitised on how to avoid wild animal attacks by taking care to move in groups, be in well-lit places after dusk and avoid outdoor games post-sunset. Officials said that the

sessions were necessitated since parents were wary of sending their children to school because of the leopard scare in the area.

The Rudraprayag forest division has recorded 27 deaths in wildlife attacks in the past two decades. 23 of these were in leopard attacks. Another 132 people were also injured in these attacks.

Source: Shivani Azad. 'U'khand forest department starts awareness sessions at schools in 'leopard-dominated landscapes', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 22/12/19.

WEST BENGAL

Tiger spotted above 7000 ft in Neora Valley NP for the third time

A tiger was caught on camera above 7,000 ft at Neora Valley National Park (NP) in December 2019 making it the third sighting of the big cat here since 2017 (*PA Update* Vol. XXIV, No. 1). A tiger was first spotted in the region in January 2017 by a car driver who took photos of the big cat. Later, the same tiger was caught on a camera installed by the forest department in January 2018.

Details of the latest sighting are not known and officials were also not able to confirm whether it was male or female.

Source: 'Tiger sighted for third time above 7,000 ft in Bengal's Neora Valley', www.hindustantimes.com, 01/01/2020.

Genetic diversity assessment of Red Panda by CCMB

Researchers from the Hyderabad based Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology (CCMB), working closely with conservation specialists of the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park, Darjeeling, have successfully completed the genetic diversity assessment of the Red Panda.

DNA was isolated from blood and faecal samples of captive animals and analysed for genetic diversity of the population,

heterozygosity levels in individual animals, identification of mother-offspring and sibling pairs and for population viability analysis based on genetic diversity. In a paper titled 'Genetic Diversity Assessment of Captive Red Panda Population in India', which was recently presented in an international conference, the researchers said that the ultimate goal of ex-situ conservation is re-introduction of Red Panda into their wild habitat.

The study was carried out by a team constituted by Ayu Singh, Arun Kumar, Nisha Nandhini and P Anuradha Reddy.



Source: M Sai Gopal. 'Bid to bring back Red Panda from brink of extinction', www.telanganatoday.com, 25/12/19.

Two radio-collared leopards die in North Bengal; FD denies collars as a cause

Two of the six leopards collared with radio collars as part of a project 'Understanding Drivers of Human-Leopard Conflicts in the Himalayan Region' in North Bengal have died over the last two years. One of the deaths occurred in October 2019 on the fringes of the Buxa Tiger Reserve (TR), while the other had been found dead near Gorumara in 2018.

The October 2019 death occurred only a couple of months after the animal was radio-collared and the forest department (FD) has not yet been able to point to the exact cause of the death. The Gorumara death was ascribed to a probable fight with another leopard. The collared animal was found dead with injuries on its body and neck.

The FD has denied that the deaths may have had anything to do with radio-collaring

and have said they have no intentions of dropping the project either.

The project is being carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India in association with the state FD.

Source: Krishnendu Mukherjee. 'Amid 2 deaths, radio collars reveal north Bengal leopard data', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 08/12/19.

NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

962 Gangetic dolphins in Assam; 1,272 in UP

Estimates done in 2015 and 2018 respectively indicate that Uttar Pradesh has 1272 Gangetic dolphins while the number for Assam is 962. The Assam assessment that was carried out in three rivers, reported 877 of the 962 in the state from the Brahmaputra.

The numbers were tabled in parliament recently by the minister of state for environment and forest, Babul Supriyo. This was done in response to a query by Bhartiya Janata Party member of parliament, Rajiv Pratap Rudy. The minister noted that assessments of the dolphin numbers and habitats were done by respective state forest departments and the data is not collated in the Union ministry. He tabled the figures for Assam and UP based on information received from the two state governments.

He also noted that according to the Conservation Action Plan for the Gangetic dolphin - 2010-20, threats to the species include increase in river traffic, construction of irrigation canals and depletion of their prey-base. Other experts have also included the creation of dams and irrigation projects as one of the major threats to these animals.

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXV, No. 6).

Source: 'Telling Numbers: 1,275 Gangetic dolphins in UP, another 962 in Assam rivers', www.indianexpress.com, 02/12/19.

MoEFCC forms committee for preparing National Elephant Action Plan

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has created a technical committee to prepare the National Elephant Action Plan (NEAP). It is expected to be completed in a year after which it will be submitted to the MoEFCC for approval.

