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Vol. XXVI, No. 3, June 2020 (No. 145)

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Note: Stories that appear in the *PA Update* are edited version of the original news reports first published in the source mentioned at the end of the story

Publication of the PA Update has been supported by

Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Trust

C/o Foundation for Ecological Security <http://fes.org.in/>

Rohini Nilekani Philanthropies and

Donations from a number of individual supporters

EDITORIAL

Wildlife and conservation in the times of COVID-19

The two months between the publishing of the last issue of the PA Update (April 2020) and this, the latest issue of June 2020 - has seen the world turn topsy-turvy in a manner never seen before. No one anticipated this coming and importantly no one really knows what to do or where we are headed.

Not unexpectedly, the world of forests, wildlife and conservation too has been impacted and this is reflected in the various developments and what the media has been reporting (see special section, pg. 14). Going into the details and an analysis of everything will, of course, not be possible, but a broad sweep, bird's eye view suggests that the developments and their reportage can be clubbed under four broad categories.

The initial period of the lock down saw a number of reports in mainstream and social media on the increasing visibility of wild animals. Citing the reduction in human activity because of the lockdown, forest officials reported an increased sighting of animals - leopards in the Sanjay Gandhi NP in Mumbai, gharials and dolphins in the Beas river in Punjab and tigers in the Sunderbans. There were also a number of reports of individual animals, elephants for eg., being sighted walking through settlements and small towns. The drift of the arguments seemed to suggest a welcoming of this phenomenon as wildlife and wild animals were seen regaining what was originally and rightfully theirs. Decreased human activity was also attributed in some cases to a reduction in the instances of human-wildlife conflict like we see with a report from Corbett TR and from parts of Kerala.

The flip side of this coin, and there are a number of reports that are still coming in, is that the lockdown and reduced patrolling has resulted in a spurt of poaching and illegal hunting. The evidence in many cases is

anecdotal and only a detailed and careful study can confirm if there was indeed a causal relationship between the lockdown and increased hunting, if indeed it had increased at all. A group of conservationists had initiated a survey to assess patterns of hunting between the initial lockdown period (25 March-4 May 2020), and the pre-lockdown period (23 Jan-24 March 2020). The result was not out by the time we went to press, but the results should provide some interesting insights.

The 3rd broad category of developments is related to the advisories issued by authorities at various levels, beginning with those from many state forest departments following the report of a tiger in the Bronx Zoo in New York in the USA being infected by the virus. Other more overarching advisories resulted in concerns being raised about the impacts on livelihoods on adivasi and forest dwelling communities. Representations sent out by activists, researchers and organisations noted that the conditions of the lockdown would have multiple effects on already marginalised communities whose access to resources, health care and livelihood opportunities are precarious in the best of times.

And finally, one saw, and continues to see the development juggernaut rolling on with even less care and concern. The Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) seems to have gone into overdrive granting clearances to big bang projects that would impact forests, wildlife and local communities across the country. 31 projects were cleared in just one meeting of the National Board for Wildlife held by video-conferencing in the midst of this unprecedented crisis. Many of these were granted in violation of laws and policies and without attention to due process and procedure. Even a global pandemic could not succeed in bringing about just a momentary pause. The more things change, the more they remain the same; they are only becoming worse where the MoEFCC is concerned.

The world has been discussing and speculating on a new normal post COVID-19; we need also to be discussing a new abnormal. Where the MoEFCC is concerned a clue lies in

the title of researcher Nandini Velho's lead story in *The Hindu Sunday Magazine* of 23 May 2020; this ministry may well be called the 'Ministry of forest clearances'. There will be no more pretence then and no more questions will be asked. Wildlife, forests, people and livelihoods may all be damned!

PS: The *PA Update* team at Kalpavriksh is very happy to announce the publication of first non-English edition of the *PA Update*. Focused on Maharashtra and published in Marathi, the first issue of the *Maharashtra Sanrakshit Kshetra Vartapatra* (Maharashtra Protected Area Newsletter) was released in April 2020 (see pg. 23). Supported by the Duleep Matthai Nature Conservation Trust and edited by Reshma Jathar it will be published four times a year. Please write to psekhsaria@gmail.com and/or marathipaupdate@gmail.com if you would like to be on the mailing list.

NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ANDHRA PRADESH

Plea in NGT against destruction of mangroves near Coringa WLS

Supreme Court advocate Sanjay Upadhyay appearing for environmental activist Bolisetty Satyanarayana urged the National Green Tribunal (NGT) to stop the Andhra Pradesh Government from destroying about 100 acres of mangrove forests in Kakinada for a proposed housing scheme. The forests are in close proximity to the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary.

The Union government, the Andhra Pradesh Forest Department, the East Godavari district administration and the Andhra Pradesh Coastal Zone Management Authority have now been made parties to the petition.

Source: G Venkataramana Rao. 'NGT urged to stop govt. from destroying mangrove forests', www.thehindu.com, 17/04/2020.

ASSAM

Opposition to coal mining in Saleki of Dehing Patkai ER

A number of environmentalists and concerned people have urged the Prime Minister, the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of India, the Chief Minister of Assam and the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) to stop any current and future coal mining project in Saleki and the whole of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve (ER). They noted that legal and illegal coal extraction is having and will have catastrophic consequences for the whole ecosystem of the region. This comes following the decision made in the 7 April 2020 meeting of the National Board for Wildlife to allow coal mining here.

The NBWL's standing committee had discussed the proposal for use of 98.59 ha of land of Saleki, proposed for a coal mining project by North Eastern Coal Field (NECF) — a unit of Coal India Limited — and gave nod to it. The meeting was held by video conferencing under the chairmanship of environment minister, Mr Prakash Javdekar.

The Dehing Patkai ER is spread over 575 sq. km in the Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar districts in Upper Assam and is home to a range of threatened and rare species including among others the hoolock gibbon, slow loris, pig-tailed macaque, stump-tailed macaque, capped langur, Indian leopard, Asian elephant, tiger, gaur, Chinese pangolin, Himalayan black bear, Himalayan squirrel, leopard cat, clouded leopard, porcupine, crab-eating mongoose, sambar, sun bear, binturong, barking deer, golden cat, and marbled cat. The reserve is also home to nearly 300 species of birds, 30 species of butterflies and over 100 species of orchids. It has also been noted that the Dehing Patkai region is already threatened by highly polluting industries, such as coal mines, oil refineries and drilling for gas.

Earlier, the NBWL in its 54th meeting, also constituted a panel to visit the proposed Lekhapani Open Cast Project under the Lekhapani Range of Digboi Forest Division in

Tinsukia district. As per the report submitted by the panel, the Standing Committee of NBWL recommended the proposal for broken up area (57.20 ha) for approval subject to submission of a rectified site-specific mine reclamation plan in consultation with the Assam Forest Department. On the other hand, for the unbroken area (41.39 ha), the NBWL will consider the matter after the user agency submits a feasibility report for underground mining and compliance report regarding fulfillment of all other conditions recommended by the NBWL.

Source: 'Environmentalists opposed coal mining in Saleki of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve', www.sentinelassam.com, 18/05/2020.

Plea to set up modern police station and hospital in Kaziranga NP

The NGO Aaranyak has requested Assam chief minister (CM) Sarbananda Sonowal to set up a modern police station and a state-of-the art hospital in Kaziranga National Park (KNP). In a memorandum submitted to the CM, Aaranyak has stated that Kohora is regarded as the gateway to KNP, which is globally known for its successful conservation efforts of greater one-horned rhino. Thousands of tourists, both domestic and international, stay in lodges in and around Kohora. In view of heavy footfall of tourists as well as concern to keep constant vigil against poachers here, the Kohora police outpost should be upgraded to a full-fledged police station.

The CM was also requested to set up a helpline counter for the benefit of tourists in the proposed KNP police station.

Source: 'Cop station, hospital plea in Kaziranga', www.telegraphindia.com, 14/03/2020.

CHHATTISGARH

Two wild buffaloes arrive at Barnawapara WLS from Assam

A pair of wild buffalo sub-adult calves - one male and the other female - arrived recently at the Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS)

from Assam as part of an initiative to increase their population in Chhattisgarh where they have been almost wiped out. Since the Indian Railways has suspended a majority of its trains on account of the lockdown to deal with the coronavirus epidemic, the animals were transported by truck. The health of the animals along the way was monitored by an 18-member forest department (FD) team led by Dr. Rakesh Verma.

