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Protected Area Update

Vol. XXIX, No. 6, December 2023 (No. 166)

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EDITORIAL

Categories of wildlife news

A quick overview of the stories carried in this issue of the *PA Update* suggests three broad categories of news. These are not mutually exclusive and neither is the categorisation comprehensive or strictly objective, yet these promise to be interesting and useful.

One set of news - the dominant category - is tiger related. More than half the stories carried this time are about tigers or tiger reserves. There is an interesting and important mix even within this, but the imprimatur of the tiger is unmistakable: it is news because the tiger is involved. That the wildlife-news ecosystem in India is tiger dominant if not tiger centric is well known and something the *PA Update* has commented upon multiple times (see, for instance, *PA Updates* Vol. XXIX, No. 5; Vol. XXVIII, No. 1; Vol. XXVII, No. 6, Vol. XXI, Nos. 3 & 1). The much larger coverage has advantages because it shows up the many different issues and challenges even if it is only about the tiger in only one issue of the newsletter: death by electrocution, translocation from one bioregion to another, natural dispersal over large areas, notification and denotification of tiger reserves (TRs) and institutional issues of management, accountability etc. More, in a sense, is better because it deals with a range of issues that are important and need dealing with.

The 2nd visible category of news is non-tiger related. This provides relief from the tiger even as it is interesting and important on its own. We see a diverse representation from across the country on account of the species reported, issues involved and also forms of research and of reporting: a census of Snow leopards in Himachal, elephant conservation initiatives in the South, an analysis of trade in tortoises and soft shell turtles based on media reporting and the changing behaviour and food habits of the Lion tailed macaques in and

around the Anaimalai forests in Tamil Nadu. One hopes that there will be more reporting in this category and a greater focus on lesser known species and habitats.

And finally, cutting across these two mutually exclusive categories is a bunch of news that raises some serious concerns. There is a prominent bunch of stories this time that raise fundamental questions on the accountability of state institutions that have the formal mandate and responsibility of conservation. In Madhya Pradesh, for instance, the wildlife wing has no records of the clearance granted in the last decade while in Gujarat the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) has pointed to serious violations and discrepancies in the management of forests and PAs in the state. In Corbett TR in Uttarakhand the CBI is investigating a former minister for illegal felling in the reserve while in Ranthambhore there are allegations of collusion and corruption around VIP safaris and a disagreement within FD officials on the status and use of patrolling vehicles.

This third category is particularly important and this is where the news ecosystem can and should pay particular attention. If the internal accountability mechanisms don't exist or are comprised, one can only expect more trouble. This is where our focus should really be and a role that the media is best placed to perform. It has certainly done well over the years and hopefully this will continue.

NEWS FROM INDIAN STATES

ARUNACHAL PRADESH

State cabinet approves creation of 336 posts for STPF in three TRs

The Arunachal Pradesh state cabinet has approved the constitution of a Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) with creation of 336 regular posts as per the guidelines of the

National Tiger Conservation Authority for three tiger reserves (TRs) of the state – Namdapha, Pakke and Kamlang. The decision was made in the month of October.

The STPF would comprise of one company of 112 personnel each for the three TRs. Each company would further be distributed into three platoons and 18 sections.

The creation of STPF is expected to lead to protection of tigers and wildlife habitats, prevention of illegal wildlife trade, and assistance in scientific management of forests.

Source: ‘State cabinet approves creation of STPF for three tiger reserves,’ www.arunachaltimes.in, 19/10/2023.

BIHAR

Kaimur WLS to be declared TR; 2nd in Bihar

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has given its in-principle approval for declaring the Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) as a tiger reserve (TR). It will be the second TR in Bihar after the Valmiki TR. The approval came in July 2023. Shergarh Fort, a major tourist attraction, as well as 58 villages, will be in a buffer zone spread over 1,050 sq. km. An area of 900 sq. km had been initially identified for the core. Following objections by the NTCA, however, the forest department (FD) excluded certain areas and identified 450 sq. km of forest to be declared a TR.

The first proposal to develop Kaimur WLS into a TR was put forward in 2018. The concerned forest officer had sent a recommendation after sighting two tigers, pugmarks and the carcasses of deer and other prey animals killed by tigers in 2017. The FD sent a team of experts to check the ground reality which then gave the go-ahead to declare the area as a TR in its report.

The Kaimur forests are connected to forests in the neighbouring states of Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

Source: Mohd Imran Khan. ‘Bihar to get its second tiger reserve in Kaimur soon,’ www.downtoearth.org.in, 27/09/2023.

GOA/KARNATAKA

Tiger sightings in a village near Cotigao WLS, Kali TR

Incidents of tiger attacks on domesticated animals and of tiger sightings have been reported recently in Loliem, a village in the vicinity of the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Goa and the adjoining Kali Tiger Reserve (TR) in Karnataka.

Forest staff have installed camera traps in the area for monitoring the movement of the animal and taken steps to increase patrolling. (Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXVI, No. 1).

Source: Rajendra Kerkar. ‘Tiger presence reported in Loliem,’ www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 28/11/2023.

GUJARAT

Serious violations and discrepancies in management of forests, WLSs in Gujarat: CAG

A series of violations and discrepancies in forest areas, especially in six wildlife sanctuaries (WLSs), of Gujarat have come into light due to an audit report prepared by the Comptroller Auditor General of India (CAG). According to this report tabled in the state assembly on September 16, poor spending of funds has led to mismanagement, leaving the forests open for encroachment, mining, and deforestation.

The six WLSs mentioned in the report for their mismanagement are Balaram Ambaji, Jessore (both in Banaskantha district), Jambughoda (Panchmahal district), Ratanmahal (Dahod district), Shoolpaneshwar (Narmada district) and Purna (Tapi and Dangs districts). It was noted that Ratanmahal WLS

hosts sloth bears, a flagship species in the area. However, the Gujarat Bear Conservation and Welfare Action Plan did not develop any provisions for monitoring the bear population in the sanctuary.

None of the WLSs had prepared inventory to check land use patterns, operative industries, and activities around the sanctuary. Three villages spread across 518.93 ha of forest land were not part of the Shoolpaneshwar WLS, stated the report. The forest department (FD) failed to form ecotourism plans and lacked transparency in proving how the pilgrimage areas such as Kedarnath Mahadev temple were regulated to keep the bears undisturbed..

The report notes that the sanctuaries lacked forest guards, which led to illicit tree cutting, leading to 18,469 cases between 2016 and 2021. The lack of check posts and communication devices disabled the officials from keeping a check on illegal activities.

The CAG audit also revealed a lack of research on flora and fauna in the state. It noted that the Dantiwada range of the Jessore WLS was encroached by invasive species *Prosopis juliflora*. Around 51% of the sanctuary area including the ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ) was dominated by the species. Adequate steps were not taken for the removal of the invasive species.

Even the wildlife populations were not properly estimated. Except for the sloth bear, wild ass, lion and leopard, the estimation was not carried out regularly between 2005 and 2020. The report notes that 43% of sloth bears were outside sanctuary areas and human-animal conflict led to 116 human deaths and 679 injuries between 2016 and 2021. Also that the FD was ill-equipped as their rapid response team did not have sufficient stock of drugs, tranquillisers, animal rescue centres and veterinary doctors.

