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Protected Area Update

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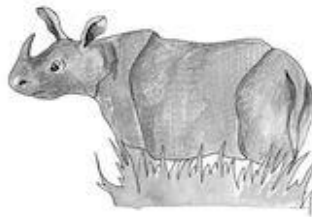
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EDITORIAL

Looking beyond charismatic mega-fauna?

Of the 30 odd news stories that appear in this issue of the PA Update, more than two-thirds (20) are about elephants, tigers and/or tiger reserves. This is a small sample, but raises a set of questions that we've asked in the PA Update multiple times before. Why is it that wildlife related reporting in India is focussed so much on only a certain set of issues, landscapes and species?

Is it, perhaps, a reflection of the priorities of the conservation community itself as much as it is a function of the nature of the media? Is this the news that sells, or are these the only developments that are accessible to the media? Does the issue become an important one because the media reports it, or is it the case that the media only reports on issues that are important in any case? This has been a long standing conundrum in the world of media and one that might not have an easy resolution

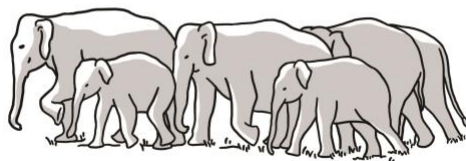
The situation has, if anything, only become more complex in recent years. There would be no denying, for instance, that there has been a much wider-spreading out of wildlife and conservation research and interest. A lot more work is happening today on a diversity of species and issues than has ever happened before. Another big game-changer has been the social media revolution that has come with its complex set of opportunities and challenges. Avenues for communication have grown multi-fold even as traditional gate keeping structures that decided what should be published as news are not relevant any more. There is also no denying that there is a lot more wildlife news these days than one newsletter like the PA Update can do justice to. And yet the impression does not go away that the information we get is of a particular type.

It does need to be recognised however that even these 20 stories show a huge diversity where the issues of conservation are

concerned. They certainly help shine a light on important challenges whether is the continued issue of human-tiger conflict, or the expanding range of elephant movement or indeed the developmental and infrastructure related threats to these forests.

Is it then a question of volume of media reporting? Is more news better, because it will by a particular logic also mean a wider and more diverse coverage? Or is it important that special efforts be made to move away from the star species and star protected areas? Should the conservation community work with established media outlets to inform and build their capacity? Are alternative channels a better option (resources and capacity will still be an issue) or would it be better that researchers and conservationists develop their own skills as communicators and journalists?

Clear, definitive answers might not be easily forthcoming, but the questions are important to ask. Understanding the media and understanding how it operates is important because what the general public knows about conservation (or any other issue) is primarily what the media tells us.



This issue of the PA Update is also atypical because we carry obituaries in memory of three exceptional conservationists that left us in the last three months. Manoj Misra, Satish Bhaskar and Lt Gen SC Sardeshpande were remarkable men who made sterling contributions to the field of conservation. We hope they rest in peace and express our deep condolences to their families and friends.

ANDHRA PRADESH

Four elephants electrocuted in Parvathipuram-Manyam district; herd probably from Odisha



Four wild elephants were electrocuted in the early hours on May 12 in Katragadda village under Bhamini Mandal in Parvathipuram-Manyam district.

The village is located near the State's border with Odisha. The elephants were part of a six-member herd comprising two males and four females. The other two elephants are suspected to have been injured and withdrawn into the forest. The herd is said to have recently entered the area from neighbouring Odisha.

Villagers found the four elephants lying dead close to an unprotected electric transformer, which was installed near a water body in the area. They alerted the police and forest department officials who rushed to the village.

Andhra Pradesh does not have a sizable elephant population. For nearly 200 years until the 1980s there was no documented presence of wild elephants in the State. In the past few decades, however, the border regions have frequently seen elephant herds migrating from neighbouring Odisha, Jharkhand, and Tamil Nadu, especially in summer. This has resulted in an increase in human-animal conflict as well (see accompanying story).

In April, three cows were killed and a car was crushed by an elephant in Bandavalasa village of Komarada Mandal in Parvathipuram-Manyam district. Two persons were also killed in an elephant attack in

Krishnagiri forest area near the Chittoor-Tamil Nadu border in Kuppam mandal of Chittoor district (*PA Update* Vol. XXV, No. 4).

Source: Bobins Abraham. 'Tragic! herd of four elephants die of electrocution in Andhra Pradesh,' www.indiatimes.com, 12/05/2023. Pavitra Bhashyam. 'Andhra Pradesh: 4 elephants die from electrocution in Parvathipuram,' www.news9live.com, 12/05/2023.

State to ensure safe passage for elephants moving in & out from neighbouring states

The Andhra Pradesh (AP) Government is initiating several steps to ensure the safe passage of elephants that move in from Odisha, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu to AP on a regular basis. The government plans to employ elephant trackers to keep a tab on elephant movement round-the-clock. A plan is also in the offing to provide relief to farmers for the loss of crops and to extend financial assistance in case of death of people due to elephant attacks. The government would ensure casual employment to one of the bereaved family members, giving them work as elephant trackers. The forest department aims to develop elephant-holding areas so that they can stay put in such areas for some time or keep them in zoos.

Forest authorities said that there used to be just 20 elephants in AP in the 1980s but their number has gone up to nearly 175 now. They are found mainly in the Seshachalam Biosphere, Sri Venkateswara National Park, Rayala Elephant Reserve and the Koundinya Wildlife Sanctuary.

With the recent death of three elephants and a calf in the north Andhra region, the AP forest authorities started deploying more animal trackers to keep a watch on them and, also to drive them back to the nearby forests from agricultural fields. Authorities confirmed that this would be done in an appropriate manner and firecrackers would not

be used. Officials say they are also against the erection of barriers to curtail the elephant movement.

In compliance with the advice of the Project Elephant Steering Committee of the Wildlife Institute of India and also taking note of the observations of the Supreme Court, the AP forest authorities aim to develop an elephant corridor. This would be done to ensure that elephants are not forcibly driven back to the places of their origin and to facilitate their passage from place to place.

Source: Sampat G Samaritan. 'AP plans steps to ensure safe passage of elephants,' www.deccanchronicle.com, 15/05/2023.

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

Dibang WLS to get TR tag

The Union environment ministry will soon notify the Dibang Tiger Reserve (TR). In a programme on March 24 organized to mark 50 years of Project Tiger, National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) chief, SP Yadav said that there are 53 TRs in the country and many more including Guru Ghasidas in Chhattisgarh and Dibang Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Arunachal Pradesh will be added to the list soon.

A preliminary rapid survey was carried out in Dibang WLS by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in collaboration with NTCA in 2013-14. The survey had confirmed the presence of tigers, and sizable diversity and abundance of prey populations here. This preliminary study was carried out after the rescue of tiger cubs from Angrim Valley in December 2012. The all-India tiger estimation exercise in 2018 revealed the presence of two adult tigers here.

Several hydropower projects are planned in the Dibang Sub Basin of the Brahmaputra Valley including the 3097 MW Etalin Hydropower Project in Dibang Valley, near the Dibang WLS. The project is facing

stiff opposition from indigenous people. The TR tag for Dibang makes it less likely that the Etalin hydropower project will be developed in the way it was originally envisaged. The proposal involved diversion of 1165.66 ha of forest land and felling of over 2.8 lakh trees in dense subtropical, evergreen, broadleaf and subtropical rainforest.