The committee was created on October 22, 2019, and includes 13 members, with Inspector General of Forest (Project Elephant) Noyal Thomas as the chairman. The committee includes as members KM Selvan, MoEFCC, Ajay Desai, World Wide Fund for Nature India, R Sukumar, Indian Institute of Science, Bivash Pandav, Wildlife Institute of India, Sandeep Kumar Tiwari, International Union for Conservation of Nature, Prajna Paramita Panda, Wildlife Trust of India, along with the chief wildlife wardens of Karnataka, Assam, West Bengal, Uttarakhand, Kerala and Odisha.

The focus of the NEAP will be on mitigation of human-elephant conflict along with the improvement of habitat. The committee will build on the human-elephant conflict management guidelines of 2017.

As per the MoEFCC's Synchronized Elephant Population Estimation 2017, the southern region of the country has 11,960 elephants, northeastern region 10,139 and the east central and northern regions 3,128 and 2,085 elephants respectively.

Source: Ishan Kukreti. 'Technical committee formed to create National Elephant Action Plan', www.downtoearth.org.in 02/12/19.

Dhananjai Mohan is new director of WII

Dr. Dhananjai Mohan has been appointed as the new director of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). A 1988 batch Indian Forest Service officer of Uttarakhand cadre, Mohan has 31 years of experience and is currently serving as Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Planning and Financial Management and Chairman of State Biodiversity Board, Uttarakhand. An alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology,

he has a PhD on 'Habitat selection of birds in New Forest, Dehradun'.

He served as an Associate Professor in the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy (IGNFA) from 1998 to 2004 and as professor in WII from 2006 to 2013 where he led avifaunal research and collaborated with University of Chicago to conduct research on Himalayan bird diversity gradient.

Source: Shivani Azad. 'Dhananjai Mohan appointed director of Wildlife Institute of India', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 04/12/19.

NTCA directs tiger range states to appoint full-time vets

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has directed tiger range states to appoint full-time veterinary doctors in tiger reserves (TRs). The order comes in the wake of Bandipur TR facing crisis regarding the availability of vets when faced with a situation of conflicts and frequent cattle killings.

As per the existing guidelines and standard operating procedures for tiger management, tiger deaths and the disposal of its carcasses in human-dominated landscapes, it is mandatory to have vets in the concerned team and committee. In Karnataka, Bandipur and Nagarhole have veterinary doctors, but they are often sent away to other places.

Source: Meera Bhardwaj. 'NTCA directs appointment of full-time vets for tiger reserves', www.newindianexpress.com, 07/12/19.

NTCA proposes revamp of tiger population monitoring set-up

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has proposed an overhaul of its tiger population monitoring set-up, admitting there is no scope for "reconciliation of data", "peer review or inputs from other professionals" in the present scheme of things.

Following the July 2019 release of its report that had announced an estimated 2,987

tigers based on 2,462 individual tigers photographed across India, *The Indian Express* carried out an investigation and argued that 221 of the 'tiger photos' included should not have been counted. This worked out to 16% over-reporting.

In a note dated December 16 to the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), the NTCA conveyed its proposal to revamp its Tiger Cell to "bring more accountability, transparency and scientific robustness" and "fill the gaps in scientific monitoring and research observed since 2006, when All India Tiger Estimation started in the country". While the WII has been conducting the quadrennial all-India tiger surveys for the NTCA since 2006, the Tiger Cell was set up through a MoU between the two in August 2016.

The NTCA has now outlined a new structure with Tiger Cells in each of the NTCA's three regional offices – at Guwahati, Bangalore and Nagpur – and asked the WII to submit technical and financial proposals to put in place a "multi-tier system" enabling structural decentralisation and efficiency.

The gaps identified by NTCA in the present setup include: no mechanism for peer review or inputs from other professionals, one-way data flow and production of report with no place for reconciliation of data with field functionaries, and no capacity building in territorial forest areas outside tiger reserves.

Outlining the functions of the revamped Tiger Cell, the NTCA has sought to make population monitoring an annual feature. The other focus areas include: understanding tiger movement, allocating resources for post-village relocation strategies for habitat restoration, bridging knowledge gaps between reserves and develop landscape-level conservation plans.