The pair was kept initially in a large paddock in the sanctuary. They will be kept at Barnawapara till they attain the age of reproduction. The buffaloes will be allowed to breed here and will only be released into the wild after reaching a certain number.

The FD had initially planned to bring in five animals from Assam, but only two could be caught in the first phase.

Source: 'Pair of wild buffalo brought to Barnawapara', www.thehitavada.com, 19/04/2020.

GUJARAT

Two lions from Chotila walk 140 km to reach Gir sanctuary

Two male lions from Chotila walked 140 km in seven days to reach the Gir Sanctuary in the month of April. The animals had been resident in the Chobari grassland near Chotila in Surendranagar district after they reached here in November 2019 via Hingolagadh Nature Education Sanctuary in Vinchhiya taluka of Rajkot.

The lions had preyed on 24 nilgai and also attacked 35 livestock heads for which the forest department (FD) has paid Rs. 5.15 lakh compensation. The FD had also surveyed open wells in agricultural lands in the area and got parapets constructed around 100 wells by paying farmers Rs. 16 lakh in assistance. The only incidence of direct conflict with humans was reported from Keshvala village of Gondal on 9 April 2020 when they attacked a cattle-herder who sustained minor injuries.

The lions moved eventually to Babra in Amreli district and from there to Gondal via Bagasara Road. They were then spotted in Bhesan taluka of Junagadh district and then in the Gir sanctuary area.

Though the FD refused to disclose their exact location, they confirmed that the place they had reached was home to at least 25 other lions. Officials said while the lions could establish themselves in Gir, there was a good chance they would return to Chotila as they were well settled in the grassland there, which also has a good prey base.

Source: 'Gujarat: Chotila lions reach Gir sanctuary, fight for territory feared', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 13/04/2020.
Gopal Kateshiya. 'Lions walk back 140km to reach home in Gir from Surendranagar', www.indianexpress.com, 13/04/2020.

KARNATAKA

CM clears Hubballi-Ankola railway project through Kali TR

Steamrolling opposition to the Hubballi-Ankola railway line, Chief Minister (CM) of Karnataka BS Yeddiurappa cleared the controversial project through Kali Tiger Reserve (TR) at the state wildlife board meeting held in Bengaluru on March 20. The board was convened for the second time in less than two weeks after the project faced vehement opposition from some of its members in the earlier meeting held on March 9. Leaders from across the political spectrum attended this meeting and argued in favour of the project while forest minister BS Anand Singh was absent.

The CM overruled various objections filed by environmental experts, including a comprehensive report by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) that the project was inimical to the environment. While the CM and the officials supportive of the project depended heavily on a report submitted by a scientist from the Indian Institute of Science,

senior forest officials have dismissed the mitigation measures suggested in the report as highly impractical and unrealistic. The issue and the state's decision will now go before the National Board for Wildlife.

The alignment of the tracks is between Kali TR and Bedthi Conservation Reserve, and more than 80% of the line cuts through the Western Ghats. The project entails felling and destruction of nearly two lakh fully grown trees to lay a 164.44 km railway line.

According to an NTCA report on the project, the forests through which the railway line cuts, supports 29 species of mammals, 256 species of birds, eight species of reptiles, and 50 species of butterflies. Majority of the mammals are in the IUCN red list and also protected under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972.

Source: 'Hubballi-Ankola railway line gets clearance despite opposition', www.thehindu.com, 20/03/2020.

MAHARASHTRA

Maharashtra proposes exclusion of 41 villages, 1,981 sq km of forest from Western Ghats ESA

The Maharashtra State Government has proposed the inclusion of 2,092 of 2,133 villages or 15,359 sq. km of the originally proposed 17,340 sq. km, thereby excluding 11.4% area from the draft Western Ghats Eco-Sensitive Area (ESA). This will leave out crucial wildlife corridors, buffer areas of tiger reserves and sanctuaries from the ESA. The state has proposed exclusion of 17 villages for industrial activities and 13 for mining based on suggestions from the industries department and mining bodies.

The Savarde village, which lies in the core zone of the Radhanagri Wildlife Sanctuary in Kolhapur, the Maloshi and Bamnoli villages in Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary in Satara, and the Yelan Gai village which was earlier marked as a mining village in the buffer area of the Sahayadri Tiger Reserve, are some of the villages that have been excluded.

Rajya Sabha member Sambhaji Raje has written to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Mr Uddhav Thackeray and union environment minister Mr. Prakash Javdekar expressing concerns over the move.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'Excluding villages from new Western Ghats ESA proposal, opening them up for mining, industries to be disastrous for environment: RS MP', www.hindustantimes.com, 24/05/2020.

NBWL approves Mumbai-Nagpur Samruddhi Mahamarg, projects from 11 other states

The National Board of Wildlife (NBWL) issued its final clearance for the Rs. 55,335 crore Mumbai-Nagpur highway during a meeting held via video-conferencing amid the coronavirus lockdown. The Maharashtra State Road Development Corporation (MSRDC) had divided the entire highway into major stretches for which environment clearances had been sought separately.

The 701 km Samruddhi Mahamarg connecting Mumbai and Nagpur will pass through 10 districts, 26 talukas and 392 villages, and is expected to reduce the existing travel time of 15 hours to eight hours. The highway will pass through the 10 km eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of Katepurna and Karanja Sohla Blackbuck Wildlife Sanctuaries towards one end of the state while cutting through the ESZ of Tansa WLS closer to the Mumbai Metropolitan Region. The total project requires 475 ha of forestland and an estimated one lakh trees will have to be cut. The NBWL's decision has revealed that mitigation measures have not yet finalised, yet MSRDC has continued road work in ESZs and tiger corridors.

The Maharashtra State Board for Wildlife (SBWL) had approved the project in January 2018 following which the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) was asked to conduct a wildlife study and prepare a detailed mitigation plan. The plan was tabled before an expert committee on January 17, 2020 and several concerns were raised by the forest officers on the proposed mitigation structures. SBWL members then conducted site

visits in February and March 2020 and a report was subsequently submitted to chief wildlife warden. One of the SBWL members noted that work in the ESZs of the sanctuaries could not start if the mitigation structures were not final. MSRDC has, however, already carried out works in Package I (tiger corridor) and II (Katepurna & Karanja Sohla), especially on stretches passing through ESZs of two sanctuaries.

Though the amended project got final clearance only on April 7, 2020, it had been cleared on September 7, 2018 on the precondition that the project proponent will plan appropriate mitigation structures to ensure safe movement of wild animals. RL Mopalwar, managing director of MSRDC, noted, however, that they got NBWL nod for road construction in ESZ of Karanja Sohla and Katepurna sanctuaries in January on the basis of which work orders were issued in February. Thus, he argues, there are no violations.

Besides, he noted, MSRDC has already submitted the requisite amount for wildlife habitat management to the Melghat Foundation before starting the work. As regards the ESZ of the Tansa WLS, Mopalwar claimed that NBWL had already cleared the road project passing through on September 7, 2018. The fresh clearance is for the corrected cost of mitigation measures, which is Rs. 54.57 crore.

Maharashtra chief wildlife warden Nitin Kakodkar also clarified that it was erroneously mentioned in the SBWL minutes of the meeting and proposal from February 2018 that two per cent of the total project cost had to be paid by MSRDC for mitigation measures under stretch 5 passing through Tansa's ESZ. The two percent of the project cost for only this particular stretch had to be paid and not for the total project cost. MSRDC brought this to the notice of the state and an amended proposal was sent to NBWL, which received clearance.

The NBWL meeting that cleared the project was chaired by the Union environment minister, Prakash Javdekar, and also cleared a number of other projects from states across the country.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'National Wildlife Board issues final nod for Mumbai-Nagpur highway amid lockdown', www.hindustantimes.com, 08/04/2020.

'National Wildlife Board issues final nod for Mumbai-Nagpur highway amid lockdown', www.hindustantimes.com, 08/04/20.

Tiger walks 3,000 km between Tipeshwar and Dnyanganga WLSs

A male tiger from Tipeshwar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Yavatmal district has set a record by covering over 3,000 km before settling down in the Dnyanganga WLS in Buldana district. The tiger, T1C1, one of the three cubs born to a Tipeshwar tigress T1, was radio-collared on February 27, 2019 as part of the 'Studying dispersal of Tigers across Eastern Vidarbha landscape' project undertaken by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in tandem with the Maharashtra Forest Department (FD).

