

The VANISHING TIGER

By Ajay Vishwanathan
Photos by Aditya “Dicky” Singh

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Its royal, sinewy gait stops you in your tracks. You then stand and admire an animal that has inspired cultures, evoked paeans, graced emblems, and in general, bewitched mankind. So I am pained by stories from Indian villages of the proud tiger—unmatched in charisma and ferocity—being ambushed by cheap human maneuvers, snagged by painful jaw traps, pierced mid-roar through the mouth and vocal chords, and bludgeoned by heavy sticks till it finally succumbs.

Yes, the tiger is dying, and painfully, too. About a hundred years ago, India had 40,000 wild tigers. Now, experts say, there are fewer than 800.

To someone’s inane question as to why the water buffalo is not our national animal, considering it is also native to India, my teacher said, “Because I cannot imagine the buffalo as a prestigious emblem I want to showcase to the world.” My teacher was right; there is nothing wrong with the buffalo or its contribution, but it lacks the majesty of the tiger, the splendor of the peacock or the serenity of the lotus, qualities we feel national emblems should embody.

YEAR OF IRONY

The cruel irony of 2010 being the Chinese Year of the Tiger is that it is in China that almost every part of this animal is most sought after, from skin, paws, and bones to eyes and testicles. An increase in the financial clout of the average Chinese citizen has fueled demand, and hence stoked illegal poaching and racketeering. *The Huffington Post* says, “A 55-pound sack of tiger bones from a single tiger, a tiger once wild and now caged in a tenement zoo enclosure, can be worth up to \$250,000.” At one end of this well-planned, illegal supply chain are these injudicious buyers; at the

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other are needy poachers who view the sight of a tiger as month-long freedom from economic strife. It doesn't help that most high-population tiger pockets are in impoverished areas.

POACHER MENACE

It seems easier to hunt down a tiger than a poacher. There are reasons aplenty. The wildlife cartel is becoming powerful and deadly, furnishing hunters with sophisticated weapons. "The poaching mafia is like an army of ants. If one link is cut it will soon be replaced with another," says Samir Sinha of Traffic India, the wildlife trade monitoring network. The Indian government meanwhile has anti-poaching staff that is underpaid, "armed" with sticks, old rusted rifles that might not fire, and fatigued intentions. The Tiger Task Force, established by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in 2005, reported that more than 50 percent of the positions in the tiger reserves are vacant, the average age of the forest staff is 50, and certain workers have not been paid for more than six months. Field directors are not inclined to spend time skulking in the bushes trying to trap poachers; instead, they want to impress the VIPs who frequent their parks.

India's Minister of State for Environment and Forests, Jairam Ramesh, revealed that out of the 27 tiger reserves across the country, 16 are in terrible shape, "where tigers have vanished or are on the brink of vanishing." Take the Sariska and Panna Tiger Reserves, now tarnished by the blood of the very animal they were meant to nurture and showcase. The number of tigers in these reserves, after a futile and disregarded struggle, has been throttled to zero. After this debacle, the authorities discovered a poacher route that ran from New Delhi to Nepal, Tibet and China. Even as we lament the loss, we have to brace ourselves for more bad news. The BBC reported last year that another national park in Madhya Pradesh, the Sanjay National Park, might have no tigers left.

VIOLENT INTRUSION AND ITS CHAIN REACTION

While poaching is a massive problem, it is not the only one. Encroachment is another. The tiger is territorial and needs its own habitat. But with human greed comes a greater desire to expand and explore. Deforestation, mining, and intrusive highways, rail tracks and human settlements have compromised the natural settings, reduced the prey biomass of forests, and indirectly spelled the downfall of the tiger.

The power of the chain reaction in the natural food chain is its efficiency, but an innate evil lies in its ability to wreak havoc as decisively when the same chain is ravaged. We invade the tiger's home. It loses its prey and space. It then crosses its barriers and kills us. We retaliate. And this continues.

Earlier this year, in the Ranthambhore National Park, two tiger cubs were killed in revenge for lost cattle. The villagers used poisoned goats to eliminate their targets. Aditya "Dicky" Singh, a wildlife enthusiast and tiger expert, was witness to the two decomposing dead bodies. In his blog, he says, "Unless a living tiger has financial value for most of the people who live near ti-



ger habitats, tigers are not going to survive." The BBC reports that there are close to 100 villages around this park. The greater the number of people overstepping the boundaries, the more the number of lost cattle, the more vengeful the human fury, and more death to the voiceless beast.