Observing that a number of WII faculty members have been working in different tiger landscapes with considerable field experience and expertise, the NTCA note said that some of them could be appointed as nodal scientists for its regional offices, while at the national level the Tiger Cell "shall be headed by an IG/DIG level officer with a central Nodal Scientist

nominated by Director, WII for technical collaboration”.

Extending the tenure of the existing MoU by two months till February 2020, the NTCA note said that the Tiger Cell “in future is to be managed in the project mode of duration of 3 years like other NTCA funded research projects and MoU for the same needs to be mutually agreed and then signed between” the NTCA and the WII.

Source: Jay Mazoomdaar. 'After dodgy count, tiger panel calls for revamp', www.indianexpress.com, 25/12/19.

110 tiger and 491 leopard deaths in India in 2019: WPSI

A report compiled by the Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) indicates that the country lost 110 tigers and 491 leopards in 2019. The number for tigers is slightly higher than the 104 deaths in 2018 and marginally less for leopards, which was 500 in 2018.

A third of the tiger deaths (38) were due to poaching, 36 died in fights with other tigers, 26 were found dead, three were killed in road/rail accidents and six during rescue. Madhya Pradesh (MP) continued to top the list of highest tiger deaths with 29 in 2019, followed by Maharashtra with 22. In 2018, MP had reported 23 tiger deaths followed by 19 in Maharashtra.

WPSI's tiger figures differ from those in the official database of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), which recorded 92 tiger deaths in 2019 and 102 in 2018.

Of the 491 leopard deaths in 2019, one-third died in road and rail accidents, and another 127 deaths were attributed to poaching.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'India lost 110 tigers, 491 leopards in 2019; poaching up: Report', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 01/01/2020.

388 wildlife-related crimes registered in 2018; highest in West Bengal, Maharashtra

388 cases of wildlife-related crimes were registered under the Wildlife Protection Act in the calendar year 2018. This is substantially lower than the number of 565 registered for the year 2016 and marginally higher than the 342 that were registered in 2017. Of the 388 cases registered in 2018, the maximum of 55 were in West Bengal followed by 50 from Maharashtra. Other states that reported a high number of cases included Assam (42), Uttar Pradesh (35), Tamil Nadu (32), and Madhya Pradesh (29).

In nearly one of every three cases — 123 of the 388 — the animal involved was a leopard or a tiger. Leopards alone accounted for over one in five cases, at 81, while 42 cases involved tigers. In between the two big cat species were scheduled birds, which accounted for 61 cases, or a little over one in seven.

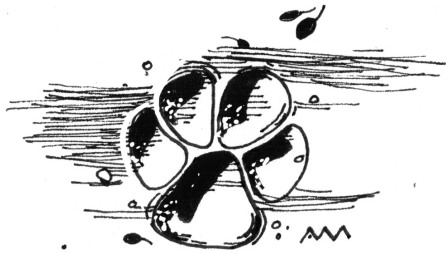
Just five species accounted for two in every three cases — 259 of 388 — with leopards (21%), scheduled birds (16%) and tigers (11%) being followed by Star tortoises or turtles (10%) and deer (9%). Ten species accounted for over 90% of the cases; the other five being elephants (7%), snakes (5%), rhinos (4%), mongoose (4%) and pangolins (a little under 4%). The remaining 10% were cases that involved 10 other species, including Tockay geckos and monkeys.

The information is based on data collated by the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) from various state forest and police departments and was presented in the parliament in early December by minister of state for environment and forests, Babul Supriyo.

According to a senior WCCB official, wildlife crime related to leopards has been more owing to a population increase across states like Maharashtra as well as their close proximity to human-dominated landscapes. However, MS Negi, additional director general of forest (wildlife), Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC), said that the high numbers indicate better law enforcement in West Bengal and Maharashtra.

Source: 'Telling Numbers: 388 wildlife crime cases last year, over 20% were about leopards', www.indianexpress.com, 07/12/19.

Badri Chatterjee. 'Maharashtra stood second in wildlife crimes in India in 2018', www.hindustantimes.com, 10/12/19.



New species of vine snake described from Western Ghats

A new species of vine snake *Proahaetulla antiqua* has been described based on two individual specimens found in the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu and the Shendurney Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. The snake was first seen in 2011 in the Agasthyamalai hills by a team of researchers from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) that was attempting to study and classify snakes in the Western Ghats.