The CAG found multiple violations of the Forest Conservation Act 1980 and Wildlife Protection Act 1972; for instance, road widening of state highways such as Danta-Ambaji highway passing through the Balaram

Ambaji WLS and its ESZ range was initiated before getting permission from government agencies. Also, the widening of the Vyara-Bhenskatari-Kalibel-Pimpri road, cutting across Purna WLS, applied for permissions after construction had begun, and finished the work before receiving approvals. It also found that the road widening was done beyond the sanctioned area. Authorities incorrectly certified beyond 20 km of Shoolpaneshwar WLS's boundary for Devalia-Rajpipla National Highway widening work. This road passes through the ESZ of the sanctuary. However, the user agencies were not penalised for violating the norms.

Further, the report has pointed out that a plan for corridor management which was given an approval in January 2018 hasn't been included in the working plan of the Chhota Udepur Forest Division for a period between 2017-18 and 2026-27. A policy for sustainable forest management, which is mandated by the National Forest Commission Report 2006 for all states, remained undrafted until November 2022. The FD did not specify a mechanism for implementing the provisions of the National Wildlife Plan, which came into force in 1983, until September 2022 and the state hasn't declared any Critical Wildlife Habitats in the past 14 years since the implementation of the Forest Rights Act 2006.

The report observed poor management of 10 ecotourism sites developed by the FD. These sites have inadequate mechanisms to control and regulate footfall and the forest areas were also heavily littered with waste, posing a threat to wildlife.

Source: Himanshu Nitnaware. 'Violations, poor management threaten Gujarat sanctuaries: CAG,' www.downtoearth.org.in, 20/09/2023.



HIMACHAL PRADESH

75 snow leopards in Himachal Pradesh



A five-year systematic study of the Snow leopard in the Himalayas has reported 75 individuals from the state of Himachal Pradesh. The maximum number has been reported from Lahaul-Spiti and Kinnaur districts. Its potential habitat also extends into the upper regions of Shimla, Kullu, Chamba and Kangra districts in the state.

The estimation, part of the Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India, was carried out by the state's wildlife wing with help from the Nature Conservation Foundation. 26,000 sq. km of the animal's habitat was mapped as part of the estimation, which was also complemented with population assessments of the prey species like bharal (blue sheep) and ibex.

A camera trapping survey was conducted to representatively sample all the strata - high, low and unknown. The team detected 44 individual snow leopards. Its density ranged from 0.08 to 0.37 individuals per 100 sq. km in the state. The trans-Himalayan regions of Spiti and Pin Valley recorded the highest densities. The estimate of blue sheep population was 891 for Spiti, and the ibex population size estimate was 224 for the Pin Valley. Spiti and Tabo recorded the highest densities of both Snow leopards and their prey while Chandra and Bharmour recorded the lowest densities for both. The camera trapping survey recorded 28 species, including carnivores, ungulates, and birds. The researchers also spotted the Common leopard and the Snow leopard in the same camera trap at two stations in the Great Himalayan

National Park, suggesting a habitat overlap between them.

The report reiterates the fact that local communities are the strongest allies for conservation if their concerns are factored into conservation planning.

Source: 'Himachal Pradesh's First-of-its-Kind Snow Leopard Census Reveals Presence of 75 'Ghosts of the Mountains', www.weather.com, 26/10/2023.

KARNATAKA

FD initiates action against actors, godmen for wearing tiger claw pendants

Authorities in Karnataka have initiated action against four Kannada film actors and two self-proclaimed godmen for wearing tiger claw lockets around their necks. Actors Darshan Thoogudeepa, Nikhil Kumaraswamy, Jaggesh, and Varthur Santhosh, and godmen Vinay Guruji and Dhananjay Guruji were spotted wearing the pendants while one of the godmen was noted using a tiger pelt to cover his chair.

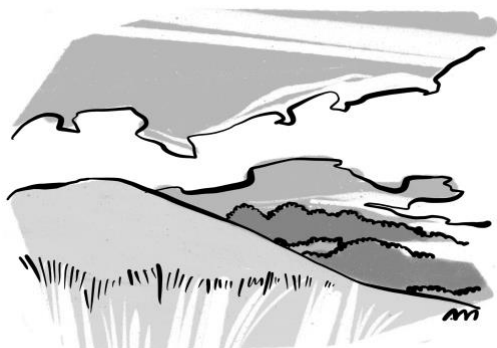
The Government of Karnataka's additional chief secretary asked the forest department to take immediate action as this was in violation of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. This was then acted upon by the principal chief conservator of forest.

A former senior forest official said that awareness among people, including in celebrities, about this type of crime is rather low. He also added that the genuineness of the item had to be ascertained by officials before taking forward the case. He noted, however, that the items were most likely not fake because the celebrities had the purchasing power to get the originals.

Source: M Raghuram. 'Action initiated against Kannada film stars, godmen for wearing tiger claw pendants,' www.downtoearth.org.in, 25/10/2023.

KERALA

Wayanad plateau important summer habitat of elephants: study



The Wayanad plateau in the Brahmagiri-Nilgiri-Eastern Ghats landscape witnesses high footfall of elephants in summer compared to the surrounding areas, a study conducted by the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) and Wildlife Conservation Trust has found. It suggests a strategic protected area expansion and acquisition of swamps and riparian forests close to forest areas as one of the conservation investments in the landscape.

Elephants frequent the wet forest tract of the Wayanad plateau during summer owing to the riparian forests and swamps in the landscape that make the habitat cooler and wetter than the surrounding matrix of dry forests in the adjacent Mysore and Sigur plateaus. With the year-round availability of water and forage, the Wayanad plateau supports the largest breeding population of Asian elephants globally. Yet, this landscape is highly neglected with little conservation efforts to protect it, the study noted.

Elephants use the Wayanad tract extensively during summer. They don't visit the region in monsoon due to forage availability in other habitats to the east of the Nilgiri landscape that comprises protected areas like Bandipur and Nagarhole Tiger Reserves, said Anoop NR, lead investigator of the study.

This seasonal migration of elephants was revealed in the first telemetry study of elephants conducted by the Bombay Natural History Society in 1999, said elephant expert Raman Sukumar. The 1999 study had found that the availability of wetlands and numerous perennial streams, even though they account for only 13% of the 2000 sq. km area of the Wayanad plateau, have a disproportionate effect on elephants during summer. Despite its significance, much of this landscape has been converted into plantations.

Of 344 sq. km of the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, almost 100 sq. km area is plantation. Such high fragmentation of forests is one of the main reasons for increasing conflict between humans and elephants. Other factors include the increased population of elephants, especially the male elephants on account of better protection measures in the recent past, depletion of palatable plant species for herbivores due to the spread of invasives and changing forest fire dynamics.

The researchers have expressed a need for long-term research to fully comprehend the importance of Wayanad as a dry season habitat for elephants in the Nilgiri landscape, especially in the context of climate change.

Source: Arathi Menon. 'Wayanad is summer home for elephants, says a study,' www.india.mongabay.com, 16/10/2023.

MADHYA PRADESH

Wildlife wing has no record of clearances issued in past decade: RTI response

A response to a right to information (RTI) query has revealed that the wildlife wing of Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (FD) has no record of compliance certificates pertaining to wildlife clearance regarding the non-forestry activities sanctioned within forests in the last decade. The query had been filed by the Bhopal-based wildlife activist Ajay Dubey.

The state FD's wildlife wing has now issued a notice directing the heads of national parks and wildlife sanctuaries to submit a detailed report of non-forestry activities such as roads, railway tracks, pipelines, electricity lines and dams carried out in their respective forest areas from 2011 to 2021.

Dubey said he now plans to approach the Supreme Court to seek a high level inquiry into this matter.

Source: 'Wildlife wing of MP forest has no record of compliance of wildlife clearance for last 10 yrs: RTI,' www.thestatesman.com, 21/09/2023.

