

Mystery of the Missing Tigers

Where have all the tigers gone ?

India's fourth largest tiger reserve in Similipal in the Eastern Indian State of Orissa is facing this uncomfortable question.

Wildlife officials insist there are 101 tigers in Similipal. They also agree that the numbers have remained more or less unchanged over the past six years.

But wildlife activists dispute the figures and argue that the tigers count is vastly exaggerated.

The reasons, they say, is that no major tiger presence has been recorded in the reserve using standard counting methods in the recent past.

Doubts

Now even the federal financial watchdog Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) in a recent report has expressed doubts over the official tiger count in Similipal. It has observed that the "pugmark" method – counting cat paw prints - by which tigers are counted in the reserve is not "considered a fool – proof methodology by experts".

The report has pointed out that other techniques such as using cameras, studying scratch marks on trees, collecting evidence of breeding, as well as direct sighting and radio telemetry, were not adopted to obtain more exact tiger figures in the reserve.

Spread over 2750 sq. km in Mayurbhanj district, Similipal is situated 300 km north of the state capital, Bhubaneswar.

Ever since the counting process of tigers and leopards started here, the pugmark method has been adopted to measure tiger numbers.

Orissa Chief wildlife warden Suresh Mohanty is confident that the pugmark method is a scientific process to estimate tiger numbers.

But wildlife activists such as the chief of the Wildlife Society of Orissa, Biswajit Mohanty, reject government claims, and say it is necessary to switch over to more developed and scientific method of ascertain the tiger figures.

They say that too much rain washes pugmarks away. If there's too little rain, the soil gets hard and the tigers don't leave pugmarks. So, they say, the method is unreliable.

There are also circumstantial indicator pointing to a thin tiger population in the reserve, activists say.

There are 64 villages with 12,000 people who live inside the Similipal Tiger Reserve. Apart from these, more than 1000 villages with 400,000 people surround the park.

Thousands of cattle and goats from these villages graze inside the reserve. Yet there are no records of any animal or human attacked by the cats in the last seven years.

Poaching

Activists says this is strange since once tiger grow old, they have to kill cattle to survive. This occurs all over India in all forest where tigers live. Even in Satkosia wildlife sanctuary in Orissa, which harbours a small tiger population of 12, cattle attacks and killing are reported regularly.

Officials contends that since tigers mostly live inside the dense forests, cases of cattle kills might go unreported.

Activists refuse to buy this.

“ If the government has no mechanism to track what is happening in villages situated inside the core area, large scale poaching over the years could have wiped out the tiger population in the reserve core zone” says Pratyash Mohapatra, a wildlife activists.

Authorities say poaching of tigers in the reserve has stopped as no animal hides or body parts have been seized in the state in the past decade.

Mohanty says he himself set up a sting operation with officials, resulting in the seizure of 21 leopard skins in the state in 1996.

Evidence of the poaching of other animals has been found inside the reserve.

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A gang of elephant poachers from the north – eastern states systematically poached elephant in the last monsoon, as was revealed from the seizure of tusks from some local tribal hunters who were their local contacts.

“ If there is concrete evidence of elephant poaching inside Similipal, how can the government be so sure that tigers are safe?” asks local resident Mitu Sahoo.

Authorities say they are putting up some 50 cameras in the Park, to find out where the tigers may have gone and get a better grip on their exact numbers.

The final results are not expected for a year. Until then, officials and activists will continue to remain at loggerhead about the missing tigers of Similipal.

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