In a study published in the journal *Plos One* in collaboration with researchers from Chennai Snake Park and Bombay Natural History Society, the IISc team has described the unique features of this snake.

The study was funded by the Department of Biotechnology, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, DBT-IISc Partnership Programme and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund.

Source: Baheerathan M. 'Researchers discover a new species of vine snake from the Western Ghats that dates back 26 million years', www.researchmatters.in, 24/07/19.

SOUTH ASIA

INDIA/NEPAL

Joint Indo-Nepal co-ordination meet held to discuss wildlife conservation issues

An Indo-Nepal coordination meeting to discuss wildlife issues was organised recently by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (TR). Forest officials of the two countries exchanged dossiers with information on wildlife criminals, in order to strengthen cooperation and putting a curb on poaching and felling of trees.

A big issue discussed was that of encroachments in wildlife corridors, including the Shukla Phanta-Lagga Bagga-Kishanpur corridor. Other issues discussed included patrolling by forest forces of the two countries in each other's territory, a fixed schedule for joint coordination meetings, exchange of contact details and joint surveys for exploring new dimensions of wildlife conservation.

Attendees included Bareilly chief conservator Lalit Verma, WWF project manager Naresh Kumar, the DFO of Kailali forest division in Nepal, Ram Chandra Karel, his counterpart in Kanchanpur forest division (Nepal) Ajay Vikram, along with SDOs and range officers of both sides.

Source: 'Forest officials exchange records of wildlife criminals at Indo-Nepal meet', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/12/19.

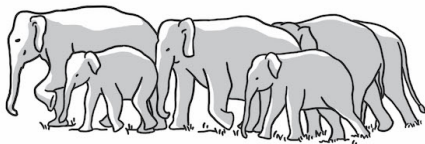
SRI LANKA

361 elephants killed in Sri Lanka in 2019

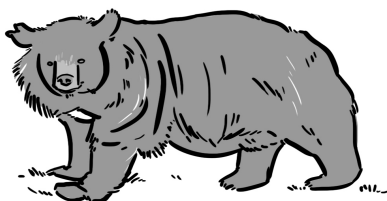
A record number of elephants – 361 – died in Sri Lanka in 2019. This is reported to be the highest since the country gained independence in 1948. The reasons for the deaths include electrocution by electrified fences and poison

and explosives hidden in food. Deaths have also been reported in train accidents. It has been suggested that the expansion of farming in rural areas is causing habitat to shrink resulting in increased conflict.

In 2018, 319 elephants and almost 100 people were killed in elephant-human conflict in Sri Lanka. 64 of the elephant deaths were by explosive devices hidden in food while 53 were shot dead. The past four years have also seen at least 21 cases of elephant poisoning deaths.



Source: Jane Dalton. 'Poison and explosives used to kill elephants as record numbers die in Sri Lanka', www.independent.co.uk, 12/01/2020.



PA Update for PA and forest staff

Seeking your help and support

One section of readers who have found the *Protected Area Update* most relevant and useful is frontline forest staff and PA managers. The reason is that the newsletter has a simple and straight-forward format and also, importantly, that a print copy version reaches remote areas where online connectivity is still a far-away dream. We get this feedback intermittently but regularly and would like to increase the reach and the spread of the *PA Update*, particularly to people in and around forests and those working there.

We are launching an effort in that direction with a request to readers to help us by contributing towards this as gift subscriptions. The more subscriptions we are able to raise, the more widely we can reach out the *PA Update*. The annual subscription for the PA update is Rs. 150:

- 1) You can gift a subscription to a particular individual/officer/PA and send us the details of the individual/s who want the *PA Update* to be sent to. We will do the rest.
- 2) You can also give us a broad suggestion of whom you want the *PA Update* sent to - could be ground staff of a particular PA, could be PA managers of a particular state or could be region based. We will work with you to then identify the specific recipients.
- 3) At a third level you can indicate to us how many subscriptions you would like to support and we will identify relevant gaps and put those people on the mailing list.

There are multiple possibilities and we would look forward to other concrete suggestions and ideas that you may have.