T1C1's marathon walk has included several back and forth journeys between Tipeshwar WLS and the forests of Adilabad district in neighbouring Telangana and also to Painganga WLS and from Dnyanganga WLS to the Ajanta hills in Aurangabad. A break-up of the walk showed that it has covered 360 km around Tipeshwar, 1,475 km from Tipeshwar to Dnyanganga, and 1,185 km around Dnyanganga.

A WII team headed by wildlife scientist Bilal Habib has tracked the tiger's movement at over 6,000 different GPS locations along its journey. Aged about two years, the tiger has baffled wildlife experts as to why he hasn't settled anywhere along his journey route. He has walked many landscapes, including highways, rivers, agricultural lands and forests and yet avoided confrontation with humans. One possible explanation for his ceaseless walk is that he might be searching for a mate. The FD has now constituted a committee of experts that will decide if a female should be translocated for him to Dnyanganga WLS.

Source: Vivek Deshpande. 'Walker' covers over 3,000 km to zero in on his new home', www.indianexpress.com, 31/03/2020.

Leucistic Sloth bear sighted in Melghat TR for first time

The first record of a rare leucistic Sloth bear has been documented from Melghat Tiger Reserve (TR). Leucism is a rare genetic condition but different from albinism.

The adult female bear with a beige coat, black head and pale snout was photographed by a camera trap with another of a black coat (possibly male) bear in the Sipna Wildlife Division of the reserve recently. Camera traps had been set up as part of the tiger monitoring study that is being carried out across Vidarbha by the Wildlife Institute of India and Maharashtra Forest Department (FD).

While the FD said that such animals had low chances of survival as their colour makes them more susceptible to predation, Nishith Dharaiya, co-chair, IUCN sloth bear expert team said that there was no threat to their health due to this condition. Nonetheless, he noted, a genetic examination and behavioural study is necessary to find out more about the mutation.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'In a first, leucistic sloth bear spotted in Maharashtra: Forest department', www.hindustantimes.com, 16/04/2020.

RAJASTHAN

Four poachers arrested in Jaisalmer; may have killed hundreds of animals over a decade

The Rajasthan Forest Department (FD) arrested four people in Jaisalmer district recently for being involved in poaching of chinkaras. Initial investigations suggest that they may have killed hundreds of chinkaras and other protected species over almost a decade.

The latest incident that led to their arrest was the poaching of three chinkaras that came to light in the Pokhran region after FD officials received a tip-off on April 2 from the local Bishnoi community. A team sent to the spot discovered remains like head, skin and

other body parts of three chinkaras – two male and one female. One of the accused was subsequently arrested from his house in the nearby area along with some remains of the animals, including meat. Three more accused were nabbed over the next few days. The gun with which the animals had been shot was also recovered from them.

The four accused belong to a local tribal community and live near the Desert National Park. They used to hunt the animals for meat and bury away their remains. No connection, however, has been established thus far between them and supply of wild meat to the local hotels. The FD was also trying to establish the exact numbers of animals killed by the accused over the years. It was suspected this would be in the 100s as they have been hunting almost every alternate day.

Source: Mayank Aggarwal. 'Rajasthan uncovers chinkara poaching racket', www.india.mongabay.com, 14/04/2020.

TAMIL NADU

Two tigers die of poisoning in Anaimalai TR

Two ten-year-old tigers, believed to be a breeding pair, were found dead at Pollachi in Anaimalai Tiger Reserve (TR) in the second week of April. The post-mortem revealed the cause of death to be the consumption of a poisoned boar. The carcass of the half-eaten boar was found along with that of the tigers and forest officials ruled out poaching as a cause of death. An enquiry has been initiated into who poisoned the boar.

The carcasses were found in the Pothamadai forest beat in a forest area named Pungan Odai. There are no human habitations here except for a tribal hamlet a few km away. While villagers had complained of livestock being lifted, the tigers were not considered to be responsible for that.

Wild boars, however, have been a serious problem for the farmers here and it has been suggested that one of them may have

chosen to poison the boar that was eventually consumed by the tigers.

Source: 'Two tigers die after consuming poisoned boar in Tamil Nadu', www.thenewsminute.com, 10/04/2020.

TELANGANA

NBWL clears railway line through forests connecting Kawal, Tadoba-Andhari and Indravati TRs

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) has given clearance for a third broad gauge railway line by the South-Central Railway (SCR) through Telangana's Kaghaznagar Forest Division, the forests of which connect three tiger reserves (TRs) —Kawal in Telangana, Tadoba-Andhari in Maharashtra and Indravati in Chhattisgarh.

The SCR had initially proposed the cutting down of trees across 189 ha of forests. A Telangana Forest Department survey noted that the area needed is less following which the Telangana State Board for Wildlife recommended clearance for only 21 ha.

The clearance also comes with a slew of conditions including construction of cross-over tunnels for animals, widening and extension of existing bridges and a payment of Rs. 15 lakh for the vulture conservation programme in Kaghaznagar. The National Tiger Conservation Authority has also laid down the condition that the SCR should purchase private lands located amid fragmented forest areas and give it to the FD as compensation.

Source: V Nilesh. 'National wildlife board nod for rail line in Telangana's Kawal tiger corridor', www.newindianexpress.com, 10/04/2020.

UTTARAKHAND

Four Snow leopards camera trapped in the Nanda Devi NP

Four snow leopards including a pair have been photographed by a camera trap in the Malari

area at an altitude of 3100 m in the Nanda Devi National Park (NP) (*PA Update* Vol. XXVI, No. 2). This was confirmed when the researchers accessed the cameras and set up in the park for the period January to March.

Source: Neeraj Santoshi. 'In a rare sight, four snow leopards captured on camera in Uttarakhand's Nanda Devi National Park', www.hindustantimes.com, 14/04/2020.

NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

ZSI releases updated checklist of Indian Amphibians

A comprehensive updated checklist of Indian amphibians was launched recently on the website of the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI). The list shows a substantial increase in the number of amphibians listed in India - from 284 in 2009 to 447 species in 2020.

The updated checklist includes systematic classification with scientifically updated species names and year of discovery with their IUCN Red List conservation status, available till April 2020. Among the species listed, 20 are critically endangered and 35 endangered. 19% of the species are data deficient and about 39% are not assessed as per Red List conservation status of IUCN.

The checklist was compiled by a team of research scientists including Dr. KP Dinesh from ZSI, Western Regional Centre, Pune, Dr. C Radhakrishnan from Calicut, Dr. BH Channakeshavamurthy, ZSI, Calicut, Mr. P Deepak from Mount Carmel College, Bengaluru and Mr. Nirmal Kulkarni from the Mhadei Research Centre, Goa. Link: https://zsi.gov.in/WriteReadData/userfiles/file/Checklist/Amphibians_2020.pdf

Source: Press release issued 17/05/2020.

Nearly 10,000 forest fires reported in April in just three states

According to the Forest Survey of India, fire alerts issued based on the Suomi National Polar-orbiting Partnership (SNPP) – Visible Infrared Imaging Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) sensor, atleast 3,531 fires were recorded in Odisha, the highest in the country between April 9 and 16. Maharashtra with 3,203 fires in that period was second followed by Madhya Pradesh, which reported 2,472 fires.

Though the incidents in Odisha are less this year compared to the same period last year, the numbers are slowly rising. Between 9 and 16 April 2019, Odisha recorded 4,429 fire spots while the same for the previous year was 682.

According to forest officials the situation is not as bad as last year except for forest divisions like Rayagada, Baliguda and Boudh. *Podu* cultivation in these areas has been the main reason for the rise in the forest fires. While the forest department has claimed to have engaged the ground staff to curb forest fires, the Wildlife Society of Odisha, an NGO, said that as the top forest officials are in Bhubaneswar due to the lockdown there is not much action on the ground.

Source: Debabrata Mohanty. 'Odisha tops forest fire incidents in the country for a week', www.hindustantimes.com, 17/04/2020.