NGT orders steps to facilitate free movement for wildlife in ESZ of Pench NP

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) has issued an order directing the government to replace metallic wired fencing with bio-fencing in the ecologically sensitive zone (ESZ) surrounding Pench National Park (NP). The forest department has been asked to identify the appropriate height and plant species for the bio-fence.

The NGT's order came in response to a petition filed by Captain Brajesh Bharadwaj. The petition had raised concerns related to massive construction activities within the ESZ of the reserve in Seoni. These activities were taking place approximately 200 m from the boundary of the core at Awarghani Rayyat village, Khawasa buffer, near Turiya gate. The petition highlighted the construction of an artificial pond and the use of its mud to create a 12-foot-high hill slope along the border wall, spanning several acres. The construction site was enclosed by high fencing attached to a cemented boundary wall and monitored by flying drones.

The NGT addressed the issue of stone pitching along the ponds, which hindered animal access to drinking water. It directed the authorities to cover the stone pitching with soil and create a grass bed along the bank of pond to facilitate free movement for animals

accessing the pond. Regarding the trenches along the boundary, the NGT has instructed the authorities to ensure that these trenches are not too deep and are equipped with soil bunds along their boundaries to prevent animals from falling into them.

Source: P Naveen. 'Bio-fence to replace wire in Pench eco-sensitive zones,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/09/2023.

Cheetahs to be introduced in Gandhi Sagar WLS in 2nd phase

Cheetahs that will come to India from South Africa in the 2nd phase of Project Cheetah will be taken to Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Mandsaur. The decision was taken following a 10 day visit to South Africa by a delegation led by the director general of forests, special secretary Chandra Prakash Goyal, and Dr. SP Yadav, member secretary of National Tiger Conservation Authority and head of Project Cheetah

The 10 member delegation comprising forest officers engaged in a series of discussions and field visits to national parks, game reserves, and wildlife lodges across South Africa. They had the opportunity to observe wild cheetahs in four distinct biomes of South Africa, namely the Semi-desert area of Karoo, open grasslands at Tiger Canyons, dense thicket vegetation at Hopewell, and woodland savanna at Dinokeng and Mabula.

Vincent van der Merwe who is the director of The Metapopulation Initiative, South Africa, and a consultant for Project Cheetah, played an important role in facilitating interaction during the tour.

Source: 'Gandhi Sagar Sanctuary to be home of next batch of S African cheetahs,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 28/10/2023.

MAHARASHTRA

SBWL clears 29 projects in its October meeting

Of the 31 proposals on the agenda of the 22nd meeting of the State Board for Wildlife (SBWL), the board rejected only two projects, while approving the other 29. The SBWL meeting, conducted in Mumbai on October 16 at short notice of two days, was chaired by the state forest minister, Sudhir Mungantiwar, via online mode.

The approved projects include 14 drinking water supply schemes under Jal Jeevan Mission, a coal mining proposal at Marki-Mangli-II in a tiger corridor in Yavatmal, optical fibre cable laying, power transmission lines, and road expansion among others. The meeting also cleared the expansion of Pench Tiger Reserve (TR) by relocating the lone village, Saleghat from within the Mansinghdeo Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS).

The drinking water supply projects fall in the ecologically sensitive zones of Melghat TR, Jayakwadi Bird Sanctuary, and Tansa WLS. Other projects approved included installation of BSNL 4G mobile towers in Karanja Sohol, Pench TR, and Nagzira WLS' core and buffer areas, tunnels along Sanjay Gandhi National Park and two 220 kV transmission lines in the corridor connecting Bor, Pench and Umred Karhandla.

The Lohardongri iron ore open-cast mine and Asolamendha dam expansion projects both proposed in Chandrapur district, were disapproved in the meeting. However, a three-member committee consisting of Chandrapur conservator, and SBWL members Praveen Pardeshi and Poonam Dhanwatey, will study both the projects and submit a report, based on which further decision will be taken.

The proposed Lohardongri mine in compartment number 439 of Bramhapuri requires diversion of 36 ha of forest land while renovation of the Asolamendha irrigation project in Mul-Saoli requires diversion of over

316 ha of forest land. The Lohardongri mine falls in the functional corridor of Tadoba Andhari TR and Umred Karhandla WLS and is close to the Ghodazari WLS and Ekara Bhuj Conservation Reserve.

The Asolamendha proposal involves the renovation of the dam on the Pathri river in Sindewahi by raising its height by 2.7 m. The forest land needs to be diverted for canals and submergence areas. Further, 628 ha of non-forest land is required for the project and will also submerge around 18 villages.

Experts including a honorary wildlife warden and a former SBWL member have pointed out that these diversions will cut the tiger corridor that connects Tadoba, Sindewahi, and Mul towards Gadchiroli and Chhattisgarh through Asolamendha. And, habitat fragmentation will further aggravate already flared-up human-animal conflict in the district. 16 people have died in tiger-human conflict in Chandrapur in the first nine months of 2023.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'SBWL says 'no' to Lohardongri mine, Asolamendha dam expansion,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 18/10/2023.

State to promote tourism in and around Sahyadri TR

There is a proposal to develop seven zones in the four districts of Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, and Ratnagiri to promote tourism in villages in the vicinity of the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve (TR). A proposal of Rs. 45 crore has also been approved to develop water tourism. The decisions were taken in the meeting held on October 18 to discuss matters related to the reserve. The meeting was attended by the concerned district guardian ministers, district collectors, chief conservator of forest of Kolhapur Circle, deputy director of the TR, and other forest officials.

A local advisory committee of 35 members has been formed to advise the government on various matters including

formulating a nature tourism policy here, coordinating development work in the buffer zone and creating standards for buildings in and around the reserve.

In another development, the National Tiger Conservation Authority has given approval to reintroduce eight tigers into the Sahyadri TR as part of the tiger recovery programme (see accompanying story).

Source: 'Tourism to be developed in Sahyadri Tiger Reserve,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 20/10/2023

Eight tigers to be reintroduced into Sahyadri TR

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has agreed to a proposal for the reintroduction of eight tigers to the Sahyadri Tiger Reserve (STR) (*PA Update* Vol. XXVIII, No. 1). No tigers were reported in the reserve in the latest tiger census even though 17,400 trap night efforts were made via 435 camera points.

The last photographic record of the tiger here is from 2018 while DNA-based assessment in 2014 had shown the presence of seven tigers in the reserve. Additionally, the fifth cycle of NTCA's Management Effective Evaluation 2023 report released in July rated STR as 'very good' habitat for tigers with 78.79% marks. Taking these factors into account the NTCA's technical committee approved Phase II of the Tiger Recovery Programme (TRP) in October. Eight individuals, four males and four females, that will be brought here from the Chandrapur landscape, will now be soft-released in the reserve. A landscape-level study of the vital corridor i.e. Sahyadri-Dandeli and interstate landscape management plan, establishing cooperation and support from all concerned FDs and divisions will also be done in this phase.

The project that will be implemented between 2023 and 2027, will also see the

reintroduction by the forest department (FD) of the main prey species of the tiger here. The FD has proposed a budget of Rs. 10.50 crore for the same and for voluntary relocation of 27 villages. Work for the rehabilitation of eight villages is already in progress.

This will be the second TRP project in Maharashtra. Earlier, in May 2023, two tigresses were reintroduced in the Navegaon Nagzira TR (NNTR) (*PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 3). The NTCA has granted permission to reintroduce five tigresses in NNTR. Three more tigresses will be released in subsequent phases.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Tigers to roar in Sahyadri again, 8 from Chanda to be shifted,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 16/10/2023.