Pls write to psekhsaria@gmail.com or to the editorial address of the *PA Update*
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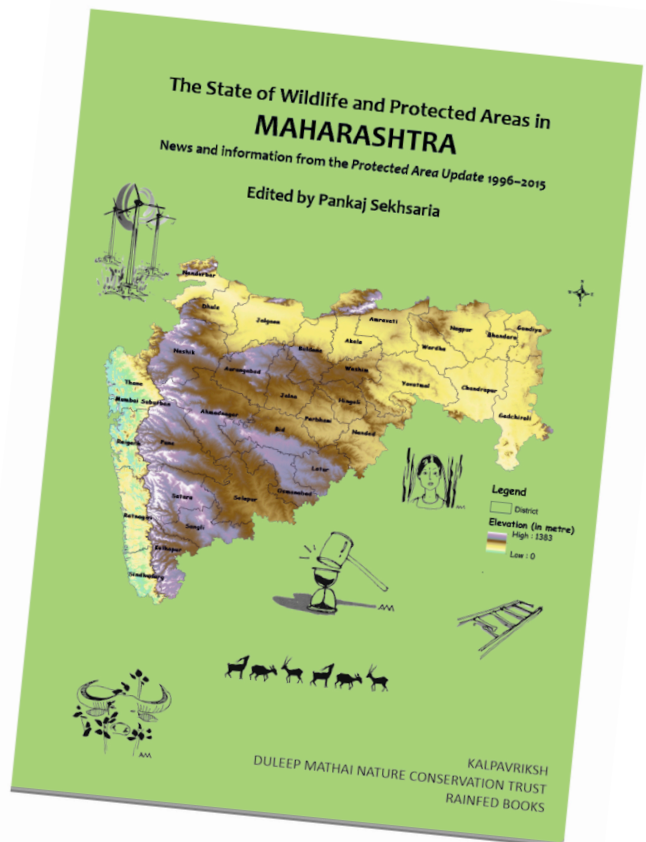
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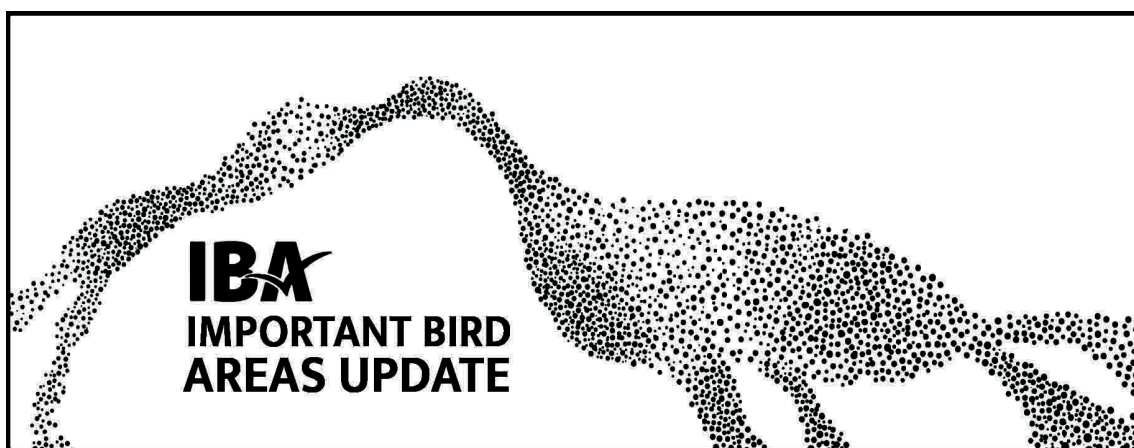
- **Section 2:** *Analysis and Perspective:*

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CHANDIGARH/PUNJAB

Chandigarh proposes 2 to 2.75 km ESZ for Sukhna WLS; Punjab proposes 100m on its side

While the Chandigarh Union Territory (UT) administration has notified an eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of 2-to-2.75-km from the boundary of the Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) as ecosensitive, the Punjab government has written to the Centre proposing an ESZ of only 100m on its side. The Centre has accordingly issued a final notification for an ESZ around the sanctuary for Chandigarh alone and the UT is pushing for Punjab and Haryana to notify a matching area as an ESZ.