Golden jackals threatened by poaching and trade in India: study

Golden jackals in India are threatened by poaching and trade driven by religious beliefs in sorcery and superstition, says a new study published by the Wildlife Conservation Society - India, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology & Environment, Wildlife Conservation Trust, National Centre for Biological Sciences, University of Florida - USA, James Cook University - Australia and Conservation Initiatives.

Titled 'Do wildlife crimes against less charismatic species go unnoticed? - a case study of golden jackal poaching and trade in India',

the report is an outcome of research conducted as part of the Wild Canids – India Project and was published in the *Journal of Threatened Taxa*.

Researchers collected publicly available information from government seizure data, news reports, social media posts, blogs and e-commerce platforms to create a repository of jackal hunting, poaching and trade incidents from 2013 to 2019. The findings revealed that 126 skins, eight tails, more than 370 jackal horns, 16 skulls and two live jackals were seized by the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau.

The analysis brought to light a widespread demand for a talisman that appears to be derived from the jackal skull known as ‘jackal horn’. The ‘jackal horn’ trade is fueled by extensive online endorsement and unsubstantiated claims made by religious practitioners. The sale of jackal horn appears to be common place in Indian trade markets as evidenced by advertisements on social media and popular online retail outlets.

The study also showed that jackal meat is consumed by several communities in the northeastern states and parts of western, central and southern India. Jackal body parts such as head, skin, tail and teeth find use in traditional and cultural practices in southern India and jackal organs are believed to have medicinal properties in Central India.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. ‘Poaching and trade of jackals rampant: Study’,
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
04/04/2020.

SOUTH ASIA

NEPAL

Tiger presence recorded at an altitude of 2,500 m

Camera traps placed in Dadeldhura’s Mahabharat region have captured images of a

tiger at an elevation of 2,500 m. The camera trap exercise was part of a month-long campaign to prove the presence of tigers at higher elevations in the Himalaya undertaken with financial and technical assistance from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

A total of 32 camera traps were placed by the divisional forestry office in the mountain forests of the Mahabharat region after locals reported tiger sightings. The Nepali word ‘bagh’ is often used interchangeably to mean tiger and leopard, and wildlife biologists wanted to make sure if the animal was indeed a tiger. They are now examining other images to determine whether the tiger simply wandered into the higher elevation, or lives there.

Higher-altitude sightings of tigers have been reported in other parts of the Himalayan range; Bhutan has recorded sightings at altitudes between 2,765 m and 3,350 m in the Royal Manas and Thrumshingla National Parks.

Additionally, the Global Tiger Forum has carried out studies to determine the feasibility of high-altitude tiger conservation. The study points to factors such as ‘gentle elevation, high forest cover, high drainage density, high temperature variations and moderate dry conditions’ as potential factors in the change of tiger habitats in the western Himalaya. This could also be the reason for tiger presence in Dadeldhura, though another factor is the increase of prey species in the mountains due to the spread of community forests. Tigers need a stable herbivore population, and research has suggested that there has been a fall in prey density in Sukla Phanta and Bardia NPs in the western Tarai.

Also, captured in the camera trap images in Dadeldhura were foxes, leopards, civets, porcupines and various species of deer and pheasants. The findings assume more importance because the area is not a protected area.

Source: Mukesh Pokhrel. ‘Tiger selfie is highest-ever sighting in Nepal’,
www.nepalitimes.com, 14/04/2020..

NOW AVAILABLE

The State of Wildlife and Protected Areas in Maharashtra

News and Information from the Protected Area Update 1996-2015

Edited by Pankaj Sekhsaria

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- Editor's Note

- Protected Areas in Maharashtra – a brief introduction

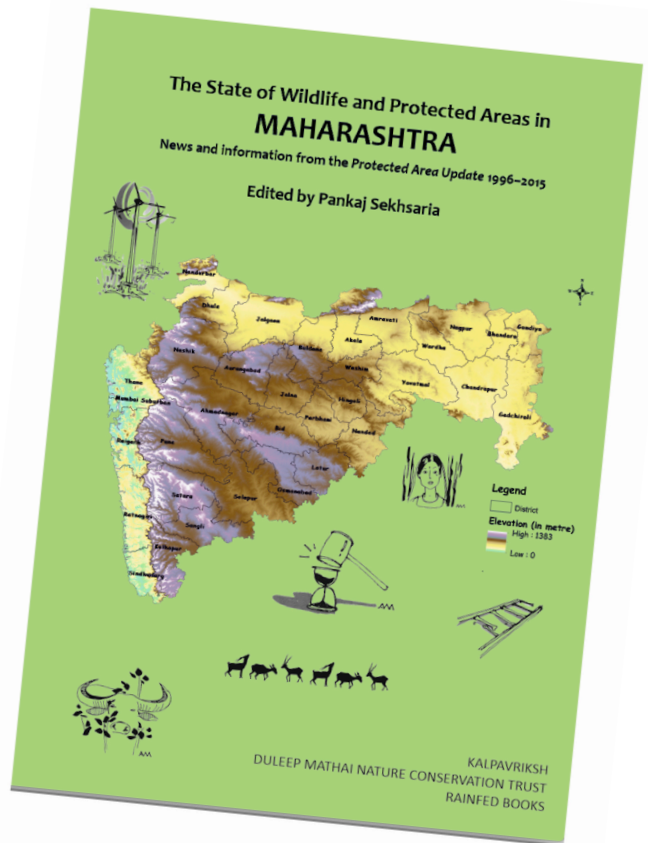
- Section 1: News and Information from protected areas: Bhimashankar WLS, Bhorgad CR, Bor WLS, Gautala Autramghat WLS, Kolamarka CR, Great Indian Bustard Sanctuary, Gyanganga WLS Jaikwadi Bird Sanctuary, Kalsubai-Harishchandragad WLS, Karnala WLS, Lonar WLS, Mahabaleshwar ESZ, Mahendri Reserve Forest, Mansingdeo WLS, Matheran ESZ, Muniya CR, Nandur Madhmeshwar Bird Sanctuary, Radhanagari WLS, Rehekuri Blackbuck Sanctuary, Sanjay Gandhi NP, Sewri Wetlands, Tansa WLS, Thane Creek WLS, Tipeswar WLS, Tungreshwar WLS, Umred-Karhandla WLS, Yawal WLS, Melghat TR, Nawegaon-Nagzira TR, Pench TR, Sahyadri TR, Tadoba-Andhari TR, Tigers, General News from Maharashtra

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1) Media reporting on the protected areas in Maharashtra - A thematic analysis (Trupthi Narayan and Pankaj Sekhsaria); 2) Wildlife coverage in the Marathi Print Media – a practitioner's perspective (Reshma Jathar); 3) Dividing lines- tribal rights and tiger reserves (Shiba Desor); 4) Rocky plateaus: Little understood treasures of the Western Ghats (Aparna Watve) and 5) Community Conserved Areas in Maharashtra (Neema Pathak Broome with Sneha Gutgutia, Shruti Mokashi, Kavya Chowdhry, Sarosh Ali and Rupesh Patil)

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IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS UPDATE

NATIONAL NEWS

Gujarat emerging as gateway for Amur falcons: WII

Tracking of satellite tagged Amur falcons by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) suggests that Gujarat is an important gateway for these migratory birds. Having flown 3,200km non-stop over the Arabian Sea, 'Irang', a sub-adult satellite-tagged Amur falcon, was reported, entering Gujarat to the south of Porbandar in the Gir forest region at 1am on May 3.

WII scientist R Suresh Kumar has noted that falcons use Kutch and Saurashtra as way points after their long flight over the Arabian Sea. The WII has tagged about 15 Amur falcons thus far to study migration pathways and environmental patterns.

In related news, another individual bird, Chiulon, named after a village in Manipur's Tamenglong district reached its breeding area in northern China on May 7. The bird which made a brief stop in Mizoram following its return from Africa in the third week of April left for China on April 28. The bird clocked 9,600 km in 15 days since leaving the Somali coast on April 23.

Source: Maulik Pathak. 'Gujarat emerging as gateway for Amur falcons: Wildlife Institute of India', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 09/05/2020.
Sobhapati Samom. 'Radio-tagged Amur Falcon reaches breeding ground in China from NE India', www.hindustantimes.com, 12/05/2020.