However, the indigenous Idu Mishmi people, who are opposed to the hydropower project are now worried that notifying Dibang a TR will restrict their access to the TR area. An environmentalist and member of Idu Mishmi community said that there is no need to declare Dibang TR as local people conserve tigers and other biodiversity. He also suggested studying the benefits of declaring Namdapha and Kamlang as TRs before considering notifying Dibang.

Researcher Ambika Aiyadurai in her 2016 research paper titled 'Tigers are Our Brothers': Understanding Human-Nature Relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India' which has been cited by NTCA in its 2018 tiger estimation report, said that Mishmi people claim tigers to be their brothers and take credit for tiger protection as they observe taboos against hunting tigers.

Source: Jayashree N. 'Centre likely to soon notify Dibang tiger reserve,' www.hindustantimes.com, 29/03/2023.

ASSAM

NGO involves local communities to form Elephant Conservation Network

Aaranyak, an NGO based in Northeast India, has formed a network of local communities called Elephant Conservation Network (ECN) in human-elephant conflict (HEC) hotspots in Assam. The network's objective is to facilitate an early warning system comprising local villagers who will monitor elephant movement in their vicinity and send out alarms. Seven ECN groups involving 130 people have been

formed in the districts of Goalpara, Baksa and Udalguri.

Teams from Aaranyak conduct formal workshops and informal discussion to build capacity of the ECN members. They are taught about elephant ecology and behaviour, and effective mitigation measures that will help them manage conflict in their areas to facilitate coexistence. The respective ECN members are connected through WhatsApp groups, wherein they share information about elephant presence. Besides, ECN members help the NGO in distribution of mitigation tools, such as rechargeable spotlights, monitoring and recording HEC incidents in the villages.

The intensity and frequency of HEC incidents in Assam have increased over time. About 800 human beings and about 500 wild elephants were killed during 2011-2021 in Assam while 82 wild elephants died as a result of HEC in the year 2022.

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 1)

Source: 'ECN for the community by the community to help HEC mitigation,' www.theshillongtimes.com, 06/04/2023.

RTI query reveals misuse of tiger conservation funds; official removed from CWLW post



Mahendra Kumar Yadava, the principal chief conservator of forest (PCCF) and the head of forest forces, has been removed as the chief wildlife warden (CWLW) after a right to information (RTI) query revealed misuse of funds meant for conservation of tigers.

Responding to an RTI query filed by Assam-based activist Rohit Choudhary, the Kaziranga field director's office informed that around Rs. 1.1 crore were spent on former President Ram Nath Kovind's visit to the Kaziranga National Park in February 2022. The money was spent from a corpus meant to be used for the conservation of tigers.

Sandeep Kumar, PCCF (wildlife and biodiversity) was appointed the new CWLW on 1st April.

Source: Saraswat Kashyap. 'Tiger funds used for ex-President's visit, Assam forest officer removed,' www.indiatoday.in, 04/04/2023.

CHHATTISGARH

Tigress who killed two & injured one in Surajpur district captured

A tigress that had killed two men and injured another in a village in Surajpur district was captured on March 28, informed the State's principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife and biodiversity conservation).

It is believed that the tigress entered Surajpur district from the Guru Ghasidas National Park in the neighbouring Koriya district. On March 27, two villagers were killed and another injured after they were attacked by the tigress near Kalamanchan village in Odgi development block, leading to protests by locals demanding immediate capture of the tigress. A team of forest personnel, including veterinarians, launched an operation to capture the big cat on March 28.

The tigress, aged around six years, was captured on the same day and kept in a cage. She had sustained injuries on her forehead after one of the three villagers she killed attacked her with an axe while trying to save himself. Veterinarians administered preliminary treatment to the animal, which will be shifted to a zoo in Raipur.

Source: ‘Tigress that killed 2 men in Surajpur district captured after five-hour operation,’ www.telegraphindia.com, 28/03/2023.

KARNATAKA

Forest guards in Bhimgad WLS being made scapegoats: forest officials

Days after two forest guards of the Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) were suspended for not being able to check encroachments and tree felling, serving forest officials of different divisions and a former forest officer questioned why senior officials are not held responsible in such cases.

The forest department (FD) had on May 6 apprehended five accused after 26 acres forest land was encroached in the Bhimgad WLS in Belagavi district’s Amagaon village. The FD had also suspended two forest guards.

Reacting to the suspension of the forest guards, a serving forest guard of Dharwad division asked why no action was taken against the range forest officer (RFO) as he is equally responsible for failing to stop such a massive encroachment and tree felling. In such a terrain, it is not possible to encroach such a huge area in just a few days and it must have taken months, pointed out the forest guard. Another forest guard posted in Shivamogga said that protecting the integrity of forests is a responsibility also of the deputy conservator of forest (DCF) and the conservator, yet, it is the guards who are in the line of fire and face the wrath of politicians and the local villagers.

In September 2022, a deputy range forest officer (DRFO) was suspended in Muchandi section of the Belagavi Range for failing to stop encroachment. A senior forest official said that in the suspension order it was mentioned that during the tenure of the said DRFO in the Muchandi section, 21 encroachment cases had occurred out of which seven were detected by him. In all these seven cases, the DRFO had not mentioned the survey

number and extent of encroachment. While the RFO had issued a notice, he had not recommended action against the DRFO at that time. He should have made sure that disciplinary action is taken against the forest guard and the DRFO and the encroached land is retrieved through the eviction of the encroachers. The officer further added that the RFO, who took charge of the Muchandi section after the first one in the case, recommended action against the DRFO, but the eviction process has not been carried out. Just by issuing notices and making forest guards and the DRFOs scapegoats with actions like suspensions, the duties of senior officials do not end, said the officer.

Former principal chief conservator of forest (PCCF) BK Singh said that DCFs must be held accountable if there is illicit felling of trees and encroachments in the division. It is the responsibility of the forest guards to move in their beat and prevent illegal activities. However, the RFOs and DCFs must take up patrolling in different beats and ranges periodically. A forest guard will keep his beat free from illegal activities when he has fear of his seniors patrolling his area on foot and detecting illegal acts.

Source: Aksheev Thakur. ‘‘We are made scapegoats,’ serving forest guards of Karnataka react to action against Bhimgad counterparts,’ www.indianexpress.com, 25/05/2023.

MADHYA PRADESH

Archaeological remains discovered in Bandhavgarh NP

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has discovered a 1,500-year-old rock painting and numerous 1,800-2,000-year-old man-made waterbodies in the Bandhavgarh National Park (NP). The region was most likely part of an old trade route, ASI said, with passing traders using the rock-cut caves as shelters. Usually, rock art is found in natural caves or overhangs;

however, here the rock painting was found in a rock-cut cave. The painting is still being studied. It possibly depicts an animal, said the archaeologist.

The presence of the waterbodies built at a height and used for collecting rainwater suggests the habitation had a modern society. The waterbodies could be 1,800-2,000 years old, but evidence suggests there was some renovation 1,000 years ago, said superintending archaeologist, ASI Jabalpur circle, Shivakant Bajpai, who is supervising the explorations.

Eleven rock-cut caves have surfaced during the second phase of exploration in Tala range of Bandhavgarh. The survey started on April 1 and will continue till June 30.

In 2022, ASI had carried out extensive explorations in the same range between May 20 and June 27, discovering 26 ancient temples/relics, 26 rock-cut caves, two monasteries, two stupas, 24 inscriptions, 46 statues, 20 scattered remains and 19 water structures.