In a letter written in the first week of December 2019, Punjab additional chief secretary for forests and wildlife preservation, Roshan Sankaria, wrote to environment ministry secretary CK Mishra asking for a 100m ESZ around Sukhna as the decision was based on policy formulated by the Punjab council of ministers in its meeting of August 8, 2013. The decision of the cabinet was taken in line with the recommendation of the central empowered committee of the Supreme Court, which has also recommended a 100m ESZ for sanctuaries smaller than 100 sq km. The Sukhna WLS is spread over an area of 26 sq km. A similar stand had also been taken by the state in a letter written to the Centre in September 2013.

The Punjab Forest Department (FD) had even filed a reply in the Punjab and

Haryana High Court which says that "In a letter on July 16, 2018, the Centre had requested the Punjab government to reconsider and send a revised proposal after exploring the possibilities of declaring an ESZ of up to one km. In the response, it was reiterated that considering the size of sanctuary and its surroundings, it was impossible for Punjab to reconsider." It had re-proposed notifying a 100m ESZ in Punjab.

In a letter to the Union government on July 25, 2014, the Chandigarh UT Administration had opposed the Punjab government proposal, stating that Punjab's limit of 100 m was small, more so when the adjoining Punjab areas of the sanctuary were being developed as high-density nagar panchayats and Nayagaon municipality. It had recommended that at least a kilometre-wide area falling in Punjab be notified as an ESZ.

Recently, the UT administration had also resolved to declare Sukhna as a wetland. The decision was taken by the Chandigarh Wetlands Authority in a July meeting where Punjab governor and UT administrator VP Singh Badnore had led the proceedings and marked the matter to the law department for notification. A draft notification in this regard was also issued.

The Sukhna Lake was declared a wetland more than 30 year ago as well. A status report placed before the Punjab and Haryana High Court recently suggests that another UT administrator had issued that notification on July 6, 1988. The new notification will include

public's suggestions and objections as required under the 2017 wetland rules.

Source: Rajinder Nagarkoti. 'Punjab sticks to only 100m ESZ around Sukhna Wildlife Sanctuary', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/12/19.

GUJARAT

High level of water keeps birds away from Nal Sarovar

High levels of water have resulted in migratory birds giving a slip to Nal Sarovar this year. Few birds were reported here in December, two months after their usual arrival time. Nal Sarovar hosts thousands of migratory birds that start arriving by October and remain till March.

An extended monsoon, which lasted till mid-November in these parts has resulted in higher-than-usual (and optimal) water levels. The inflows from the catchment area and overflows from the Narmada canal resulted in the lake having more than nine feet of water in October and about five feet in early December. Migratory birds need about three to 3.5 feet of water for optimal foraging conditions.

Migratory birds had given a miss to the Nal Sarovar in 2018 as well, but that was because the lake had dried up as the state government did not release the Narmada waters into it in 2017 and 2018.

Before 2018, Nal Sarovar had gone completely dry for a long period in 2002. (Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXV. No. 3)

Source: Himanshu Kaushik. 'Problem of plenty: Birds give Nalsarovar a miss', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 09/12/19.

JAMMU & KASHMIR

21 lakh trees to be felled to 'reclaim' Wular Lake

The Wular Conservation and Management Authority (WUCMA) has embarked on a project

to cut over 20 lakh trees to "reclaim" the shrinking Wular Lake spread across north Kashmir's Bandipore and Baramulla districts. Two lakh trees are being currently cut in the first phase of the project that has been started on the basis of a 2007 report by Wetlands International South-Asia (WISA).

The trees are being cut within the area of the lake as demarcated by the 1911 revenue records. Wular, which is the largest freshwater lake here, was spread over an area of 119 sq miles as per the 1911 revenue records. It has shrunk now to 27 sq miles. The WISA report had suggested the removal of all the trees from inside the lake boundary as they are not natural and had been planted over the years. Most of those to be cut fall in the Ningli forest range. "Ningli plantation, currently occupying 27.30 sq km, needs to be removed for enhancement of water holding capacity. The removal would help enhancement of water level by at least one meter, which is critical to restoration of biodiversity," the report states.

While WUCMA officials cite a draft study by Kashmir University on the impact assessment of Wular restoration as a green signal for felling trees, experts caution that proper studies should be conducted in this regard. The concerns raised include those related to the carbon sequestration potential of these trees.

Source: Bashaarat Masood. 'J&K admin to fell 21 lakh trees to 'reclaim' Wular Lake', www.indianexpress.com, 13/01/2020.