Tiger electrocuted in Gadchiroli division; 41st tiger death in state this year



A four-year-old tiger was electrocuted by live wire traps laid using an 11kV overhead power line passing through the reserve forest compartment

number 417 in Amirza beat in Chatgaon forest range of Gadchiroli division. The skull and three paws of the animal were missing when the carcass was found by the authorities. Gadchiroli deputy conservator of forests said that the trap was probably laid for herbivores but a tiger got electrocuted. It is the 41st tiger death in Maharashtra since 01 January 2023.

Maharashtra recorded 32 tiger deaths in 2022. Six of these were due to electrocution, while eight of the 41 in 2023 were electrocution deaths.

(Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXVII, No. 4).

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. ‘Tiger electrocuted, mutilated by poachers in Gadchiroli div.,’
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
26/10/2023.

93 tigers in TATR; reserve on the brink of saturation, say experts



93 tigers were recorded in the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve (TATR) in the latest 2023 Phase IV survey, which involves monitoring of tiger and prey populations on an annual basis. 44 were identified as males and 47 as females. The gender of two individuals could not be identified. This amounts to a six-fold increase in the tiger population in TATR that was reported to be 15 individuals in 2010.

The entire exercise was conducted over 55 days between March and May 2023 in the core (625 sq. km) and buffer (1,127 sq. km) areas in two phases. 9-lakh pictures were captured by 1,250 cameras placed at 625 locations. 4,855 images of tigers were captured at 502 locations, while 389 locations captured 2,174 images of leopards. Over 1.44 lakh images featured other species including chital, mongoose, honey badger and the pangolin.

Conservator of forest (CF) and TATR’s field director Jitendra Ramgaonkar said that though the survey shows a marginal rise, tiger numbers in TATR are mostly stable. The figure of 93 is the optimum number. There is an increase in the area covered from 321 sq. km in 2010 to over 1,300 sq. km in the buffer. The stability of figures is because the numbers have reached a saturation point due to carrying capacity. However, he added that the

increase in number of tigers poses a big challenge.

TATR deputy director (core) Nandkishore Kale elaborated on the challenge saying that some tigers from the core were being chased away by their stronger counterparts. These tigers then settle in the buffer, pushing those in the buffer to adjoining territorial areas, resulting in deaths in territorial fights and also causing human animal conflict. Further, he suggested that conservation translocation of tigers could be a solution to this problem of plenty.

Gadchiroli honorary wildlife warden Uday Patel said that the situation was alarming. It is imperative to focus on habitat degradation, anthropogenic pressure and wild prey populations in areas in the landscape as these are key factors dictating conflict outside the reserve. NGO Eco-Pro's president Bandu Dhotre has insisted on the implementation of the Wildlife Action Plan, which was approved three years ago but has remained on paper. (Also see *PA Update* Vol. XVIII, No. 1)

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. ‘Tadoba tiger count rising, experts fear reserve on cusp of saturation,’
www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com,
10/11/2023.

Habal Pada in Aarey Colony fears eviction due to GMLR project in SGNP



Habal Pada, a village of over 65 families, near Film City has joined protests against the Goregaon Mulund Link Road (GMLR) project along with the other villages

located on the forest land of Aarey Milk Colony. The villagers have submitted a right to information (RTI) request to get the project

map, which will show them where the road will go and how it will affect their village.

After eight months of inviting bids and tendering, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) finalised a winning bid of Rs. 6,301 crores in July 2023 for the GMLR project. It aims to connect the western and eastern suburbs of Mumbai through the construction of twin tunnels under the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP). These underground tunnels with three lanes on each side, are proposed to be constructed from Film City in Goregaon in the western suburbs to Khindipada in Mulund in the eastern suburbs.

According to the additional municipal commissioner (projects) P Velrasu, the tunnels will cause no disturbance to the park or its surrounding lands including Aarey Colony. Habal Pada villagers have, however, expressed concern that the construction of the road leading to the tunnel might cut through their village, possibly displacing their ancestral homes. The BMC authorities have initiated preliminary planning by marking trees close to the village for removal.

A resident of the village said that the authorities had told villagers to let them begin the construction work, and if the villagers resist, they will do it by force. The Forest Rights Act 2006 recognises the rights of the forest-dwelling tribal communities and enables the tribal population to have a decisive say in the determination of local policies and schemes impacting them. Habal Pada, however, has been getting eviction notices since 2018.

A population of almost 10,000 live in the Aarey forest with 27 padas. Most of them existed before Aarey Milk Colony was created. While the Warlis of Ketli Pada have been fighting for years to ensure that they aren't relocated to make way for an anti-terrorism squad training camp project, the Kokana tribe from Prajapur Pada have been battling against the Metro car shed.

(Also see *PA Updates* XXIX, No. 2; Vol. XXVII, Nos. 5 & 1, Vol. XXVI, No. 5, Vol. XXV, Nos. 4 & 1 and Vol. XXIV, Nos. 3 & 2).

Source: Sherine Raj. 'GMLR project approval brings eviction worries for tribal families,' www.mumbai.citizenmatters.in, 10/11/2023.

MAHARASHTRA/ANDHRA PRADESH/ODISHA

Tiger walks 2,000 km from Brahmapuri in Maharashtra to Andhra Pradesh & Odisha

The tiger recorded in the areas along the border of Andhra Pradesh (AP) and Odisha in recent months has come from Brahmapuri near Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra. The Parlekhamundi Forest Division in Gajapati district of Odisha had contacted the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), to establish the identity of the tiger. WII's National Tiger Database revealed that the tiger was recorded at Bramhapuri in Tadoba landscape, where it was photographed during a camera trap survey by the Wildlife Conservation Trust in 2021. This male tiger from Bramhapuri was not radio-collared but had been photographed. This made identification possible by comparing the stripe pattern on its body seen in the photographs.

The animal is estimated to have walked more than 2,000 km crossing Chhattisgarh, Telangana, and AP in the last 18 months. Though it would have crossed many mines, agricultural fields, roads, and habitations, there is no record of the tiger attacking humans, pointed out the officials.

A tiger sighting was first reported in Rayagada district of Odisha in June. Since then the tiger kept traversing between Odisha and AP. In July, tiger sightings were reported in Bhaleri and Meturu villages in AP, and in Budura, Bathada, Idudi, Kashingar, and other areas in Odisha along the Vamsadhra River. The forest personnel of Odisha and AP conducted a joint patrolling exercise in the border areas after the tiger killed three cows and injured two buffaloes in three separate

incidents in Srikakulam district of AP on November 1.

It had been camera trapped a few days earlier on 19 October on the outskirts of Santhoshpur village in Mahendra forest of Narayanpur range in Odisha. In September, it had been sighted in the Mahendra forests in Gajapati district. Forest records show no historical presence of tigers in Gajapati district. Residents of Mohana and Kashinagar, however, have long claimed the presence of tigers here. Tiger sightings have been claimed from Jodipathar village and Lakhari sanctuary as well.

Though Odisha has been reporting tiger dispersal from neighbouring Chhattisgarh, this time a tiger has reached from Maharashtra. WII's conservation biologist Bilal Habib said that the dispersal itself is an eye-opener and underlines the significance of the Central Indian tiger population for tiger connectivity as also its importance for the long-term survival of big cats.

Source: Vijay Pinjarkar. 'Tadoba tiger traverses 2,000km, crosses four states, reaches Odisha,'

www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 24/11/2023.

'Joint patrolling in border areas after tiger attacks,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 03/11/2023.

Sisir Panigrahy. 'Tiger returns to Gajapati, villagers anxious, forest staff on toes,' www.newindianexpress.com, 22/10/2023.