Source: Amarjeet Singh. '2,000-year-old 'modern society' unearthed in tiger reserve in Madhya Pradesh's Bandhavgarh National Park,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 05/05/2023.

Case against forest staff for destroying evidence of elephant death in Bandhavgarh TR

The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), May 18, registered a case against a forester, a forest guard and three forest watchmen under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 for destroying evidence of a wild elephant's death by burning the carcass and burying the ashes in six deep pits in November 2022. A wildlife activist had reported the matter and filed a complaint in the matter in January earlier this year.

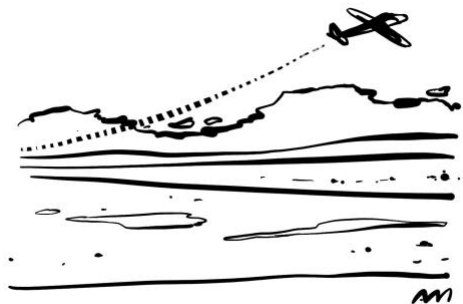
All five are staff of Madhya Pradesh (MP) Forest Department stationed at

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (TR). A WCCB officer said that the MP Special Task Force (STF) is investigating the matter. The accused are reported to have said that they found the semi-decomposed body of the elephant in Chhatwa village of Panpatha buffer zone of the TR. They got scared that action will be taken against them by higher officials for failing to prevent the death of the wild elephant and decided to destroy the evidence. An official said that the statements of the accused on why they burnt the carcass were found unsatisfactory.

According to forest officials, as many 40 elephants have come to MP from Chhattisgarh in the past three years and can be found in the reserve in Shahdol and Umaria.

Source: '5 forest staff booked for burning elephant carcass in MP,' www.hindustantimes.com, 20/05/2023.

Illegal airstrip construction inside Satpura TR; citizen files complaint



The work to extend the British-era airstrip in Pachmarhi to 1,800 m from the existing 400 m was, allegedly, started without any environment and wildlife clearances. Captain Brajesh Bharadwaj from Chhindwara, in his complaint to the National Tiger Conservation Authority, principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife), Satpura Tiger Reserve (TR) field director, Airports Authority of India and Director General of Civil Aviation, stated that the work has started near Pt. Ravishankar Bhavan on Dhupgad Road and hill slopes to extend the airstrip.

Bhardwaj is reported to have witnessed the damage during his visit to the hill station on May 19. He said that the airstrip is within one km from the core area of the reserve and falls within the buffer zone as well as the eco-sensitive zone (ESZ) of the TR. Pachmarhi is also a notified biosphere reserve (BR)

The hills surrounding the airstrip is a route to Dhupgad. The hill slopes will be cut for the runway extension, which is a violation of the ESZ notification. Planes will fly over the core area during take-off, landings, diversions etc., thus, violating Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. New airstrips with fuel bunkering and refuelling require mandatory clearances, said Bharadwaj.

The field director of the reserve confirmed receiving a complaint from Bharadwaj. He also confirmed that no wildlife permissions have been taken and that he has sought a report in the matter from the public works department.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Pachmarhi airstrip extension taken up sans env clearances,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/05/2023.

FD planning to reintroduce caracal in Ghatigaon WLS

The Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (FD) is planning to reintroduce the caracal into the forests around the Gwalior region especially, Ghatigaon Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). This species has not been sighted in the State in the last 20 years.

In 2019, forest officials had initiated a search in the Ujjain Forest circle, circulating pamphlets for caracals and seeking information from locals. However, they only received pictures of jungle cats and not caracals.

With no sightings of caracals in and around the Ujjain district, officials have decided to look for them in the Chambal region. Also, they are now looking for a place

around Ghatigaon WLS to prepare an enclosure where caracals can be reintroduced. Caracals are listed as Schedule I species under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.

Source: P Naveen. 'Now, 'most wanted' caracals next on reintroduction project of Madhya Pradesh Forest Department,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 04/04/2023.

MADHYA PRADESH/RAJASTHAN

Tiger from Ranthambore reported in Kuno NP

Pugmarks discovered inside Kuno National Park (NP) on May 1 were reported by the Madhya Pradesh (MP) Forest Department (FD) to be of tiger T-136, which has come from Ranthambore Tiger Reserve. The pugmarks were detected in Basantpura area, which is in the unfenced region towards Palpur East, approximately 5 km from the cheetah enclosure in Kuno NP.

T-136 had crossed the Rajasthan border and entered Morena in MP in November 2022. The Rajasthan FD had informed its MP counterparts about its movement. After leaving Ranthambore, the tiger wandered near human settlements close to Gangapur before finally reaching the Dholpur forest close to the MP border.

The tiger had used a well frequented tiger migration corridor. In 2020, tiger T-38 had returned to Ranthambore via this route, nearly a decade after crossing the Chambal ravines and venturing into the Kuno-Palpur area. The movement of T-71, another tiger that later disappeared, was also recorded in 2012 in the corridor. Similarly, T-56 had lived in these forests before moving further to Datia in MP.

Source: 'Ranthambore tiger enters Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park, pugmarks 5km from cheetah zone', www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 02/05/2023.

MAHARASHTRA

Tigresses captured from Brahmapuri & Gadchiroli to be released in Navegaon Nagzira TR

The State wildlife wing, on May 16, captured two tigresses; one from Brahmapuri division and another from Gadchiroli. These tigresses will be relocated to Navegaon Nagzira Tiger Reserve (NNTR), informed the field director of Tadoba Andhari TR.

Also, the process of translocation of four to five tigers from the Brahmapuri division to the NNTR has begun.

The decision to relocate the tigers from Brahmapuri and some other parts of Chandrapur was taken by the then principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife) Sunil Limaye about two and a half years ago. The then chief minister Uddhav Thackeray had given the go-ahead to the plan; however, it was delayed until recently.

It is estimated that there are around 350 tigers in Maharashtra with over 200 tigers in Chandrapur district alone. As per the forest department (FD) data, a total of 10 people were killed this year in human-animal conflict. In all, 53 people were killed in attacks by tigers and leopards in the Chandrapur district in 2022 (*PA Updates* Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 6 & 2; Vol. XXVII, No. 6 and Vol. XXVI, No. 5).

The decision of relocating tigers aims at tackling the increasing conflict in Chandrapur district, while increasing at the same time the number of tigresses at the NNTR to balance the male-female ratio. Experts from the Wildlife Institute of India said that the NNTR with core area of 656 sq. km and buffer of 1,200 sq. km has a potential to host 20-25 tigers. The present tiger population here is around 8-10.

Source: '2 tigresses captured in Chandrapur to be relocated to Navegaon Nagzira,' www.hindustantimes.com, 17/05/2023.

NBWL clears limestone mining in corridor connecting Tipeswar WLS to Tadoba Andhari & Kawal TRs



The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), in its 72nd meeting held on April 25, granted clearance to limestone mining in the corridor between Tipeswar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) and Tadoba Andhari and Kawal Tiger Reserves (TRs). The Birla group's Reliance Cementation Company Private Limited (RCCPL) had proposed to mine limestone in the tiger corridor in the Mukutban forest range in Zari-Zamni tehsil of Yavatmal district. Of the mining lease spread over 572 ha, 467 ha is reserve forest in the tiger corridor.