RAJASTHAN

Lethal electric trap may have triggered mass bird deaths in Sambhar Lake

An investigation by *The Indian Express* has revealed that a vast network of live wires running thousands of bore wells could have created a submerged electric trap and the carcasses of electrocuted birds could have served as the biomass for the toxic bacteria to thrive, leading to the death of over 20,000 birds due to avian botulism.

An estimated 5,000 to 20,000 illegal bore wells extract saline groundwater across a 25-45 km stretch along the north-western shores of the lake for the salt pan business here. Heavy rains earlier this year meant that the electric cable lay submerged under water even as the pumps continued to operate. The pumps are, as a precautionary measure, run mostly in the night so that the leaking current does not endanger labourers who work through the day.

The leaking electricity is likely, however, to have electrocuted the birds that arrived early. These carcasses are likely to have served as an ideal base for the growth of the toxic bacteria that led to the spread of botulism. While the first reports of the deaths came only around November 10, the development stage of the maggots found in the carcasses suggested that the deaths had begun to happen in the last week of October itself.

The dead birds were found in large numbers in the Nawa belt and this is where the die-off is suspected to have begun. In late November, almost two weeks after the deaths were reported, the state government began removing illegal bore wells and wires from the lake bed in Nawa. Officials maintained that the move was long overdue since the National Green Tribunal had ordered their removal in November 2016. Officials said they will continue looking for dead birds all of December and keep removing illegal bore wells. They have also stated that a three-foot-deep trench to guard against pipelines and power cable will be dug.

Source: Jay Mazoomdar. 'Sambhar lake may have been lethal electric trap when birds arrived', www.indianexpress.com, 26/12/19.

PAKISTAN

Special houbara hunting permits issued to Bahrain king

The Pakistan government has issued special permits to King of Bahrain Sheikh Hamad bin Isa bin Salman al Khalifa and five other members of his family to hunt the internationally-protected Houbara bustard

during the 2019-20 hunting season. Besides the king, the hunting party includes his uncle, his country's interior minister, adviser on defence, cousins, and some others.

Owing to ruthless hunting by Arab hunters, the population of the migratory bird has declined because of which it is not only protected under various international nature conservation conventions, but its hunting is also banned under local wildlife protection laws. Pakistanis are not allowed to hunt this bird.

Under a code of conduct issued by the foreign ministry, a hunter can hunt 100 houbara bustards in a 10-day hunting spree during the three-month-long hunting season between Nov 1, 2019 and Jan 31, 2020.

The king's uncle, Sheikh Ebrahim bin Hamad bin Abdullah al Khalifa, has been allowed to hunt the migratory bird in Sujawal district's Shah Bunder tehsil. The king's cousin, who is also his interior minister, Lt Gen Sheikh Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa, was granted permits for Naushahro Feroze district in Sindh and Jaffarabad district in Balochistan. The king's adviser on defence, Sheikh Abdullah bin Salman al Khalifa, had permits in Sujawal district's Jati tehsil, cousin Sheikh Khalid bin Rashid bin Abdullah al Khalifa, in Tando Mohammad Khan, while another cousin, Sheikh Ahmad bin Ali al Khalifa, in Hyderabad and Malir (excluding Malir Cantonment and Dhabeji areas) districts.

Source: Bhagwandas. 'Special houbara hunting permits issued to Bahrain king', www.dawn.com, 24/12/19.

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FROM THE ARCHIVES - 10 years ago

PA Update 82, December 2009

BIHAR

Railway track creates new rhino habitat adjoining Valmiki TR

New swampy habitat of roughly 1000 hectares has been created adjoining the Valmiki Tiger Reserve by the Bagha – Chitauni rail link that prevents the natural flow of some rivulets into the reserve. The link that had been converted to a broad gauge line in the 1990s had been opposed by the Bihar forest department (FD) and a legal battle had also been fought on the grounds that it would be detrimental to the habitat of the reserve.

Blockage of the flow of water has now created the swampy habitat and has attracted rhinos from across the border from Nepal. Earlier the rhinos used to visit the area for a few days but since 2004 they are reported to have taken up permanent residence. Three rhinos are regularly found here now.

The FD now plans to undertake a survey of the area to figure out the feasibility of creating a protected area here for rhinos.

