

Putting teeth into wildlife laws

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Frightening as it may sound, Jim Corbett's 'Gentleman of the Jungle' is facing virtual extinction. With rampant poaching, depleting forest cover and conflict with man, the tiger finds itself not a predator but helpless prey. Despite a plethora of laws, conviction remains a farce. What is needed is the will to turn things around, says DEVAKI PANINI.

The author, an environmental lawyer based in New Delhi, works as a legal consultant to the Tiger Conservation Programme , World Wide Fund for Nature – India. She has been involved in conducting legal workshops for field personnel of tiger reserves supported by the programme.

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The Similipal National Park situated in the eastern state of Orissa in India in the District of Mayurbhanj has an estimated wild tiger population of around 99 as per 2004 census figures. This tiger habitat contains the single largest tiger concentration in the state and hence any effort for tiger conservation in Orissa would be inadequate without launching efforts for conservation of the Similipal tiger population. The total area of the tiger reserve is around 3,000 sq. kms which includes a core of 800 sq. kms. It was included in the first group of tiger bearing areas declared as Tiger Reserves in 1974 and obtains central government assistance under project Tiger. The Similipal Tiger Reserve has some unique advantages as a Tiger Reserve since no road or railway line bisects the park and as a result the resident tigers are relatively undisturbed from human activities compared to other areas of the country.

The peripheral areas of the Tiger Reserve are under threat due to deforestation and it is crucial that such areas are protected for the future survival of the wild tiger population.

The following reasons have been found responsible for forest loss :

- a) Illegal felling of timber trees and collection of firewood:
- b) Failure of sal tree regeneration due to excessive and improper harvesting of sal leaves
- c) Failure of forest regeneration due to cattle grazing and goat farming.
- d) Setting of fires in summer season for collection of forest produce.

In the past the forest department has undertaken a few local meetings in the local villages for conservation of the tiger habitat. However, these efforts were sporadic and were not carried out in a continuous planned manner as a result of which total success could not be achieved. The Wildlife Society of Orissa which is a premier state level wildlife conservation NGO working since the last 10 years in the state of Orissa took up this project to protect the tiger habitat in the peripheral areas of Similipal.

Source : Wildlife Society of Orissa , Biswajit Mohanty, Secretary.