'Tiger scare grips Srikakulam villages,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 30/10/2023.

MANIPUR

Village bans hunting to protect biodiversity of Shirui forest

In a move to conserve biodiversity of Shirui peak and its forest, the people of Shirui village

in Ukhrul district have imposed a ban on hunting wildlife within its jurisdiction for three years beginning October 2023. The village has expressed willingness to continue the initiative beyond three years if they get the support from the government for an alternative livelihood to villagers.

A resolution was passed in the matter in the Shirui village half yearly meeting recently. The village authorities also wrote a letter in this regard to the divisional forest officer of Ukhrul (Aze) in October.

Shirui peak also known as Shirui Kashong in local parlance is the habitat of Manipur's state flower Shirui lily *Lilium mackliniae*. The species discovered by an English botanist and explorer Dr. Frank Kingdon Ward in the Shirui hills in 1946 was named after Shirui village. He later gave it a botanical name *Lilium Mackliniae* after the maiden name of his wife Jean Macklin.

The state bird of Manipur, Nongin *Syrmaticus humiae*, and state tree, Uningthou *Phoebe hainesiana* are also found in this area.

Source: 'In a first, Manipur village bans wildlife hunting for 3 years to conserve forest,'

www.hindustantimes.com, 11/11/2023.

ODISHA

New sophisticated weapons for Similipal TR's STPF



The Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) of the Similipal Tiger Reserve (TR) will soon

get new sophisticated weapons that include INSAS rifles, revolvers and compaction guns. Orders for five of each (total 15) were placed recently by the authorities.

The reserve had 80 old guns which were not in use. These too have been repaired

and made available to field personnel. 40 personnel of the reserve recently also completed training at the Biju Patnaik State Police Academy. A second phase of the training will be held soon in Baripada.

Presently around 120 police personnel conduct routine patrolling along with forest personnel in the core of the reserve. The police personnel have their own firearms. Besides, 600 protection assistants guard the reserve at anti-poaching camps and check gates. However, they will not get any firearms.

The state government decided in July to arm forest personnel following the killing of two forest personnel in May and June. The Odisha Non-gazetted Forest Service Association had ceased work demanding that forest personnel in sanctuaries and tiger reserves be provided with firearms (*PA Updates* Vol. XXIX, Nos. 4 & 2)

Source: Riyan Ramanath V. ‘Similipal tiger protection force to get Insas rifles, revolvers,’ www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 09/11/2023.

Tiger recorded on camera trap inside Debrigarh WLS

A tiger was recently photographed by a camera trap in the Debrigarh Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Sambalpur. This is only the 3rd sighting in the last six years. The first was in December 2022 when a tiger was seen by a group of tourists, while the second sighting, of the same individual, was reported a couple of months later in February 2023.

The forest department had then said that the tiger had moved to Debrigarh from a forest in Chhattisgarh.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority has already given approval to a proposal of the Odisha government to declare Debrigarh WLS as a tiger reserve. (Also see *PA Updates* Vol. XXVIII, No. 1 and Vol. XXVII, No. 6).

Source: ‘Tiger spotted again at Debrigarh forest in Odisha’s Sambalpur district,’ www.orissapost.com, 31/10/2023.

RAJASTHAN

Conflict among officials for patrolling vehicles at Ranthambore NP

The ongoing internal conflict among officials concerning patrolling vehicles is allegedly impeding tiger monitoring in the Ranthambore National Park (NP). Since October, six vehicles, including canters and patrolling and monitoring vehicles have come under the purview of the chief conservator of forest (CCF) and the regional director of the Ranthambore Tiger Reserve. The release of these vehicles is contingent upon permission from the CCF.

Teams requiring these vehicles for emergency situations now need to request allocation from the CCF office before venturing into the field, which is reported to have been impractical.

The CCF has, however, denied the allegations saying that there is an abundance of vehicles available for monitoring. With the new system, stricter control has been established but the team can request vehicle issuance at any time. This new system ensures transparency, he said.

Source: ‘Row over patrolling vehicles affects tiger monitoring at R’bore,’ www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 08/11/2023.

Black-marketing of VIP quota safaris in Ranthambore NP: internal report

A recent internal inquiry report by the officiating chief conservator of forest (CCF) of Ranthambore, P Kathirvel, has revealed black-marketing of VIP quota safari trips to luxury hotels and a nexus for the same between officials, agents, and hoteliers. The inquiry was conducted in response to a complaint by

Deepak Dangindorya, a Congress leader and vice chairperson of the State Safai Karamchari Commission.

According to the report, the government fee for a VIP special quota safari vehicle is Rs. 7,830, excluding Rs. 3,300 for vehicle choice and Rs. 530 for the guide. However, these safaris were being sold at Rs. 49,000 plus GST amounting to Rs. 57,820 to a luxury hotel through brokers. In March, four vehicles associated with a luxury hotel were allowed safaris 148 times for an estimated revenue of approximately Rs. 57 lakh.

The report mentions the alleged involvement of a field director, deputy conservator of forest, tourism professionals, and a forest guard. The CCF has, in the report, recommended the head office to hand over the probe to the anti-corruption bureau.

Source: Ajay Singh. 'VIP quota for Ranthambhore safaris sold in black by officials: Report,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 29/11/2023.

Authorities install camera traps to study Rusty-spotted cat in Keoladeo NP

Keoladeo National Park (KNP) authorities have started setting up camera traps in the park to study the Rusty-spotted cat and develop conservation strategies for the species. The move came after a female was photographed carrying its kitten by two visitors in the park in October 2023. The park director, Manas Singh, said this was the first sighting of the species in the last five years and the first in a decade of a mother with a kitten.

A total of 90 camera traps will be set up for the purpose. Some concern has been expressed over the scale of the camera trap installation. Shomita Mukherjee, principal scientist, Sálím Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), said that installing almost 100 camera traps in a small area might disturb the habitat and prove to be detrimental to the cat's population and habitat.

Besides Keoladeo, the Rusty-spotted cat has been sighted in many parts of Rajasthan including Sajjangarh Biological Park, Phulwari ki Nal Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS), Jaisamand WLS in Udaipur, Sita Mata WLS in Pratapgarh and Bassi and Bhainsrorgarh WLSs in Chittorgarh, among others. Its presence has also been found in other districts of the state such as Baran, Pali, Sawai Madhopur, Alwar, Kota, Bundi, Jhalawar, Dholpur, Bharatpur and Sirohi.

Source: Shuchita Jha. 'A 100 camera traps to monitor rusty-spotted cats in Keoladeo National Park,' www.india.mongabay.com, 03/11/2023

RAJASTHAN / MADHYA PRADESH

Tiger presence in Kuno NP raises concern about possible conflict with cheetahs



Tiger T-136 of Ranthambore Tiger Reserve (TR) has been sighted in Kuno NP, some 8 km from the enclosure where the cheetahs were first released in September

2022. Officers from Madhya Pradesh (MP) forest department (FD) and Wildlife Institute of India researchers were also able to photograph the tiger.

The cheetahs have been shifted to large enclosures of Kuno NP fearing the possibility of clashes between them and the tiger. Other than the presence of the tiger, the depleting prey base is a major concern for Project Cheetah. Officials fear that a low prey base can trigger clashes between predators.

The tiger crossed the Rajasthan border and entered Morena in MP in November 2022 (*PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 3). After leaving Ranthambore, the tiger was reported near human settlements close to Gangapur before reaching Dholpur close to the MP border. In May 2023, the MP FD had found pugmarks of A tiger in the Basantpura area, 5 km from the cheetah enclosure. According to another news item, however, the divisional forest officer of Kuno is reported to have said that it is not yet clear whether the tiger in Kuno was from Ranthambore.