The mining project has three components — a cement factory, limestone mine, and a captive power plant. The RCCPL received stage-I forest clearance in 2012 and stage-II clearance in 2017. However, in 2016, the approved tiger conservation plan (TCP) of Tadoba Andhari TR mentioned Zari-Jamni and Mukutban as part of the vital corridors. On October 12, 2021, the then chief minister Uddhav Thackeray constituted a committee to re-examine the mining proposal considering the threat to the tiger corridor. The committee in its report had suggested 'avoidance' as the best mitigation strategy.

The project was however cleared after the Eknath Shinde-Devendra Fadnavis's government took office.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Limestone mining project approved in tiger corridor,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/05/2023.

NBWL clears skywalk project at Chikhaldara

The 72nd meeting of the standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife recently cleared a skywalk project at Chikhaldara in Amravati district. CIDCO had proposed to use 0.9286 ha of land from the Melghat TR buffer area for the construction of a rope suspension bridge (skywalk) connecting Hurricane Point and Goreghat Point at Chikhaldara. 70% of the work on of the project entailing an expense of Rs. 25 crore has already been completed.

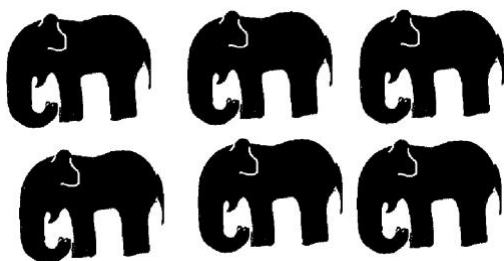
The skywalk project was cleared subject to conditions including a ban on plastic/other disposable items on the skywalk and no littering in the area around. CIDCO has been told to take suitable measures to prevent monkeys from climbing the bridge to reduce human-animal conflict.

CIDCO will deposit 2% of the amount of the project to the Melghat Tiger Conservation Foundation for wildlife management.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Limestone mining project approved in tiger corridor,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/05/2023.

ODISHA

Orissa HC stays NGT's ultimatum on notification of elephant corridors



The Orissa High Court (HC), on May 4, restrained the National Green Tribunal (NGT) from going ahead with the proceedings in which it had issued an ultimatum on notification of elephant corridors in Odisha.

The Wildlife Society of Odisha (WSO) had filed the execution application on non-compliance of NGT's order dated August 17, 2021, in which the State government was directed to notify the elephant corridors as identified by the Asian Nature Conservation Foundation and the action plan submitted by it, within a period of two months.

On April 6, NGT's East zone bench in Kolkata had warned the principal chief conservator of forest (PCCF) - wildlife and chief wildlife warden (CWLW) of Odisha that it will proceed under Section 26 of the NGT Act, 2010 if the elephant corridors in the State are not notified within a month. NGT's ultimatum assumed significance as Section 26 of the NGT Act for failure to comply prescribes severe punishment. However, the HC issued the stay order on the petition the State government had filed seeking intervention against the NGT's order.

When the petition came up for hearing on May 4, the advocate general pointed out that the NGT had issued the ultimatum even as it was very much aware that there was a public interest litigation (PIL) in the HC regarding the notification of elephant corridor. The next date of hearing on the PIL is coming on the same date (May 9) the NGT has listed the matter, said the lawyer. Taking note of it, the HC said that the court has passed a series of orders in the PIL, all of which were brought to the notice of the NGT. The HC, in an interim order, said that further proceedings in NGT in WSO's execution application shall remain stayed till the next date.

The HC further issued notices to the WSO and secretary, Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, while posting the petition for hearing along with the PIL on May 9. The latest in the matter is not known.

Source: Lalmohan Patnaik. 'Orissa HC stays NGT proceedings on elephant corridors,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 04/05/2023.

RAJASTHAN

Only tigress in Mukundra Hills TR dies; had three fully formed cubs in womb

MT-4, the only tigress in Mukundra Hills Tiger Reserve (TR), died during treatment on May 4. She had three fully formed cubs in her womb.

The 9-year-old tigress was seen chasing a herd of deer on April 27 inside the reserve. On 29 April, a couple of days later, she was spotted as being dull in movement, with possible colic pain. A team of doctors from Ranthambore and Kota carried out round-the-clock monitoring and found the tigress the next day with severe constipation. She was tranquilised on May 1 and administered enema. Doctors evacuated two pieces of fecalith. On May 4, the day she died, they evacuated another 4-5 pieces of fecalith. The monitoring team, on May 3, had reported prolapse of rectum.

On recommendation of inserting the rectum and anus into its place, a joint consultation was held with experts from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Wildlife Institute of India (WII), doctors from Jaipur, Ranthambore and Kota, after which a team of doctors tranquillized MT-4 in the morning on May 4 for the treatment. The tigress revived stopped breathing and died half an hour later. A postmortem found that the tigress was full-term pregnant with three cubs in her womb.

Terming the death of MT-4 as a major setback to MHTR and tourism in Hadouti, wildlife enthusiasts raised concerns of infections from tigers shifted to MHTR from Ranthambore. When tigers in MHTR died of disease in 2020, veterinary doctors pointed to possible infection in tigers in Ranthambore.

Forest and wildlife officers have, however, denied that infection was the reason of the death of MT-4.

Source: 'Rajasthan: Mukundra Tiger Reserve's only tigress MT-4 dies, was pregnant with 3 cubs,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 05/05/2023.

Dholpur proposed as fifth TR in State

Dholpur Tiger Reserve (TR) will be Rajasthan's fifth and the country's 53rd TR after approval from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA). The proposed Dholpur TR adjoins Ranthambore TR in Sawai Madhopur, which is the source population of the big cats.

Tigress T-117 was spotted with three cubs in the Sarmathura forest area in a camera trap in Dholpur district in mid-April. The officials informed that the tigress gave birth to three cubs, which are 15-20 days old. This is the second litter of the tigress with T-116; both of whom had moved to the Dholpur area from Ranthambore TR around two years ago.

With the increasing tiger population in Ranthambore TR, the State forest department had moved a proposal to develop the fifth TR in Rajasthan. It has proposed to develop parts of the Karauli and Dholpur forest areas adjoining Ranthambore as a TR. As per the preliminary proposal, the total TR area will be 1058 sq. km.

According to the data from forest officials, the population of tigers in the State's four TRs has increased to 113 from 59 in 2014. With 86 tigers, Ranthambore TR is the third most congested habitat of tiger in India after Corbett National Park (NP) in Uttarakhand and Kaziranga NP in Assam.

Source: Sachin Saini. 'Tigress spotted with her cubs in Rajasthan's Dholpur: Officials', www.hindustantimes.com, 15/04/2023.



TAMIL NADU

AI-based surveillance system to detect elephants on railway tracks in Madukkarai forest

The Tamil Nadu Forest Department (FD) has decided to install 12 cameras with an artificial intelligence (AI) based surveillance system to detect the movement of wild elephants near railway tracks in Madukkarai forest range of the Coimbatore division. Five cameras are to be installed along the A-line track that traverses the forest for a stretch of 1.78 km. The remaining seven would be installed along the B-line track that passes through the forest for 2.8 km. The FD has also planned to install speed guns along the two tracks to monitor the speed of trains. The State government has sanctioned Rs. 7.24 crore for the purpose.

According to the conservator of forests, Coimbatore circle, a private firm has started constructing 12 towers for the cameras and they will be ready in three months. Each tower will be 18 m to 20 m high and the AI and thermal imaging cameras will be fixed atop them. The cameras will capture the images of elephants near the track and generate alerts automatically.