Source: 'New habitat for rhinos in Bihar', Times News Network, 01/12/09

ODISHA

Oriental small-clawed otter reported from Karlapat WLS

Recent surveys done by the NGO Vasundhara has revealed for the first time the presence of the Oriental small-clawed otter from the Karlapat Wildlife Sanctuary. Signs of the presence of the animal were found in most streams in the sanctuary and the maximum presence was noticed in the Karlapat stream as the water depth was maximum and flow rate was minimum.

The survey has found a healthy population of the otters in 16 streams of the sanctuary. The research team also found out

that the crabs are the favoured food item of the otters. Local tribal communities here are reported to believe that if anyone eats the otter, his/her body will not decompose even after death.

Source: 'Ecologists find large population of otters', www.expressbuzz.com 21/12/09

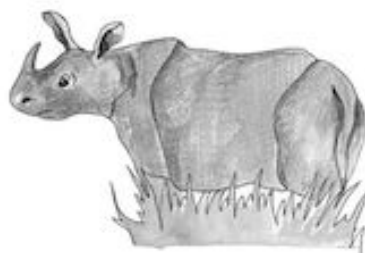
UTTAR PRADESH

Rhinos near Indo-Nepal border will get unique IDs

Wildlife officials are planning a database of the rhino population in Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary and Pilibhit forest area. They will assign a unique identity card to each rhino, in order to keep a track of the individual rhinos' movement across the Indo-Nepal border. Rhinos will be identified on the basis of physical parameters like shape of their horns, its length and its size. Each rhino will be photographed and the data will be incorporated in making the IDs.

Three rhinos – a male, a female and a sub-adult have moved to the Katarniaghat WLS from Nepal through the Khata corridor, while six from the Shukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve in Nepal have moved to the Lagga Bagga area in Uttar Pradesh's Pilibhit forest division.

Source: 'Rhinos wandering on Indo-Nepal border to get IDs', *Indian Express*, 12/12/09



PERSPECTIVE

In the 'Public Interest'?

Contesting Mumbai's Coastal Road

In November 2018, The Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) began to dump tons of debris in the shallow waters off the Western coastline of Mumbai, and restrained the artisanal fisherfolk, the Kolis, from Worli Koliwada from casting their nets. In response, the fisherfolk filed a writ petition in the Mumbai High Court (HC) contesting the ambitious Coastal Road Project, which threatened to irreversibly affect their livelihoods. They claimed that the work had commenced without any prior engagement with the community and neither the environmental nor the social impact assessment for the project acknowledged the presence of fishing activity here.

In March 2019, I was part of a team that published a report titled 'The Social Ecology of the Shallow Seas', an ethnographic study which documented artisanal fishing practices in the Worli Fishing Zone. It is intriguing that even in a dense metropolis built through a series of reclamations since its colonial origins, the city's western coast still retains its natural edge comprised of rocky and sandy shores interspersed with estuarine ecologies. The Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) has provided some protection since 1991. For the city's Kolis this coast is a productive landscape, the intricate fabric of their economic, social and cultural life being rooted in the dynamic interface between land and water. The report highlights how passive techniques of artisanal fishing are adapted to specific geomorphic and ecological conditions of the shallow seas and intertidal areas, which are spawning grounds and habitats for juvenile fish.

The MCGM however conceives of the city's rocky shores as a 'barren wasteland' which can be reclaimed and enclosed by displacing productive customary and collective uses of the foreshore and shallow waters. Shifting conceptions of the Mumbai's coastal landscape driven by new coastal imaginaries have resulted in the rebranding of the coast as a recreational landscape undermining the intricate relations or

inter-dependencies between ecology, community and livelihood. Public justification is won by devaluing this landscape, and recasting elite infrastructural mega-projects such as the Coastal Road as being in urgent 'public interest'. These are then facilitated through deregulation: an amendment to the CRZ in 2015 permits reclamation for roads in intertidal areas under 'exceptional circumstances'. The term 'Green reclamation' has been coined to make this more palatable and there are proposals to create new urban parks with Miyawaki 'forests' on these newly reclaimed lands.

The HC which eventually heard six petitions on the coastal road rejected the MCGM's claim that traffic congestion qualified as an 'exceptional circumstance' that could justify destruction of coastal ecology and quashed the CRZ clearance. Unfortunately the order has been stayed by the Supreme Court and reclamation work continues unabated, irreversibly impacting both ecosystems and livelihoods.

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