The tiger's arrival at Kuno is not surprising as there is an active 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.

Source: P Naveen. 'Rajasthan's nomad tiger seen in Kuno amid fears of low prey base,' www.timesofindia.indiatimes.com, 25/11/2023.

Kajal Kumari. 'Tiger Spotted In Kuno National Park, Officials Shift Cheetahs In Enclosures To Avoid Big Cat Fight,' www.freepressjournal.in, 25/11/2023.

TAMIL NADU

Gudalur Forest Division takes up native species plantation in elephant habitat

The Gudalur Forest Division has taken up planting saplings of native trees in an effort to improve habitat for the elephant here. 59,000 saplings are to be planted at Nadukani, Pitharkadu, Cherambadi and Pandalur during the north east monsoon. 10,000 saplings have already been planted in gap areas inside tea plantations and 90% of them are reported to be growing well.

The Gudalur division is known for severe human-elephant conflict. It connects Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu with Nilambur in

Kerala and has seen a lot of forest cover loss due to tea plantations and human settlements. The recent surrender of forest areas leased to Tantea back to the forest department (FD) has provided an opportunity to mitigate human-elephant conflict, said a senior forest official.

The FD has been modifying the landscape according to the needs of large mammals like the elephant, tiger and dholes. Invasive alien species have been removed and check dams constructed to improve water availability. Afforestation in low tea density areas is being carried out with native tree species and efforts are on to create an original ecosystem, said the officer.

Source: S Senthil Kumar. 'Forest Department to plant 59,000 native tree saplings in Nilgiris,' www.newindianexpress.com, 11/11/2023.

Authorities seal 18 illegal bore-wells around Vallanadu WLS

The Thoothukudi district administration recently sealed 18 illegal bore-wells in and around Vallanadu Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in Srivaikuntam taluk. This was facilitated through an executive order dated 11 September 2023. This information was revealed in a reply to a right to information (RTI) query filed by activist M Sujan Christopher. The RTI reply noted that the district administration had received 15 complaints regarding the operation of illegal bore-wells till October 2023.

Another RTI reply obtained by Christopher revealed that there are 255 blackbucks, 36 sambar and 53 spotted deer in and around the sanctuary as per the latest census conducted in 2021-22.

According to the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) associate professor Mathivanan, there is only a minimal strength of the species now found in the sanctuary. Tanks and ponds are the primary water source for these animals. A large number of deer are now out of the

sanctuary due to reduced water availability inside.

It is hoped that the closure of unauthorised bore-wells drilled for commercial purpose will benefit the deer and other wild animals here.

Source: S Godson Wisely Dass. '18 illegal borewells sealed around Vallanadu blackbuck sanctuary: RTI reply,' www.newindianexpress.com, 01/11/2023.

LTMs near Valparai, Anaimalai TR, rely more on garbage for food: study



Undertaking a four-year-long study in the rainforests at Puthuthottam near Valparai, independent researcher Dr.

Ashni Dhawale has discovered that groups of Lion-tailed macaques (LTM) have been increasingly frequenting human habitations after adapting to an unconventional food source - garbage. Though the species is characterised as an elusive habitat specialist, Dhawale, who observed the ecological changes and behavioural adaptations of one LTM population of about 200 individuals, found that the group increasingly became habituated to human presence in areas beyond their habitat.

Dhawale tracked the movement patterns of LTMs using GPS mapping and their use of the habitat in and around Valparai town and settlements within the Puthuthottam forest fragment. UK-based Rufford Foundation helped with her doctoral thesis, which aimed to shed light on the key drivers of change within this population, potentially influencing their long-term survival in an ever-changing landscape.

These primates began spending less time foraging and more time engaging in various activities, including resting and social

interactions. While this adaptation offered a source of sustenance, it posed significant challenges, including the need to navigate man-made structures, such as roads and buildings, which increased mortality risk. While the population itself appears to be increasing, the study reveals that population dynamics such as growth and birth rates have declined significantly over the last decade. Therefore, while the absolute number is 200 individuals split into five groups, the growth rate suggests that the population is highly vulnerable, especially under current circumstances.

The study identified collision with vehicles and electrocution, especially in the town area as the major threats faced by LTMs in Valparai. It has recommended to the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve officials to conduct long-term monitoring of LTMs and to the Valparai municipality officials to take steps to prevent the open dumping of garbage as it was easily accessible along the road.

Source: S Senthil Kumar. 'Elusive macaques show drastic behavioural changes when exposed to garbage,' www.newindianexpress.com, 02/10/2023.

UTTARAKHAND

CBI to question former forest minister over illegal tree felling & construction in Corbett TR



The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) has started investigating the tiger safari construction case in the Corbett National

Park (NP). The CBI is investigating the case on the directions of the Nainital High Court (HC), which had taken a tough stand on the illegal construction and felling of more than 6,000 trees during the construction of Pakhro Tiger

Safari in the Corbett Tiger Reserve (TR) area. The HC had asked the government why the case should not be investigated by the CBI.

The CBI had sought case related documents, which have been handed over to them, said the state vigilance director Dr. V Murugesan. The CBI is likely to soon start questioning the officials concerned as well as former forest minister Harak Singh Rawat in this matter. It may first question about a dozen forest officials, employees and contractors working in the range, including retired and current forest officers associated with the Pakhro Safari construction.

In this case, a Dehradun resident had filed a public interest petition in the HC. The petitioner brought to the notice of the court that investigations by eight agencies have revealed irregularities in the construction of the tiger safari and other tourist facilities in the reserve. A large number of trees were cut and all kinds of construction including of buildings and walls were carried out without financial and administrative approval. (See *PA Updates* Vol. XXIX. No. 2 and Vol. XXVIII, Nos. 6 & 4)



Source: Narendra Sethi. 'CBI begins probe into illegal felling of 6,000 trees at Pakhro Tiger Safari in Corbett,' www.newindianexpress.com, 25/09/2023.

UTTAR PRADESH

One more killed in leopard attack; 17th death in Bijnor district this year

A person was killed in a leopard attack in Bijnor district on January 17, 2023, and since then, 17 people including eight children are reported to have been killed here by leopards.

Protected Area Update Vol. XXIX, No. 6

In the latest incident, a 12-year-old boy was killed on November 1, reportedly by a leopard, in Khatriwala village of Badhapur area of district Bijnor.

After the boy's mutilated and half eaten body was found around 300 m from his house, a cage along with cameras was installed in the vicinity. The divisional forest officer of Bijnor said that the leopard was found trapped in the cage on November 3. Local residents however believe that there might be more than one leopard who have been attacking people.

Meanwhile, the state's wildlife department declared two leopards as man-eaters after examining evidence collected from the field and has ordered to kill them. (Also see *PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 5).

Source: S Raju. 'Leopard makes 17th kill in UP's Bijnor again, caged,' www.hindustantimes.com, 03/11/2023.

NATIONAL NEWS FROM INDIA

Anthropogenic pressure, climate change threaten PAs in the Himalayas: experts

A study published in the *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment* journal in September 2023 has revealed that the built-up area in and around the Dachigam National Park (NP) has gone up by 325% between 1965 and 2020. Irfan Rashid, Assistant Professor at the Department of Geoinformatics, University of Kashmir, and corresponding author for the study, noted that surface aquatic vegetation in Dal Lake, for which the NP is an important catchment increased by about 175% in this period. This is attributed to the growth of built-up areas and the corresponding increase in the sewage generated. The catchment area of Dal Lake covers around 337 sq. km, with the NP occupying about 141 sq. km.