The 12 cameras will be linked to a command control centre at the Chenganpallam forest checkpost, where staff would be deployed round the clock. Whenever the AI cameras generate an alert, forest personnel manning the command centre would alert the Palakkad railway division officials, who would ask loco pilots to reduce the speed of trains in the area. The speed guns along the tracks would ensure the speed limit for trains. If any train breaches the speed limit, an alert will be sent to the control room and necessary instructions will be given to the Railways.

The Railways had brought down the speed limit of passenger trains to 45 kmph between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m. and 65 kmph during the day on the two stretches. The goods trains were ordered to maintain a speed between 25 and 35 kmph on the section.

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

Source: A Subburaj. 'AI-based cameras to curb elephant deaths,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 18/05/2023.

EAC seeks alternative site analysis for Tangedco's project near Kanyakumari WLS and KMTR

An expert appraisal committee (EAC) of the Union environment ministry has deferred a hydroelectric project proposed by Tangedco inside the Kanyakumari Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) and the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve (KMTR).

Tangedco has proposed to build a 1,500 MW pumped storage hydroelectric project spread over 40.72 ha by using Kodayar dam as the upper reservoir, and Pechiparai dam as the lower reservoir. A 10.95 km tunnel will be built linking both these reservoirs to enable power generation. The total cost of the project is estimated to be Rs. 10,838 crores.

While an application seeking wildlife clearance is yet to be filed before the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), Tangedco has applied for terms of reference to conduct an environmental impact assessment. When the project came up for discussion during the EAC meeting, it was noted that the project site lies in dense forests between the two protected areas. The EAC suggested submitting the alternative site analysis on ecological aspects such as loss of forest ecosystem due to diversion of forest land/loss of biodiversity and its impacts on the productivity of the ecosystem and likely impacts of the project on tribals.

Source: SV Krishna Chaitanya. 'Centre defers proposed hydro power project inside Kalakkad tiger reserve', www.newindianexpress.com, 30/03/2023

TELANGANA

21 ha forest diversion for railway line near Kawal TR

The National Board for Wildlife (NBWL), in its 72nd meeting held recently has granted clearance to divert 21 ha of forest land to lay a new railway line in the tiger corridor connecting the Kawal Tiger Reserve (TR) in Kagaznagar division. The new line is set to run alongside the existing track from Makudi to Rechni Road railway stations in Komaram Bheem Asifabad and Mancherial districts.

The NBWL has mandated the construction of two overpasses and one underpass for animals. Railways will bear the cost of constructing cross-over tunnels beneath the proposed railway line, especially along streams at designated animal crossing zones.

The Railways will allocate Rs. 2.8 crore for developing natural grasslands, meadows, water harvesting structures, solar borewells, publicity and awareness materials, and signboards. This funding will be implemented over five years. It also includes provisions for monitoring Long-billed vultures as part of the vulture conservation programme in Kagaznagar division.

Source: U Sudhakar Reddy. 'Nat'l wildlife board nod to divert forest land in Kawal tiger corridor,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 13/05/2023.

UTTARAKHAND

More than 35 snow leopards in and around Gangotri NP

Spread over 2390 sq. km, Gangotri National Park (NP) is estimated to have between 35 and 40 snow leopards. The figure was jointly arrived at by park authorities and experts from the Wildlife Institute of India (WII). Last year, the park administration had installed a total of 40 camera traps in Kedartal, Gomukh Track,

Karchha, Chorgarh, Tirpani and Nilpani in Nelang Valley and Bhaironghati, Gartang Gali in the park area.

Park authorities said that the frequent sightings of leopards, and the capture of their photographs on mobile phones by tourists in the park, was an indication of an increase in their population.

The previous estimate in 2019-20 only indicated a figure in single digits, said the park's deputy director.

Source: Narendra Sethi. 'Encouraging rise in number of snow leopards in Uttarakhand's Gangotri National Park,' www.newindianexpress.com, 05/04/2023.

WEST BENGAL

Tiger presence recorded in Mahananda WLS after 20 years

Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) has recorded presence of tigers in camera traps for the first time in more than two decades. The last photographic record from the forest, was from 1999 when an old tiger had sneaked into the Salugara Army Camp from the sanctuary. Foresters, though, said that indirect evidences of tiger were found even in 2010.

The State chief wildlife warden (CWLW) said that the detailed tiger estimation report to be released in July is expected to have some population trend in north Bengal. Based on that the WLS authorities will decide about deploying more camera traps in the sanctuary.

Conservationists have said that tigers from Bhutan and the Greater Manas landscape are known to visit the north Bengal region. The hill region, particularly Neora Valley, has a link with Mahananda WLS through Kalimpong. Tigers from that region can come to Mahananda, informed the CWLW. The additional principal chief conservator of forest (north Bengal) said that they were not looking at these regions as potential tiger habitats. They have been focusing on conservation of lesser-

known animals in the region. However, the protection measures in last few years have yielded results and now there are tigers too.

Tiger occupied habitat has increased in the landscape here after recent photographic evidences of tigers from Buxa, Neora Valley and Mahananda (*PA Updates* Vol. XXVI, Nos. 5 & 1 and Vol. XXIV, No. 1). However, the region is facing threats such as habitat loss, poaching and human-wildlife conflict, which require more efforts for long-term conservation, stated the latest all-India tiger estimation report.

Source: Krishnendu Mukherjee. 'After 2 decades, cameras click tiger in West Bengal's Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 19/04/2023.

State declares four new Biodiversity Heritage Sites

The West Bengal government has declared four new biodiversity heritage sites (BHSs): Char Balidanga and the State Horticulture Research and Development Station campus, both in Nadia district, Namthing Pokhar in Darjeeling district and Amkhoi Fossil Park in Birbhum district. The announcement was made on 18th April, World Heritage day by the State Biodiversity Board

Char Balidanga comprises two islands in the Hooghly River with tropical riverine vegetation of tall grasses and swampy flat lands that are periodically inundated by tidal action. It is spread over approximately 47 ha. Namthing Pokhari, a Himalayan natural wetland covering almost 5 ha in Kurseong block, is the home to the Himalayan salamander. Amkhoi Fossil Park near Ilambazar with an area of 10 ha has unique geological and paleo-botanical features. The campus of the State Horticulture Research and Development Station in Deypara panchayat in Krishnagar block is spread over 39 ha; it hosts indigenous germplasm of 50 varieties of

mango, and seven varieties of guava and several others.

The existing four BHSs in the State include Chilkigarh Kanak Durga in Jhargram, Baneswar Shiv Dighi in Cooch Behar and Tonglu and Dhotrey in Darjeeling.

Source: Anasuya Basu. 'Four more biodiversity hotspots in West Bengal,' www.telegraphindia.com, 21/04/2023

NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

SC lifts its ban on development activities in ESZs

The Supreme Court (SC) on April 26 lifted the ban on development activities within eco-sensitive zones (ESZs) of a minimum of one km around protected areas. Modifying its June 2022 order, the SC said that the activities within ESZs shall be guided by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC)'s February 2011 guidelines and the 2022 office memorandum of an expert committee on ESZs. The bench said that the 2022 ban will not be applicable to instances where appropriate notifications have been issued by the MoEFCC. The ban will not apply to ESZs that lie on inter-state borders or share common boundaries.

The SC clarified that mining within national parks and one km from boundaries shall not be permissible. It noted that MoEFCC's February 2011 guidelines banned commercial mining in ESZs but allowed eco-tourism and, the establishment of hotels and resorts. In June 2022, the SC had directed all PAs to earmark a minimum distance of one km as ESZ where activities such as mining and establishment of any new permanent structure will not be permitted.