MAHARASHTRA

Return rate of tagged birds highest in Mumbai: BNHS

More tagged or ringed migratory birds return to roosting and feeding sites in Mumbai and Navi Mumbai than any other region in India, a study by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS)

has revealed. Of 10,803 individuals of migratory shore-birds across 46 species ringed in the Mumbai region between 2014 and 2020 (majorly from 2018 onwards) 4.6% (497 birds) were recorded again at the site.

The high recapture data is attributed to very high site fidelity for these migratory birds and intensive efforts of bird ringing over a long period by the BNHS. More recent data from November 2019 to January 2020 showed 3,453 birds ringed by BNHS across wetlands near Bhandup pumping station in Mumbai, the Thane creek and TS Chanakya wetlands in Navi Mumbai. Of these, 3,415 were small waders and 38 flamingos with 160 recaptures during the exercise.

Apart from the Lesser and Greater flamingos, birds ringed by BNHS include common waders such as Little stint, Curlew sandpiper, Lesser sand plover, Common redshank, and Black-tailed godwit. The rarer birds ringed included Red-necked phalarope, Spotted redshank, and Bar-tailed godwit. Most of these birds visit Mumbai after spending the summer in Arctic Russia.

80% of the recaptures recorded were from the sites where the birds were tagged. For example, a bird ringed in 2014 at Panje wetland in Uran was recaptured in Panje again in 2018.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'World Migratory Bird Day: Return rate of tagged birds highest in Mumbai: BNHS', www.hindustantimes.com, 08/05/2020.



THE COVID-19 CONNECTION

NATIONAL NEWS

Conservationists urge minister to withhold forest, environment clearances during the COVID-19 epidemic

A group of 291 conservation scientists and allied professionals, including 12 former members of the Standing Committee (SC) of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) and former affiliates of the Forest Advisory Committees has asked Union environment minister, Mr Prakash Javdekar, to withhold forest and environment clearances during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The communication to the minister came in response to the decisions and clearances given by the 57th meeting (held by video conferencing) of the SC on April 7 for 31 proposals affecting 15 tiger reserves, sanctuaries, notified eco-sensitive zones, deemed eco-sensitive zones and designated wildlife corridors from 11 different states. These included 16 linear infrastructure projects and others such as the private sector Etalin hydro-power project in Arunachal Pradesh and a coal mining project in the Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve in Assam. Expert Appraisal Committees (EACs), bodies under the ministry, also approved a slew of infrastructure project proposals as part of considering 145 projects on April 22-24. Ten EACs have conducted 15 meetings in this regard so far, according to the Union environment ministry's Parivesh portal.

The signatories presented several concerns with regard to project evaluations not being done rigorously and non-following of procedure by statutory bodies. They said video calls were not an efficient mode of communication to assess the environmental, livelihood and biodiversity impacts of projects. They pointed out that under normal circumstances, EAC meetings lasted an entire day. In comparison, meetings during the recent lockdown lasted only 2 hours, with only 10

minutes to appraise each project. They also noted that reliance on digital documents uploaded by project developers on the Parivesh single-window clearance portal led to "fait accompli situations" and gravely compromised the appraisals by the committees during the lockdown. The signatories said that appraisals and assessments for clearances were being reduced to an "empty formality" lacking the credibility and rigour of its purpose.

Given the current circumstances and uncertain future, they called for fresh appraisals, holding in abeyance forest and environmental clearance decisions and postponing further meetings till all pandemic-related travel and meeting restrictions are completely lifted across India. They urged the Ministry of Environment Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC) to carry out its intended mandate of protection of forests, wildlife and natural heritage and not fast-track the clearance of projects.

The signatories included among others former Bombay Natural History Society director, Asad Rahmani, conservationists MK Ranjitsinh, AJT Johnsingh, Belinda Wright, Bittu Sahgal, Biswajit Mohanty, Kishor Rithe, Prerna Singh Bindra, Divyabhanusinh Chavda, Praveen Bhargav, Shekar Dattatri, Goa-based lawyer Norma Alvares and film-maker Mike Pandey. Indian academics from the universities of Columbia, Yale, Michigan and Cambridge also signed the letter.

In a separate letter, conservationist Rohit Choudhury appealed to Mr Javdekar to save the independence of National Tiger Conservation Authority. This comes in response to the MoEFCC's bid to restructure its regional offices by subsuming the NTCA and all the other specialised wings such as the Forest Survey of India (FSI), the Central Zoo Authority (CZA) and the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB).

Source: 'Conservationists urge Javadekar after The Hindu's story on NTCA restructuring', www.thehindu.com, 13/05/2020.
 Badri Chatterjee. 'Withdraw green nods given during lockdown: Conservationists to minister', www.hindustantimes.com, 13/05/2020.
 Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Withhold forest and eco clearances amid pandemic: Experts urge minister', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 14/05/2020.

MoTA urged to ensure support forest communities impacted due to COVID-19

In a letter issued in the first week of May, a number of researchers, experts and forest rights groups urged the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) to take urgent steps to ensure support for tribal and forest communities affected due to COVID-19 outbreak and the lockdown.

The topics covered in the letter include health, livelihood, the specific situation of the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) who are in severe distress, the issue of pastoral and nomadic communities whose migration and seasonal access to livelihood resources has been severely restricted, the continued tenurial insecurity of forest dwelling communities, restriction on movement in protected areas, continued diversion of forest land, concerns about compensatory afforestation being carried out on forest land used by tribals and other traditional forest dwellers, environmental impact assessment (EIA) amendments being brought in, and the issue of evictions and mining in states like Gujarat and Odisha.

The letter also asked for the following steps to be taken up on an urgent basis:

- MoTA to set up a COVID response cell and issue specific guidelines to address the issues and problems of tribals and forest dwellers.
- The central government should coordinate with the state governments to provide immediate relief to the tribal communities by ensuring information and awareness, providing health care and testing facilities in the tribal

areas, support for minor forest produce (MFP) collection and sale.

- The central government should look into the cases of forest rights violation and eviction due to mining and forest diversions, plantations by forest department, restrictions on access to forest for livelihoods activities etc.

- MoTA should also ensure that district and sub-district level officers are well informed about all relevant guidelines and orders related to COVID-19 and lockdown issued by the Centre and the states from time to time and that these are complied with.

- MoTA and TRIFED should work with state tribal departments to urgently devise effective institutional mechanisms for the collection, storage, procurement and sale of non-timber forest produce during the ongoing collection season. Necessary financial and logistical support should be provided to the gram sabhas and forest management committees constituted under the Forest Rights Act (FRA) together with other PPAs for direct procurement from the gatherers.

- MoTA should request MoEFCC to release the huge compensatory afforestation fund to the gram sabhas constituted under FRA to support community forest management for generating livelihoods and wage employment for tribals and forest dwellers to deal with the economic crisis.

- Ensuring support to vulnerable communities such as the PVTGs and pastoral communities and

- Effective implementation of FRA so that communities are more secure in the long run.

Source: Press release dated 06/05/2020.

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Studies reveal pangolins as host of coronaviruses; Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand are illegal trade hotspots

A recent study, published in the journal *Cell*, has placed pangolins as a natural reservoir of coronaviruses similar to SARS-CoV2, which has caused the COVID-19 pandemic. Another

recent study had identified the presence of SARS-CoV2 like viruses in Malayan pangolins smuggled into China to be sold in wet markets.

The discovery of multiple lineages of pangolin coronavirus and their similarity to SARS-CoV2 suggests that pangolins should be considered as possible hosts in the emergence of novel coronaviruses and should be removed from wet markets to prevent zoonotic transmission, said Ved Kumar, a former wildlife conservationist with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), and founder of Maaty Biodiversity Conservation & Societal Research Organization.

In their study, published in the journal *Forensic Science International: Reports*, Kumar and his team described the hotspots for pangolin trafficking in India. Based on their research, between 2003 and 2014, states in Northeast India like Assam, Manipur, and Meghalaya were the hotspots for pangolin poaching in the country. Between 2014 and 2018 most of the cases were reported from central, northern, and eastern Indian states where Maharashtra and Uttarakhand reported the second highest position with 12 per cent of overall seizures. (Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXVI, No. 1 and Vol. XXV, No. 1).

Based on earlier studies from 2011 to 2013, analysing 51 pangolin seizures reported all over India, the scientists said that 42 of them were made from the Northeastern states of India. Assessing another report of more than 91 pangolin seizures made between 2009–2017, they said that the states of Manipur and Tamil Nadu have had the highest number of documented confiscations.