Reduction in the forest cover and negative changes to the habitat, the study

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notes, could be a reason for the increase in incidents of human-wildlife conflict here. Rashid points to the examples of bears sighted in residential areas of Srinagar city like Rajbagh and Sonwar as evidence of the same (*PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 4).

Another study published in the *Nordic Journal of Botany* evaluated the floristic elements of the Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) in North Kashmir and reports that the major threats include over-exploitation, overgrazing, invasive species, human settlements, a huge tourism influx and pollution. The study recorded 364 plant species here with 161 of these being native. This included 82 species that are endemic and 22 that are threatened.

The study notes that rising temperatures can cause shifts in vegetation zones, impacting the habitats of various wildlife species. For instance, the snow leopard is facing competition with other sympatries such as the common leopard in terms of prey species due to range shifts with respect to elevations.

The spread of invasive species is another key threat to these ecologically fragile areas in the Indian Himalayan Region. The Great Himalayan NP in Himachal Pradesh is grappling with the exotic Brown trout invasion. This is leading to a phenology shift of Himalayan native fish species such as the Snow trout. Gautam Talukdar, a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) said that the Himalayan ecosystems are becoming increasingly fragile due to the escalating anthropogenic pressures and climate change. The impact of human activities in the protected areas (PAs) is exacerbated by irregular weather patterns and extreme weather events.

A recent example are the heavy rains in 2023 in Himachal Pradesh that caused flash floods and landslides in the Kullu-Manali-Shimla region and also affecting the Great Himalayan NP. Similarly, Uttarakhand has experienced multiple calamities in recent years, with the 2013 Uttarakhand floods being one of the most devastating. Likewise, Sikkim

recently witnessed flash floods and landslides due to intense rainfall. PAs such as Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve are also under imminent threat due to landslides blocking roads and disrupting access.

Anzar Khuroo, Associate Professor, Department of Botany, University of Kashmir, pointed out that unsustainable tourism and improperly implemented 'eco-tourism' are another significant threats to these PAs. Principal scientist at the CSIR – Institute of Himalayan Bioresource Technology, Palampur, Himachal Pradesh, Amit Chawla said that for the effective management of PAs, it is essential to implement the schemes and scientific management plans, along with ensuring that adequate funding goes into these schemes. As most of the PAs in the Indian Himalayan Region are situated in the high-altitude zone with arduous terrains, the field staff is to be trained properly and should be provided patrolling and camping gear and advanced field equipment for regular monitoring, he added.

Further, the experts emphasised that any conservation effort would be incomplete without the involvement of the local communities. There is a need for strengthening the existing educational institutes in the vicinity with science and socio-economics-based teaching programmes, Chawla said, adding that this would help provide the right education and impart the right skills so that the local youth are trained and take up conservation efforts by formation of self-help groups or NGOs.



Source: Hirra Azmat. 'Dachigam National Park at risk as forest cover, natural habitat reduces, reveals study,' www.india.mongabay.com, 24/11/2023.

Study reveals different patterns in illegal trade of tortoises and soft-shell turtles



Tortoises or hard-shell turtles from India are traded to more places globally and through a wider trafficking network than soft-shell turtles. The former are mostly traded as pets while the latter are for meat and primarily within the country. These are the outcomes of a study published in the journal *Oryx* in September 2023. The study was based on a comparison of supply networks of tortoises and soft-shell turtles based on 78 and 64 seizures, respectively, reported in the media for the period 2013 - 2019.

The illegally traded tortoises were often found to be transported by air, which indicated corruption at entry and exit points, said the authors of the study adding that a lack of training on and awareness of illegal wildlife trade amongst enforcement authorities at entry/exit points and a lack of functional scanning equipment may also facilitate trafficking via airports. Further it said that the greater geographical scale and the presence of larger numbers of international trafficking links in tortoise trafficking could indicate the involvement of transnational criminal gangs.

The study showed that smuggling routes are convoluted in the form of two-way trafficking of tortoises between specific exit points within the country, such as between Chennai and Bengaluru. They are unidirectional for soft-shell turtles indicating a simpler supply chain from source to destination, potentially necessitating less organization.

The important trading stops in the case of tortoises were all located in large, well-connected state capitals like Chennai, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Bangalore. From here, the consignments moved to other 'nodes' within

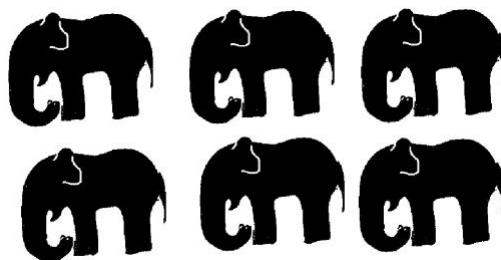
India or abroad. Chennai emerged as the most central node in tortoise trafficking followed by North 24 Parganas in West Bengal. Other nodes of importance included Sri Lanka, West Bengal, and Delhi.

In contrast, nodes for both supply and import of soft-shell turtles for meat trade were predominantly within the country, indicating that the trade was domestic. Varanasi, Jaunpur, Pratapgarh, Sultanpur and Amethi in the Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh were found to be the key supply districts of soft-shell turtles while North 24 Parganas re-emerged as an important hub of soft-shell turtles trafficking.

The study has called for inter-agency collaboration and the involvement of expertise from cybercrime and financial crime departments to curb the illegal trade.

Source: Preetha Banerjee. 'Tortoise & hard-shell turtle smuggling network wider, more organised than that for soft-shell turtle: Report,' www.downtoearth.org.in, 25/09/2023.

Inconsistencies in elephant corridors identified in 2023 report: expert



Earlier this year, the central government released a report titled 'Elephant Corridors of India, 2023', which mentioned an increase of 62 corridors in the country since 2010, bringing the total to 150 — an increase of 40% (*PA Update* Vol. XXIX, No. 5). Raman Sukumar, elephant expert and professor at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) has, however, pointed out inconsistencies in the definition of corridors in the report during a standing committee meeting of the National Board for Wildlife held on 29 August 2023. He warned of opening floodgates for litigation and more

human-elephant conflicts due to the inconsistencies. Sukumar noted that the original meaning of the corridors has been lost and there is a tendency to call every place where elephants move as corridors adding that the report has classified landscapes and habitats as corridors.

The minutes have many examples of the same. States like Karnataka submitted documents mentioning potential corridors, which could be one to two km long or about tens of hectares of land. On the other hand, states like Jharkhand have submitted documents for a vast expanse of corridors. One area referred to as a corridor in Jharkhand is 120 km long and 5 km wide. This means 600 sq. km, which is larger than most of the protected areas in the country. Another corridor in Jharkhand was documented as being about 46 km long but only 30 m wide. This means that if a herd of elephants is to walk in this corridor, they should move in a single file. There are similar anomalies in the case of Odisha as well; one suggested corridor, for instance, is 75 km long.

The areas in West Bengal close to Odisha and Jharkhand, like Mayurjhira, have only small patches of forest cover that are fit for elephants. The rest of the areas where elephants move in south Bengal are human-dominated agricultural fields. The elephants go to Bankura, East Midnapur, West Midnapur and even Bangladesh. The document suggests linking these areas to other elephant landscapes, which has never been the intent of the word corridor, said Sukumar.

Apart from defining corridors, there are a lot of inconsistencies in the report in which states have offered suggestions on the merger and incomplete merger of corridors, he added.