In its review plea, the Union government said the SC's directions will have ramifications on the lives of local communities living around protected areas. Several State

governments also requested an alteration of the SC's order.

The Kerala government has also told the court that forests account for nearly 30% of the State's area. It cited the State's population density and added much of its land was occupied and that the court's order posed practical difficulties for Kerala. In fact, the 2022 order also impacted the Kerala High Court building, which is located within 200 m of the Mangalavanam Bird Sanctuary.

Source: Utkarsh Anand. 'SC lifts complete ban on development activities within ESZs,' www.hindustantimes.com, 26/04/2023.

88,903 ha forest land diverted for non-forest purpose in the last five years

Over 88,903 ha of forest land has been diverted for non-forestry purposes in the country in the last five years. The highest of over 19,424 ha was diverted for road construction followed by 18,847 ha for mining, 13,344 ha for irrigation projects, 9,469 ha for transmission lines and 7,630 ha for defence projects.

Environment minister Ashwini Kumar Choubey informed the Rajya Sabha that the Centre allowed these diversions for various development projects under the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. The diversions were affected for over 25 kinds of projects including those concerning railways (4,769 ha), thermal power plants, solar power work and drinking water facilities among others.

Source: '89k hectares of forest land diverted for development projects in 5 years,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 07/04/2023.



SOUTH ASIA

NEPAL

Domesticated female elephants near Chitwan NP attract wild males to human settlements

Domesticated elephants kept in or near human settlements are attracting wild male elephants from Chitwan National Park (CNP). The males, looking to mate, are in the process posing a threat to human settlements and property on the outskirts of the park. The concrete elephant statue at the main gateway to CNP has been attacked several times by a resident wild elephant bull of the Chitwan-Parsa complex, known to local officials as Ronaldo. Ronaldo charges at the statue regularly for perceived territorial violations.

Unattached young males like Ronaldo move in and out of human settlements, home to 97 domesticated elephants, that lie within 3-4 km of the park. For these elephants mating success is far greater with domesticated female elephants than with females in the wild.

On January 29, four people were injured when a wild elephant attacked them close to a stable holding domesticated elephants in the Kumroj area. Incidents like this compound the already severe problem of human-elephant conflict in Nepal. Elephant welfare activists have suggested that the government should establish a sanctuary where all domesticated elephants can roam in relative freedom away from human settlements and graze there. However, an official at the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation said that the department does not have the resources or land for such a scheme, and that the welfare of the domesticated private elephants is the responsibility of their owners.

Source: Abhaya Raj Joshi. 'Mating urge adds new pressure to human-elephant conflict in Nepal,' www.news.mongabay.com, 27/04/2023.

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS UPDATE

RAJASTHAN

Successful hatching of chick of captive reared GIB



A chick of a Great Indian Bustard (GIB) reared in captivity was hatched on April 1 in Jaisalmer's

breeding centre for the first time.

The breeding centre had collected 30 eggs from the wild, of which six were damaged. Twenty-four chicks were successfully hatched from the eggs, but two of them died leaving 22 artificially hatched GIBs at the breeding centre. Out of these, two birds had mated in February, and the female laid an egg on March 6. The egg was placed in an incubator and hatching took place after 21 days of incubation, informed a veterinary scientist at the centre.

Chicks from captive birds would help the centre to increase the population of the birds that can then be released in the wild. Officials however also pointed out that the first generation of GIBs have been manually fed, and they may not have the ability to find food for themselves in the wild.

The number of GIBs has declined to less than 150 in the wild, with close to 90 of them found in two protected areas, the Desert National Park, and Ramdevra Army Protected Area. According to the Wildlife Institute of India, GIB population has declined by as much as 75% in 30 years. Power transmission lines and windmills in Thar Desert in Rajasthan and Kutch in Gujarat have contributed to the decline. (Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 6 & 5).

Source: Mukesh Mathrani. 'Great Indian Bustard chick hatches from birds reared in captivity, Barmer,' www.hindustantimes.com, 02/04/2023.

State declares three conservation reserves in Sorsan, Khichan and Hamirgarh

The grasslands that shelter the great Indian bustard (GIB) in Sorsan, Baran, the winter home of demoiselle cranes in Khichan, Jodhpur, and Hamirgarh in Bhilwara, were recently declared as conservation reserves (CRs).

The number of CRs in Rajasthan has now reached 26.

Source: 'Three new conservation reserves declared in Rajasthan,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 23/04/2023.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Range countries to collaborate for conservation of Central Asian Flyway

Range countries of the Central Asian Flyway (CAF) have agreed to collaborate to strengthen conservation efforts for migratory birds and their habitats.

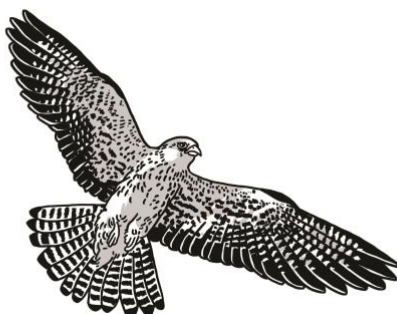
The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme/Convention on Migratory Species (UNEP/CMS) held a meeting in New Delhi for the same in May 2023 that was attended by representatives from 11 countries, including Armenia, Bangladesh, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kuwait, Mongolia, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Others attending included representatives of the Indian forest department, scientific institutions

in India, international and national non-governmental organizations, and subject experts.

The delegates deliberated on an institutional framework for the CAF, discussed priority areas for implementation, and agreed on a draft roadmap for updating the CMS CAF Action Plan.

The CAF is a major migratory route for birds, covering 30 countries from the Arctic Ocean to the Indian Ocean.

Source: 'Countries join hands to protect migratory birds in Central Asian Flyway,' www.livemint.com, 06/05/2023.

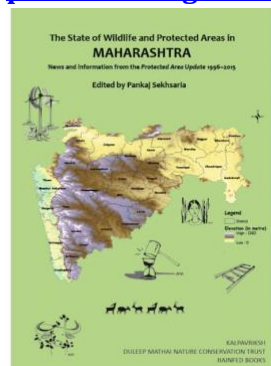
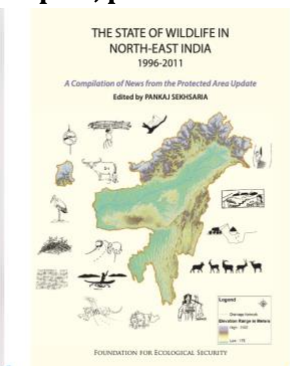
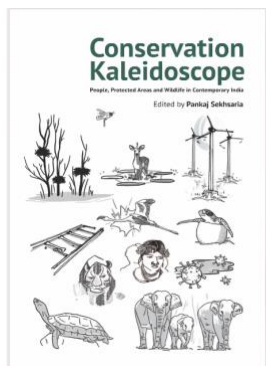


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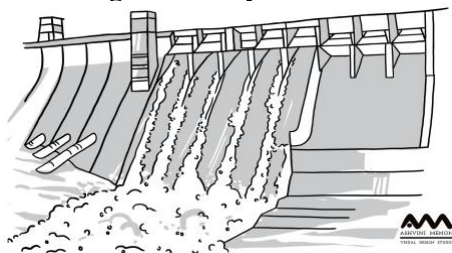


IN MEMORY

Manoj Misra

Manoj Kumar Misra, often described as the protector of Yamuna, is no more. He passed away on 4 June. He was 70. We lost him to COVID at a time when we all thought COVID was something of the past. He began his professional life as a forester and spent 22 years in the Indian Forest Service in undivided Madhya Pradesh. He took voluntary retirement from the service in early 2000. Since then, protection of rivers became his mission.