Over the last decade 119 pangolin seizures were recorded and it is estimated that 7,500 individuals perished in a decade. While the northeast has been a trade hotspot, current trends seem to suggest the poaching is moving towards southern and northern India. In the current scenario, Tamil Nadu and Uttarakhand are the hotspots of pangolin poaching.

According to the scientists, the poached animals are transported by traffickers into China and Myanmar using road and postal services. In southern India traders purchase the pangolin body parts from the local poachers,

transport them via road in trucks and other heavy vehicles to West Bengal, Assam, Nagaland and eventually into China via Myanmar.

It is believed in China that the pangolin's various body parts, especially their scales, and also its fetuses, blood, bones and claws have healing properties in traditional medicines. The meat is also considered a delicacy and a high source of protein. Its consumption is also a symbol of status.

Source: 'Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand emerging as hotspots for pangolin trafficking in India, researchers warn', www.economictimes.indiatimes.com, 09/04/2020.

WII's wildlife app to collect data during lockdown

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has launched an app called 'Lockdown Wildlife Tracker' to collect data of wildlife movement through human habitation during the coronavirus lockdown period and help in wildlife conservation and management in the long run.

The important features of the application include recording wildlife sightings anytime and from anywhere, uploading sightings with photographs, quick entry tools making the recording experience short and simple and GPS enabled entries of all sightings.

Once the lockdown is lifted, WII will share the data with the respective states and shall also come out with detailed state specific reports in addition to a national one.

Source: Suparna Roy. 'Now, an app to track wildlife straying outside habitats during lockdown', www.hindustantimes.com, 18/04/2020.

MoEFCC coronavirus related advisory to restrict movement around PAs

The Union Ministry of Environment Forest & Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued an advisory to restrict the movement of people around

protected areas across the country after a tiger tested positive for coronavirus at Bronx Zoo in New York in the United States of America.

The four-year-old tiger named Nadia and six other tigers and lions at the zoo that also took ill are believed to have been infected by a zoo employee who wasn't yet showing symptoms. The zoo was closed to the public from March 16 onwards amidst the pandemic.

The MoEFCC advisory has urged many precautions including highlighting immediate preventive steps to be taken to stop the spread of the virus among wildlife, reducing human-wildlife interface, setting up of a task force of veterinary doctors, biologists, and field managers, creating a 24x7 reporting mechanism, enhancing disease surveillance and reporting action taken to the ministry.

Forest rights activists, however, wrote to Union ministers Prakash Javadekar and Arjun Munda, flagging the concern that the advisory can be misused to restrict the access of tribal and nomadic communities to natural resources. Forest and tribal rights groups, including the Van Panchayat Sangharsh Morcha, the All India Union of Forest Working People and the Adivasi Jan Van Adhikar Manch, urged that the advisory be re-issued with clarifications that it should not be implemented to restrict customary and legal rights of use and access of the local communities living in and around protected areas.

Source: Jayashree Nandi. 'COVID-19: Govt restricts movement of people around national parks', www.hindustantimes.com, 06/04/2020. 'Centre's advisory to prevent animal-human transmission can be misused to evict tribals: Activists', www.outlookindia.com, 17/04/2020.

ASSAM

FD issues guidelines to sensitise people towards freely roaming animals during lockdown

The Assam Forest Department (FD) issued guidelines in the first week of April to sensitise

the public about wild animals that they might come across during the lockdown. The advisory appeared in all local papers in the state with an appeal to the public to cooperate with the authorities and also listing out a set of dos and don'ts. 'Don't take a selfie with the wild animal'; 'don't go too close to the wild animal' and 'don't make noise near the wild animal', were some of the instructions in the said list.

While wild animals venturing into human habitation is not a new phenomenon in Assam, forest officials noted that the lockdown had resulted in an increase in the frequency of sightings and the distances that the animals were covering. On March 24, for example, a rhino from the Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary was found in Khetri in Sonapur 25 km away. Usually they come out to Maloibari Pothaar, right next to Pobitora, but this time, probably because of lack of villagers/sounds of cars, it walked much further. The animal was located almost three days later and brought back to the sanctuary.

In another incident in the last week of March, a leopard was killed by the authorities after it attacked a member of the tranquilising team and a BSF jawan in a village in Jorhat district. In Dibrugarh's Tingkhong, two juvenile leopards died on March 30. Though it is common for leopards to venture into villages, young ten-month old leopards are generally not seen. A flock of Whistling teals were similarly seen in Dighalipukhuri Lake in an area of Guwahati that is otherwise buzzing with human activity.

Source: Tora Agarwala. 'No selfies with animals: Why lockdown is forcing Assam Forest Dept to issue new advisories', www.indianexpress.com, 04/04/2020.

GUJARAT

FD taking precautions to avoid transmission of coronavirus in lions

After a tiger at the Bronx Zoo in New York tested positive for the coronavirus, the Gujarat Forest Department (FD) sounded a high alert with regard to the disease spreading in Asiatic

lions. Wildlife experts and officials working on lion conservation in and around Gir pointed out that while the exact cause of the recent deaths of 8-12 lions in Dhari was not known, they were certain it was because of some disease.

A forest official noted, however, that the chances of lions in Gujarat being infected with the coronavirus were very slim as they live in the wild, unlike the tiger at the Bronx Zoo. Further, there was little scope for any close encounter between humans and the lions.

The deaths of as many as 29 lions due to tick-borne babesiosis and the canine distemper virus in two months in 2018 had become a major concern for the authorities and wildlife experts here (*PA Update* Vol. XXV, No. 1).

Source: 'Gujarat: Lions monitored by forest department',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
07/04/2020.

HARYANA

State wildlife department steps up vigilance

In orders passed in the second week of April, the Haryana Wildlife Department issued instructions to all districts, particularly those with sensitive wildlife habitats, to increase anti-poaching surveillance in wake of the coronavirus related lockdown. Officials were also asked to keep a close eye on the health and behaviour of captive animals, particularly apex carnivores, in view of the reports of the New York Bronx Zoo tiger testing positive for the virus.

No case of poaching was reported in Haryana in the first two weeks of the lockdown, however.

Source: Prayag Arora-Desai. 'Wildlife department to step up anti-poaching surveillance during lockdown',
www.hindustantimes.com, 09/04/2020.

KERALA

Human-animal conflict reduces during lockdown

Data compiled by the Kerala Forest Department (FD) suggests that human-animal conflict has declined during the coronavirus lockdown in many forest divisions in Kerala. Though the data collected before and after the lockdown is not for the same duration, the declining trend is perceptible.

While the number of incidents involving conflict in the high range circle comprising Munnar, Marayoor and Kottayam was 60 from March 1 to 23, it dipped to 12 during the first phase of the lockdown from March 24 to April 2. Also, the number of incidents in wildlife north circle, Palakkad comprising Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary and other divisions declined from 141 in the pre-lockdown period to 57 after lockdown began. In the Palakkad circle it dipped from 91 to 35.

Forest officials have pointed out that the reduction in the number of incidents could be due to the fact that animals weren't disturbed by people who are indoors. Earlier, it was noted, the mere presence of wild animals near human habitations was reported as conflict. From the data collected, merely seeing an animal or encountering it is not being reported as a conflict during lockdown.

Source: 'Man-animal conflict rates plummet',
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
08/04/2020.

MAHARASHTRA

Increase in frequency of leopard sightings, other animals, in Aarey colony, SGNP, other PAs

An increase was reported in the frequency of leopard sightings in the Aarey Milk Colony adjoining the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) in the first two weeks of the coronavirus related lockdown starting March end. A spike was also noted in the number of

sambar, spotted deer and a host of primates across SGNP.

According to the Maharashtra Forest Department (FD), sightings of leopards in Aarey went up from an average of two a week, to pictures being taken by the camera traps daily during this period. Images captured included many of cubs as well from different locations in Aarey. This type of movement has not been observed before by any of the four camera traps in the area. The 16 sq. km Aarey Colony has a resident population of six to seven leopards including cubs, as well as a transient population moving from SGNP. Additional principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife) Sunil Limaye said that a similar increase in observations was recorded in Karnala and Tansa Wildlife Sanctuaries as well.