Source: Himanshu Nitnaware. 'Elephant corridor report plagued with inconsistencies, could escalate conflict with humans, says expert,' www.downtoearth.org.in, 02/11/2023

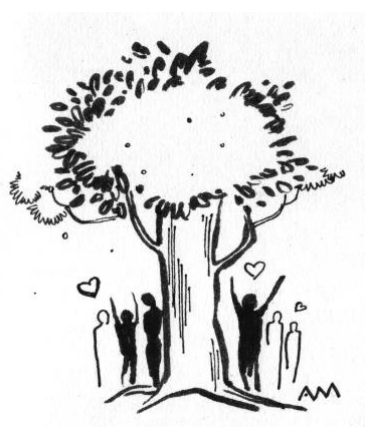
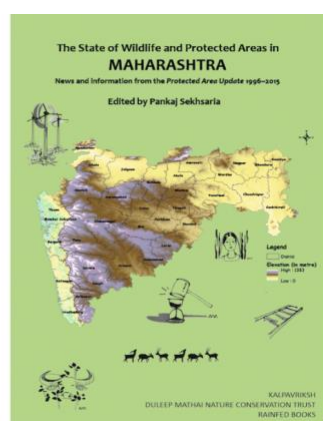
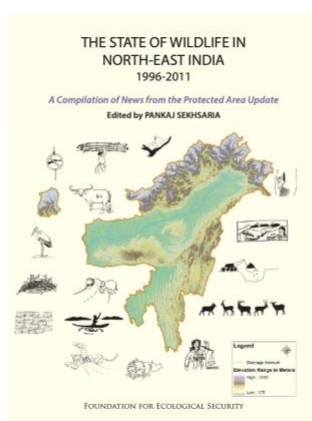
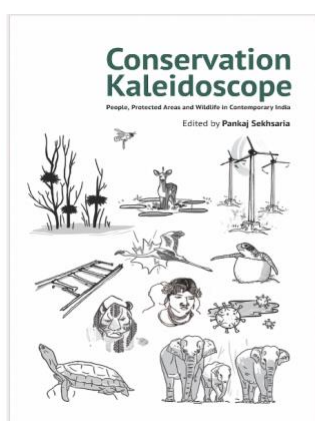


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- 3) *The State of Wildlife in North-East India 1996-2011: A compilation of news from the Protected Area Update*, 2013, 330 pp, 100 line drawings, Price: Rs. 300

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GOA

ESZs notified for six PAs

The Union Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) has notified eco-sensitive zones (ESZs) for six protected areas (PAs) in Goa. For five PAs, the ESZ for will include an area of one km around their respective boundaries while for the Cotigao Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) it would cover a radius of three kms from the boundary.

The demarcation of the ESZ envisages a ban on mining and other activities in the case of four protected areas, Mhadei, Bondla, Cotigao and the Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary effective from January 2014. All the activities listed in the notification will be banned after a 60-day period of the notification.

The ban extends to existing mining of minor and major minerals, stone quarrying and crushing units. Mining will however continue in the Netravali WLS and the Bhagwan Mahaveer National Park (NP) and the state government has been given five to 10 years to phase out these activities.

Four villages, Govanem, Assode, Sirsode and Surla will be completely within the ESZ of the Bhagwan Mahaveer NP and Molem WLS while 14 other villages including Shigao, Colem, Codli and Sangod will be partially in the sensitive area. In the case of Neturim WLS, five villages, Nundem, Dongar, Viliena, Bati and Cumbari will be totally in the ESZ and 13 other villages, including Selaulim, Tudov, Potrem and Gaondongorim will be partly in it. In the case of the Cotigao WLS, three villages, Poinguinim, Gaondongorim and Cotigao will be in this sensitive zone.

Eleven villages, including Govanem, Sirsode and Choraundem will be completely in the ESZ of the Mhadei WLS while 23 other areas including Copardem, Ambeli and Bhuimpal will be partially in the ESZ. In the case of Bondla WLS, four villages,

Darbandora, Usgao, Gotaikhadiwada and Melaulim will be totally encompassed by the one-km zone while seven villages, including Pissurlem will be partly within it.

Source: '1km ESZ for 5 wildlife sanctuaries notified', *The Times of India*, 08/11/13.

Rare tree found in Mhadei WLS

Researchers from the Sirsi Forest College along with Goan researchers have discovered the critically endangered tree, *Semecarpus kathalekanensis*, inside the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS).

Professor Vasudev of Sirsi Forest College with researchers Shivprakash and Shrikant Gunaga, along with M K Janarthanam of Goa University and researcher Ashish Prabhugaonkar found the trees in the in Bibtyan of Brahma Karmali area of the sanctuary.

Semecarpus kathalekanensis is an evergreen tree, which grows generally up to 20 meters high. It belongs to the Anacardiaceae family. Its bark is smooth, greyish brown and mottled with numerous prominent warts. Its branchlets are stout, smooth and hairless. Leaves are simple, alternately and spirally arranged and carried on stalks 5-10 cm long. The tree bears fruit which are bigger than the size of a *chikoo* and have *jamun* colour nuts in them.

Brahma Karmali locals call these trees as *Bibti* and the area as *Bibtyan*. There are estimated to be only about 200 individuals of this tree species. All its five known habitats are in the Western Ghats, four in Uttar Kannada of Karnataka and the one in Mhadei WLS which was recently confirmed.

Source: Rajendra P Kerkar, 'Critically endangered trees found in Sattari', *The Times of India*, 15/10/13.

PERSPECTIVE

Tracking Olive Ridleys on the West Coast of India

Olive Ridley turtles are the most abundantly found sea turtles across the world's oceans and they have been coming to the shores of India for many years for nesting. Their sporadic nesting is seen on over 40 beaches along Maharashtra's coastline as well.

The Maharashtra Forest Department (FD) along with the help of local communities and NGOs has been undertaking the conservation of Olive Ridley turtle nests along the coast in Maharashtra since 2003 but till recently there was no information regarding their movement in the Arabian sea.

To understand the movement and migration of these Olive Ridley turtles, the Mangrove Cell, of the Maharashtra FD and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) undertook a research programme. Five female Olive Ridley turtles were satellite tagged in January-February 2022 in Maharashtra, the first such initiative on the western coast of India.

The movements of these turtles were tracked by WII and it was observed that all the turtles showed a southward movement pattern. The turtles mainly showed two types of movements: one was the migratory phase in which they were moving in a particular direction whereas the other was a stopover phase or a foraging phase in which the turtles moved very slowly and stayed in the same area for days or months.

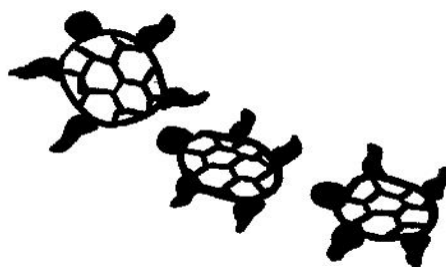
These satellite transmitters functioned for around 4-5 months and the data obtained through this programme was the first of its kind regarding the movement and migration patterns of Olive Ridley turtles from the west coast of India.

Continuing this study, two more turtles were tagged on 22 February 2023. These two turtles also showed southward movement and one of the turtle was observed to move around a lot in the waters off the coast of Karnataka similar to that of the earlier tagged turtles. This

suggests that this might be an important foraging area.

The other turtle continued travelling south from the Arabian sea to the Indian Ocean and after crossing Sri Lanka it travelled north into the Bay of Bengal. Both the turtles were tracked for more than 200 days and their transmitters stopped functioning in late September 2023.

Thus, this research programme has provided valuable data regarding the movement and migration of the Olive Ridley turtles nesting on the west coast of India.



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