His passion for the Yamuna is well known and well talked about. It was due to his consistent efforts as Convenor of the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan that the NGT gave the 2015 verdict that was instrumental in making the Nirmal Yamuna Rejuvenation plan. Manoj took on Art of Living of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar when it organised the three-day World Cultural Festival on the flood plains of Yamuna. He took the matter to the NGT. The NGT formed a Supervisory Committee headed by Shashi Shekhar, then Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, based on whose report the NGT imposed a fine of Rs. 5 crore for the pollution and damage caused by the event.



He connected with people's efforts to defend their rivers all across the country. He engaged with the struggles against hydro-power projects in the Himalayas. After the devastating floods and landslides in and around Kedarnath in June 2013, the Supreme Court appointed the Ravi Chopra committee to look into the relationship between construction of hydro power projects and the Kedarnath

tragedy. Shashi Shekhar, as then Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, had to submit an affidavit. In my personal chat with Shashi Shekhar, after Manoj passed away, he very vividly recalled the inputs provided by Manoj in preparing the affidavit. Based on this, the SC came out with the Subordinate Legislation on Ganga, which provides the legal framework for the river even today.

Jairam Ramesh, the former minister of the Ministry of Environment and Forests, in his obituary, recalled Manoj's help in drafting the first set of rules for River Regulation Zone much along the lines of the Coastal Regulation Zone rules.

Manoj was a vocal critic of the new found imagination of river beautification in the form of river front developments in the urban stretches of our rivers. He got connected with the groups that are resisting river front development of the Mula-Mutha in Pune. He was connected with the issues in Mahanadi basin -- both inter-sectoral and inter-state conflicts -- through the work of the Forum for Policy Dialogue on Water Conflicts in India in the basin. Manoj was also a Steering Committee member of the Water Conflicts Forum. During the last couple of years he was quite involved in the Ken-Betwa River Linking Project. He firmly believed that the project shall sound a death knell for the Panna Tiger Reserve. He was of the opinion that much cheaper, faster and sustainable alternatives to provide water security to Bundelkhand are available. To give a concrete shape to the alternative, Manoj helped bring together a few concerned organisations and experts. Unfortunately this has remained an unfinished task.

It was his passion for rivers that drove him, along with a few others, to set up India Rivers Forum (IRF) in 2014. IRF, an active network of organisations and individuals dedicated to work for the rejuvenation and

restoration of rivers, organises India River Week on different themes related to rivers. It is difficult to imagine an India River Week without the sobering but persuasive presence of Manoj.

He provided substantive inputs into the draft National Water Policy 2020 prepared by the Mihir Shah committee. His presentation before the committee and the note he submitted along with SP Ravi of Chalakudy River Protection Committee provides us glimpses of his world view around rivers and their governance. He argued for legislative support for river rejuvenation in the form of a comprehensive framework River Basin Rejuvenation law. This, according to him, shall ensure restoration of flows, security of groundwater and revival of traditional community institutions and the restoration and protection of floodplains.

Manoj brought out the edited book, *Wildlife @ 50: Saving the Wild, Securing the Future*, in 2022 coinciding with 50 years of the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. It captures India's 50-year-long wildlife journey through the eyes and experiences of a diverse set of authors. He was also in the midst of editing a book on water which he tentatively titled as *Water Tales: 50 Years of Water Stewardship in India*. His aim was to get it published in 2024 on the 50th anniversary of the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974.

He was a researcher, activist and policy advocate all rolled into one. I am sure the India River Forum, the Water Conflicts Forum, hundreds of environmental activists with whom he was connected and his friends and family members together will take forward his legacy.

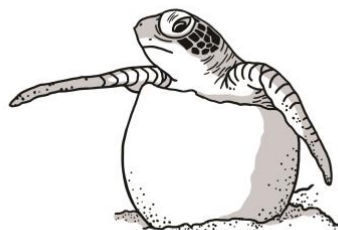
- **KJ Joy** is part of Society for Promoting Participative Ecosystem Management, Water Conflicts Forum, India River Forum and Vikalp Sangam.

Email: joykjjoy2@gmail.com

Satish Bhaskar

One of India's pioneer conservationists was laid to rest in March. Sea turtle biologist Satish Bhaskar's career began at the Madras Snake Park, when he was a student at the IIT Madras. His passion for the ocean and its denizens, soon drew him there and Rom spoke to him about the need for sea turtle surveys on our coastline and islands.

IIT's loss was conservation's gain; Satish carried out the first coastal surveys for India's sea turtle species and their deteriorating nesting habitats, initially for the Snake Park and Crocodile Bank, and later for WWF. His mode of transport was mostly his sturdy legs; and his feats include a close elephant encounter on Interview Island, Andamans; marooning himself for a 5-month sea turtle study on uninhabited Suheli Island, Lakshadweep; and walking literally thousands of kilometers of India's coastline looking for nests and interviewing local communities on the status of these amazing animals.



Shy and humble, Satish was not in the game for fame or name nor for money, of which there was mighty little - but simply because he was passionate about marine conservation, and the job that had to be done. His deep involvement in the Andamans and Nicobars is reflected today in the ongoing work by the Dakshin Foundation which has been continuing the sea turtle study throughout the islands and now includes a radio telemetry project on Little Andaman to learn about leatherback turtle migration patterns.

Satish was also an excellent writer, and leaves behind a number of important

papers and notes, many of them in the Madras Snake Park's newsletter, *Hamadryad*. A group of us, friends of his, plan to find a publisher for his memoirs, which are full of interesting information and adventure.

Satish married Brenda Leveiro, also on the Snake Park/Croc Bank team, and she received a "letter in a bottle" from him from Suheli Island, posted to her by a Sri Lankan fisherman. Typically, Satish had enclosed the postage money as well. Brenda had been an extremely supportive partner for his field work, single-parenting their three children while he was away for months at a time. She passed away a year ago, so the two of them are together again, in the happy hunting grounds where the exceptional people go. But their legacy will remain firmly here on Earth and the Croc Bank thanks them for their contribution to this organisation and its work. Rest in Peace.

- **Zai Whitaker** is Co-founder/Trustee,
Madras Crocodile Bank/Centre for
Herpetology.
Email: zai@madrascrocodilebank.org

Lt Gen SC Sardeshpande

There is no other way of holding the memory of Lt Gen Sardeshpande other than with pride, reverence, deep respect, and affection.

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) over a century ago (1911-24) was part of a collaborative mammalian survey initiated by Robert Charles Wroughton. A biggish large mouthed laterite cave in the deep jungles of Khanapur's Talewadi plateau in present days Belagavi District of Karnataka was found in 1912 to house a few specimens of a free-tailed bat – *Otomops wroughtoni*. A hundred years later in 2011 these bats came to the rescue of these jungles; providing them with sanctuary status – Bhimgad Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). Little did anyone think that they would one day be linked with a present day novel conservation effort led by a highly decorated soldier of the Indian Army!