In another related development captive big cats in SGNP's safari section, which were being fed chicken during the first week of the lockdown, will be given frozen buffalo meat as the Deonar abattoir agreed to supply the meat for the two months starting April 4 onwards. The meat was originally meant for export purposes, which has been put on hold due to the lockdown.

Source: Badri Chatterjee. 'Rapid increase in leopard movement in Aarey Colony: Forest department', www.hindustantimes.com, 10/04/2020.

PUNJAB

Gharials, dolphins flourish in Beas CR, Harike WLS following COVID-19 lockdown

The Punjab Wildlife Department has said that the long COVID-19 lockdown has come as a boon to river dolphins and gharials in areas like the Harike Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) and Beas Conservation Reserve (CR), thanks to improved water quality due to reduced human activity and industrial pollution.

With a clean, fast flowing river now full of fish, the lockdown has turned the Beas CR - a 185-km stretch of the Beas River- into a perfect habitat for the gharials, which were re-introduced in the river over two years ago. The

water quality of the Beas has considerably improved in the last few weeks and the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB) has removed the river from polluted category after a recent survey. Dolphins too have been spotted at distances of 50 km from areas they are regularly sighted.

Ground reports shared by the teams of the wildlife department and 'Beas Mitars'- a network of riparian communities along the reserve revealed that prey intake of the gharials has increased due to availability of aquatic life like fish in abundance. This has emerged as a heartening sign particularly in light of the molasses leak incident in 2018, which had led to mass mortality of numerous species of fish (*PA Update* Vol. XXV, Nos. 6 & 1; and Vol. XXIV, Nos. 3 & 1). The river dolphins too were being sighted more often in Gharka and Karmowala villages falling in Tarn Taran district and occasionally in Harike WLS as well.

Gharials are being regularly spotted basking on the mid-channel islands of the Beas CR and about 25 gharials on an average have been spotted per sighting at different location. Encouraged by these reports the wildlife department has decided to release more gharial hatchlings in winter.

Dr Kuldeep Kumar Lomis, principal chief conservator of forests, wildlife and chief wildlife warden of Punjab, said that the gharials are doing well in the reserve and are being regularly monitored. He added that the Beas Mitars and teams of the department have helped in gathering river-related information and quick field action amidst COVID-19 related restrictions in the state. The department is planning to further augment staff strength and infrastructure for the reserve along with regular patrolling and enforcement.

Source: Vinod Kumar. 'With Beas pollution down, rare Indus river dolphins venturing out', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 06/05/2020.

Vinod Kumar. 'Highly sensitive to pollution, gharials flourish in Beas in COVID-19 lockdown', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 13/05/2020.

RAJASTHAN

Spike in poaching in Western Rajasthan during COVID-19 lockdown: FD, activists

Officials of the Rajasthan Forest Department and activists highlight that there has been a rise in poaching of wild animals and birds in western Rajasthan during the COVID-19 lockdown. They have recorded at least 30 cases of killing of animals, including chinkara and the peacock during this period. Demand for meat and loss of daily wages are among the main reasons credited for this spike in wildlife poaching.

Eight to ten cases of poaching were reported from Nagaur and six from Jodhpur with similar reports coming in from Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Pali as well.

One of the reasons for the spike in poaching of wildlife, according to members of the local Bishnoi community is the surge in demand for meat in the general populace during the lockdown.

Source: Azera Parveen Rahman. 'Rajasthan sees spike in wildlife poaching during COVID-19 lockdown', www.india.mongabay.com, 20/05/2020.

UTTARAKHAND

Corbett TR builds isolation wards for animals, takes other steps

Alerted by the National Tiger Conservation Authority after the coronavirus infection was detected in a tiger in the United States of America, the Corbett Tiger Reserve (TR) management has built one isolation ward each for animals, especially domestic elephants, in Bijrani and Kalagarh.

Pet elephants and guard dogs are believed to be more at risk of infection as they go out in the forest to patrol with their handlers. Therefore, unnecessary visits to the 17 pet elephants in the reserve was banned. A ban was also imposed on mahouts visiting their family members. The elephant camp was sanitized and minerals and vitamins were being given to increase the immunity of elephants and guard dogs.

Source: 'Isolation wards created for elephants at Corbett National Park', www.uttarakhandnewsnetwork.com, 09/04/2020.

Human-elephant conflict reduces near Corbett TR in lockdown period

The reduction of vehicular traffic around the Corbett Tiger Reserve (TR) on account of the coronavirus related lockdown is said to have significantly reduced incidents of human-elephant conflict here. Wildlife experts said this was on account of the fact that elephants can now cross roads easily without running into traffic or human beings. Villagers meanwhile noted that they didn't even realise when an elephant passes through a corridor without any disturbance to human settlements.

According to the chief conservator of forests, western circle, the reduced human pressures have helped in the reduction of conflict. Also, the forest department (FD) is continuously monitoring the whole landscape to see for changes in the behaviour of animals in pre- and post-lockdown periods. The data is being collected with camera traps at different locations on the national highway that cuts through the Corbett landscape to study conflict cases. The traps are also helping the FD to keep an eye on anti-social elements trying to enter the forests during the lockdown.

The elephants regularly create a commotion when they have to cross the highway to reach the Kosi River. The crossings often bring them in conflict with human beings and lead to elephants attacking vehicles. There have been several instances when tourists have fled from their vehicles to save their lives. Last November, a wild elephant killed a 52-year-old man after pulling him out of a bus near the reserve in Mandal forest range in Nainital district. Elephants sometimes also attack vehicles for food items on the 25 km road stretch in the Ramnagar area near the reserve.

Source: Suparna Roy. 'Man-elephant conflict falls sharply around Corbett as COVID-19 lockdown stops traffic', www.hindustantimes.com, 14/04/2020.

UTTAR PRADESH

FD issues instructions in view of the coronavirus pandemic

Following guidelines issued by the Centre to ensure the well-being of both forest staff and wildlife in view of the coronavirus pandemic, the Uttar Pradesh Forest Department (FD) issued instructions to its staff in the first week of April to wear masks and observe proper sanitisation before entering the protected areas, to undergo health check-ups to ensure that they are free of the infection before interacting with villagers living around the forests and also for villagers to avoid routes that go through the forests.

In order to monitor health of the carnivores, the FD was told to keep an eye on big cats with the help of camera traps. The guidelines were to be followed if any animal was seen to display symptoms of the viral infection and in the case of a carnivore death in the forest, the samples were to be collected and sent for tests.

The Dudhwa Tiger Reserve authorities had in response restricted the movement of villagers in the forest area and NGOs like the World Wide Fund for Nature and Wildlife Trust of India that provide regular support to foresters, were also advised to follow the guidelines.

Lucknow zoo too has created a quarantine ward for the animals in the zoo.

Source: Kanwardeep Singh. 'COVID-19 scare: UP forest dept to monitor wildlife', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 08/04/2020.

WEST BENGAL

Increased tiger sightings in the Sunderbans during lockdown

Forest officials have reported an increase in tiger sightings in the Sunderbans during the lockdown period. These were said to have doubled from not more than two in a week to a

sighting being reported on five, sometimes to six days in the week. On some days, reports of multiple tiger sightings from different areas of the tiger reserve (TR) were also received. Patrolling using boats was also intensified in the delta to look out for tigers that show signs of COVID-19.

More than two lakh tourists, hundreds of honey collectors and fishermen enter the Sunderban TR every year with permits. But because of the threat of coronavirus, entry of visitors to Sunderban and other protected areas in West Bengal was suspended from March 17.

Source: Joydeep Thakur. 'Tiger sightings increase in the Sunderban with lockdown but no tourists to see them', www.hindustantimes.com, 13/04/2020.



Google-group for the PA Update

Readers who would like to regularly receive the electronic version of the *PA Update* can do so by to this mailing list by visiting:

<https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/paupdate>

FROM THE ARCHIVES - 10 years ago
PA Update 85, June 2010

ASSAM

Kaziranga NP gets record number of tourists

The Kaziranga National Park was visited by a record 1,12,844 tourists in 2009-10. This included nearly 6000 foreign visitors. Tourism revenue collected during the year was almost Rs. 122 lakhs.

The park had recorded 73,716 tourists in 2006-07, 59,746 tourists in 2007-08 and 1,06,051 tourists in 2008-09.