INSURGENTS AND TIGER-TRACKING

Another problem comes in the form of Naxalite-Maoist guerillas, who are part of an insurgency started by peasants. In the name of standing up for tribal oppression, they harass and even terrorize forest officials, whom they regard as government puppets wielding sticks and power to extract money, land and goods from tribal folk. *The Guardian*, UK, notes, "At least six of the parks are overrun by Naxalites and are inaccessible to the forest department." No access means poor tiger-counting methods and protection, which brings

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us to the matter of tiger-tracking.

The last extensive tiger census in India was based largely on counting pug marks, a method considered archaic by many. In his candid expose, *Tiger: The Death Chronicles*, filmmaker Krishnendu Bose revealed how pugmarks can be manipulated to exaggerate the numbers. Even as the animals are poached, stripped of their parts and smuggled, the pugmark calculations show no fall in tigers. "The plaster pugmarks of 1991 are probably stamped again as the pugmarks of 2001," says P.K. Sen, former director of Project Tiger.

A more accurate estimate could come from a combination of camera traps along animal trails and a survey of the habitat and prey base. But it is difficult to imagine our fraud-prone government officials spending money on cameras when they can get away with understaffing their posts, underpaying their existing men, and fudging pugmarks.

GLOBAL WARMING

Additionally, there is the highly touted problem of global warming. Rising sea levels in the Sundarbans mangrove forest are threatening its tiger population. The Sundarbans, declared in 1987 a UNESCO World Heritage Site shared by India and Bangladesh, sits on the delta of the Ganges. Colby Loucks, Deputy Director Conservation Science at the World Wildlife Fund, said,

"If we don't take steps to address the impacts of climate change on the Sundarbans, the only way its tigers will survive this century is with scuba gear." Again, the hand of the chain reaction: we pollute our environment and tigers drown to their defenseless demise.

FIXES? SOME BIG, SOME SMALL

So, with all the cries of death, duplicity and disregard, is anybody listening?

To coincide with the start of the Chinese Year of the Tiger, and to coax more support from the international community and celebrities, the World Wildlife Fund has launched a Year of the Tiger campaign beginning February 14. The goal is to double wild tiger numbers by 2022.

Then, there are smaller groups working with admirable passion, albeit with limited resources. Fateh Singh Rathore, the government's former field director at Ranthambhore, founded Tiger Watch, which hires informants for Rs. 3,500 a month. "It's a risky job," says anti-poaching expert Dharmendra Khandal. "The community knows who the informants are." When you expose the faults and guile of those in power, you should expect to face consequences. In 2004, when Tiger Watch revealed real tiger numbers in the Ranthambhore Reserve, rowdy officials stormed into Rathore's office and demolished it, then shattered his shop and restaurant.



Rathore is unperturbed, and continues his effort to nab notorious poachers (like Madhya Pradesh's Devi Singh) and expose the government's misleading numbers. If the work of Tiger Watch is inspiring, so are the efforts of the Vasanta Sena, an emboldened group of unarmed women volunteers mostly from poor families in Kerala's Periyar tiger reserve. In addition to their battle against poachers, they try to stop the destruction of the tiger's habitat, especially the felling of sandalwood trees, prized for their oil. Also heartening to note is a joint operation by the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the Wildlife Institute of India to determine the real tiger population using modern counting techniques. These developments follow an outcry after 2009, which saw one of the worst declines in tiger numbers.

While the loss of a gorgeous animal is terrible in itself, the possible repercussions to the ecosystem could be severe enough to impact us all. Says Traffic India: "The removal of a top predator from any ecosystem is the equivalent of removing an essential structural component from an airplane. The system will crash."

There has been an outpouring of passion for the cause of the tiger, there have been speeches, committee meetings, and there is world consensus, but the real action needs to come from the relevant people. All those involved—from the big markets of China, Taiwan, and South Korea to the main poaching centers of India, Nepal, and Sumatra—need to recognize the crisis that has befallen the most recognizable predator on earth. Samir Sinha wants to intensify international pressure on China to punch out illegal trading in tiger parts. "Violators should be taken to task. Punishment must be severe and swift," says Sekhar Dattatri, a wildlife filmmaker.

The solutions are easier to propose than to implement because the roots of the issue lie deeper. "The problems for the tiger are poverty, illiteracy and overpopulation," says Aditya Singh. "The big problems that India has are the problems the tiger faces." The implications of Singh's observation seem ominous. The threat is real. The current breed of tigers is close, very close, to suffering the same fate as its now-extinct Javan and Balinese relatives. Are we about to have the dubious distinction of having witnessed the swansong of the largest big cat? I hope not.

The water buffalo certainly wouldn't look like it belonged in the same group as the peacock and the lotus. ■