Born on 4th September 1934, Lt. SC Sardeshpande grew up in and around Savadatti–Munavalli–Dharwad. His formative years were greatly influenced and moulded by his visionary father. After graduating from Defence Services Staff College, Wellington, Sardeshpande was commissioned to the Kumaon Regiment in 1956 and held a number of command and staff positions. His military valour was duly recognised with the Uttam Yudh Seva Medal (IPKF Sri Lanka), the Ati Vishisht Seva Medal (Naga Hills Services) and the Vishisht Seva Medal (Bangladesh war). He gave up military service in 1990. The Government of Karnataka honoured him with the Rajyotsava Prashasti in 1996. The desire to lead a quiet retired life brought him to Belgaum in mid-1990s.



In the early-1990s the jungles of Khanapur Taluka had caught the attention of local nature enthusiasts as well as those of sand miners, illegal forest loggers, poachers, game-hunters, miners, exploitative extractors of non-timber forest produce, medicinal plant collectors etc. Civil engineers and hydrologists too had established their stakes in the region as projects on the drawing board. The adjoining contiguous forests to the West (in Goa), the Kali River catchment and its forests of Dandeli-Ganeshgudi-Supa-Castle Rock-Londa-Ramnagar-Anmod regions to the South and the districts of Dodamarg, Kolhapur, Sindhudurg, Radhanagari in Southern Maharashtra were faced with similar problems.

A few members from BNHS were probably the first to make an attempt to seek out local groups for support to bring in protective measures to these pristine

contiguous forests. They soon found in Lt Gen SC Sardeshpande an able and willing leader. The period of 1997-98 saw the retired Army General make numerous forays in the jungles of Khanapur –the Mahadayi and Mallaprabha catchments; meetings included those with resident dwellers, leaders and panchayat members, displaced dam oustees, local groups and individuals, academics and scientists, research fellows, forest and government officials.

First to come were Mhadei and Netravali Wildlife Sanctuaries in 1999 in Goa where BNHS members and others from Goa played a leading role. Paryavarani was formed in 1998 with Lt Gen SC Sardeshpande as its Founder President. Seeking to put a halt to the multiple ‘bush fires’ erupting everywhere, the groups from these regions came together under the leadership of Lt Gen SC Sardeshpande to propose to the Government of India an area of 10,000 sq km as Sahyadri Ecologically Sensitive Area (SESA). The Government of Karnataka created the Bhimgad WLS in 2011 and proposed an Ecologically Sensitive Area around it in 2016. Paryavarani was honoured with the prestigious Parisara Prashasti in 2012.

Enthused by these efforts, groups in Dakshin Kannada district sought similar protection to 22,000 sq km in the Kodchadri

region – the Kodchadri Ecologically Sensitive Area (KESA). The concerns were similar throughout the length of the Western Ghats. 2009 saw the revival of the Save the Western Ghats Movement of 1989. Jayaram Ramesh, the then Minister of Environment and Forests set up a committee to examine the entire Western Ghats for its Ecological Sensitivity under chairmanship of Prof Madhav Gadgil. The comprehensive Gadgil –WGEEP Report saw stiff resistance from the political front. The Kasturirangan Report too seems unacceptable. Lt SC Sardeshpande is one of the primary petitioners in the Supreme Court challenging the Governments lack of action on these reports.

A staunch believer in improving the human condition in every possible way within his capacity he left behind his physical body during the early hours of the 8th March 2023 at his daughter’s home in Bengaluru for the furthering of knowledge of young medical professionals.

The presence of a visionary who led by example is missed dearly.

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A Gir Diary: April & May 2013



April 15: Supreme Court (SC) passes order for translocation of lions from Gir to Madhya Pradesh within six months.

April 16: A group of local residents, mainly guides, protests the presence of Dr Ravi Chellam as he attempts to enter the sanctuary with a group of visitors from Prague zoo. Chellam is prevented from entering the sanctuary and is forced to leave the area.

- Residents of Kodinar and Sasan take to the streets to oppose the relocation of lions.

April 18: Five villages of Sasan observe a bandh to protest the translocation of lions. The bandh was supported by the Gypsy Association, Forest Guides Association and Gir Hotels Association.

April 21: A team of 13 senior forest officials from Maharashtra including the Chief Wildlife Warden and officers of the level of additional principal chief conservator of forest and chief conservator of forest visit Gir for a three day study of rescue of wild animals including the leopard.

The visit was a follow-up to a visit in March by Principal Secretary, Forests and Environment, Maharashtra, Praveen Pardeshi.

April 23: News reports suggest that land prices around the Kuno-Palpur WLS in the

Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh have gone up three times after the SC order for the relocation of lions from Gir.

April 25: Meeting of the Gujarat State Board for Wildlife – CM Narendra Modi calls for the filing of a strong review petition before the SC to prevent the translocation.

April 28: 25,000 people from Surat, Vadodara and Ahmedabad, gathered at Ankolvadi village of Talala taluka in Gir, pledge to not allow the translocation of lions. The people had actually gathered to raise funds for cattle fodder in scarcity-hit Saurashtra. But the ‘Bhavya Lok Dayro’ organized by Samast Junagadh Jilla Parivar of Surat and Talala Taluka Gau Seva Samiti also became a platform for people to vent their resentment against the SC order.

May 3: Signature campaigns launched in Rajkot and Bhavnagar to oppose the translocation of lions from Gujarat.

May 17: Gujarat Government files a plea in the SC challenging the order of April 15.

(For more on the issue of translocation of lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh see *PA Updates* Vol. XV, Nos. 4 & 3; and Nos. 50, 46, 43, 34, 33, 32, 26, 22 & 20)

PERSPECTIVE

The magic of the Myristica swamp

The very first appearance of Myristica is still stuck at the back of my mind and that memory is a very special one. This was located on the border of Hewale and Bambarde villages in Dodamarg Taluka of Maharashtra's Sindhudurg District.

The tall standing Myristica species with the very evolved tree root system found with an unusual feature- the stilt roots and knee roots - make it a Myristica swamp. The moment you enter the stream which flows through the hearth of the swamp one has an exhilarating experience of walking back millions of years. The micro climate which is inside the swamp helps you realise how climate can differ from the kind of landscape and habitat you are in.

The swamp actually helps in maintaining the stream flow all-round the year, thus making it one of the most important freshwater drinking resources for the people residing near the swamp and also contributing to the Tillari river by joining its stream and discharging the water perennially. The freshwater flowing in the swamps has been the highlight and backbone of the whole habitat making it one of the most biodiversity rich places. It also adds great watershed values to the landscape as it can hold the water which eventually helps in sustaining the groundwater sources.

The small pocket of the swamp here has gone through a lot of transformation over the decades. Land use has been changing - there are paddy fields on one side and on the other one can see human settlements along with a river flowing parallel to the swamp. There is also the rapid growth of rubber and areca nut plantations that are beginning to dominate and rapidly transform the landscape.

This experience made me realise the fact that every such habitat near a human setting is never away from the social element it carries with it. The human belief system, the culture and the traditions the place carries has a conservation relevance which researchers are still very far from understanding. The ancient forest in Maharashtra is very sacred for the local community and is known as *Kanhalachi rai*. The sacredness a place is very unique and differs from people to people with geographic barriers making a crucial difference in their settings and the traditional values which are passed on to every generation.

Myristica swamps are unique but deeply threatened systems and urgent efforts are needed to understand them and to ensure their conservation.

- **Divyanshu Pawar** is a Hydrologist and Ecologist working with The Corbett Foundation as a Project Coordinator for Natural Resource Management at the Lonavala and Rajmachi Conservation Reserve.
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