Source: 'Tourist record at KNP this year', *The Sentinel*, 01/05/10

UTTAR PRADESH

Swamp deer habitat in Dudhwa TR threatened due to changing course of River Sharda

Jhadi Taal, a critical refuge of the swamp deer, is under threat of submergence due to the changing course of River Sharda. The river that was about 4.8 kms from the habitat of the deer six decades ago is said to have now moved to less than a kilometer away.

Spread over about 200 sq km, Jhadi Taal is a marshy grassland on the banks of the river and is surrounded by sal forests of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve. It is home to an estimated 1500 deer and a study by the Wildlife Institute of India has suggested that this shifting of the river course presents a serious threat to the animals.

High run-off and siltation rates have been observed in the river during the last 40 years. This has occurred, primarily, due to massive conversion of forest to agricultural land for resettlement of people in Nepal in the upper reaches during the 1960s and 1970s and river engineering works. These changes in land use, have in turn, caused frequent and sudden changes in the river course and resulted in the

river channel coming closer to the habitat of the deer.

Source: 'River threatens Swamp deers' habitat in UP', *Deccan Herald*, 24/03/10

UTTARAKHAND

MoEF concerned over growing number of resorts around Corbett TR

The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has reportedly expressed concern over the growing number of tourist resorts around the Corbett Tiger Reserve.

Minister, Mr. Jairam Ramesh too has expressed his concern regarding the influence of the land mafia near the reserve, something he believes could be an important reason for tiger deaths and rise in cases of man-animal conflict. In 1991 there were only six such resorts around the reserve, but at present there are 74 (also see *PA Update* Vol XVI, No. 1).

The Minister is also reported to have written a letter to the Uttarakhand Chief Minister Ramesh Pokhriyal asking him not to permit any more resorts around Corbett. He has also asked the state government to notify the buffer area of the reserve so that people living in them can be compensated if their cattle are killed or crops destroyed by wild animals.

Source: 'No more resorts near Corbett: Jairam Ramesh' 23/03/10, www.wildlifewatch.in





खंड १, अंक १

एप्रिल २०२० (क्र.१)

अनुक्रमणिका

या नव्या बातमीपत्राविषयी...	३	नांदुरमधमेश्वर वन्यजीव अभयारण्य	९
संपादकीय		नांदुरमधमेश्वर राज्यातील पहिले 'रामसर' स्थळ	
नुसती हिरवाईची टक्केवारी; वन्यजीवनाचे चित्र धूसर	४	वर्धापनदिनी पक्षीगणनेत १७,६०७ पक्ष्यांची नोंद	
संरक्षित क्षेत्रातील बातम्या		'रामसर' दर्जांमुळे वन विभागाची जबाबदारी वाढली	
<u>चांदोली राष्ट्रीय उद्यान</u>	४	पेंच व्याघ्र प्रकल्प	१०
पवनचकत्यांच्या खांबांवर कॅमेरे लावून जंगलावर नजर		चौकशीचा ससेमिरा चुकवण्यासाठी सीमेपलीकडे टाकला	
<u>टिपेश्वर अभयारण्य</u>	५	वाधिणीचा मृतदेह	
प्रभावी व्यवस्थापन क्रमवारीत टिपेश्वर सहाय्या स्थानी		बोर व्याघ्र प्रकल्प	११
हदवाढ विचाराधीन; लगतच्या गावांमध्ये वाघाची भीती		वन कर्मचारी व स्थानिक ग्रामस्थांचा अभ्यासदौरा	
<u>टिपेश्वर अभयारण्य/ज्ञानगंगा अभयारण्य</u>	६	मेळघाट व्याघ्र प्रकल्प	११
पाच महिन्यांत वाघाचा टिपेश्वर ते ज्ञानगंगा प्रवास		सागाच्या दीडदोनशे वृक्षांची बेकायदा तोड	
<u>ताडोबा अंधारी व्याघ्र प्रकल्प</u>	६	'मालूर फॉरेस्ट' ग्रामस्थांचा पुनर्वसनाला नकार	
अतिक्रमणाबाबत हमीपत्राच्या अटीला विरोध		<u>राधानगरी (दाजीपूर) अभयारण्य</u>	१२
ताडोबातून गोरेवाड्यात नेलेला बछडा आजारी		दाजीपूरच्या जंगलात वाघाटीचे दर्शन	
<u>ताडोबा अंधारी व्याघ्र प्रकल्प/उमरेड कऱ्हांडला अभयारण्य</u>	७	लोणार अभयारण्य	१२
ताडोबातील वाघ ८० किलोमीटरचा प्रवास करून उमरेड		लोणार विवरावर रोहित पक्ष्याचे दर्शन	
कऱ्हांडला अभयारण्यात		<u>संजय गांधी राष्ट्रीय उद्यान</u>	१२
<u>तुंगेश्वर वन्यजीव अभयारण्य</u>	७	'मेट्रो कारशेड'साठी आरे हाच पर्याय योग्य'	
अभयारण्यात वेगाने दुचाकी चालवणाऱ्या दहा जणांना अटक;		आरे वसाहतीत आंतरराष्ट्रीय दर्जाचे मत्स्यालय	
दोघांचा शोध सुरू		येऊर हिल्स परिसरात रात्री क्रिकेट सामन्यावर बंदी	
मुंबईनजीकच्या जंगलांना हवामान बदलापेक्षा मानवनिर्मित		राज्यव्यापी बातम्या	
वणव्यांचा धोका जास्त		जनुकीय चाचणीसाठी महाराष्ट्राचा वन विभाग स्वतःची	
<u>नवेगाव नागझिरा व्याघ्र प्रकल्प</u>	८	प्रयोगशाळा उभारणार	१३
कोका अभयारण्यातून रात्रीची वाहतूक बंद		११ वर्षांत चार लाख हेक्टर जंगल भस्मसात	१४
अपुन्या लिंगगुणोत्तरामुळे नवेगाव नागझिर्यात वाघांच्या		वन्य पशूंसाठी पाळीव पशुंचे डॉक्टर; वन विभाग टीकेचा	
संख्यावाढीला मर्यादा		धनी	१४

PERSPECTIVE

Communicating conservation in these difficult times

FERN is a small Thane/Mumbai based environmental NGO that has for the last five years been conducting an annual Environment Lecture Series (ELS) for the citizens of Thane. Conducted for a week following Diwali every year, the lectures get an average attendance of about 80 and the minimum cost we incur for the same is Rs. 50,000. The funding comes from a few donors and from the funds that we manage to save from our paid programs over the year.

We have been very fortunate that many experts have spoken at our ELS. It has, however, been a challenge for many of them to find the time to travel to Thane and deliver a lecture. We have also been requested by many to upload videos of the lectures on YouTube and similar platforms for a wider outreach. While we have been considering this for the last two years, the cost of professional recording has been beyond our budgets and uploading an amateur recording would mean doing injustice to the speakers' content. Both these things had been holding us back.

The COVID-19 related lockdown starting March presented us with a new challenge as well as a new opportunity: a lot of the experts, whom we were keen to invite in person but were hesitant due to the distance or their availability, have been relatively free as compared to their usual schedules. We suddenly lost our inhibitions and stopped worrying about the production quality of the videos that we were planning to upload to YouTube. We knew the content and the message was important and it was reaching a far greater audience than our annual ELS.

Over the last two months we have recorded 10 interviews (*Paryavaranavar Bolu Kahi*) and an additional 10 stories of successful conservation efforts (Tales of Conservation) and uploaded them to FERN's YouTube channel (https://www.youtube.com/fern_thane).

These have covered recent topics such as the supreme court's judgement on

Panchgani Tableland in Feb 2020, declaration of Marine Protected Area at Lakshadweep in March 2020 and the very interesting story of tiger re-introduction to the Panna Tiger Reserve a decade ago.

Doing this presented its own challenges. Internet connectivity and bandwidth was one, the discomfort with the technology among speakers and audiences was another. We also had to learn video editing from scratch. Yet we have had a good time doing this, have received positive feedback and encouragement from hundreds of viewers and these videos will be available on YouTube for posterity.

While we embraced this medium due to the limitations enforced by the current situation, we now believe that even after we return to normalcy, it will be prudent to have a combination of the old way of delivering lectures and the new way of listening to them.

- Seema Hardikar & Subodh Khanolkar are the founder members of FERN.

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