Source : www.thehindu.com Date : 2020-08-13

HOW THE TIGER CAN REGAIN ITS STRIPES

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

On International Tiger Day, July 29, authorities proudly declared that India should “celebrate” the increase in tigers from about 2,000 in 1970 to about 3,000 now. This is an annual growth rate lower than 1% after 50 years of incredible, sometimes heroic, efforts. Clearly, India has done better than other tiger range countries, but at what cost and what efficiency needs deeper scrutiny.

On the same day, a functionary of the Delhi-based Global Tiger Forum admonished us not to aspire, ever, to have more than 3,500 wild tigers. In a country with such an expansive land base, a robust economic foundation, and a rapidly urbanising educated population cheering for the tiger, this dismal projection cannot be our vision. Even a back-of-the-envelope calculation can show that India has the potential to hold 10,000 to 15,000 wild tigers. What is lacking is a pragmatic plan to get to that goal.

In contrast to the above dismal scenario, I can report what I witnessed in the Malenad landscape of about 25,000 sq km in Karnataka. Field observations over 50 years and research suggest that there were only around 70 tigers in this landscape in the early 1970s. I had feared they would all be gone soon. The substantial increase of tigers that followed, against all odds, was due to the work of dedicated foresters and conservationists under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. There are now about 400 wild tigers in Malenad. My own estimates, based on long-term research, show that the Malenad forests can potentially harbour about 1,300 cats. Clearly my experience is at odds with the current bureaucratic projections.

Two legal instruments that enabled tiger recoveries in India were the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and the Forest (Conservation) Act of 1980, which reinforced Project Tiger. The political leadership and field efforts behind this recovery had to overcome very difficult social challenges: slow growth of the economy, excessive reliance on forest exploitation for livelihoods and government revenues, dire poverty, and protein dependency on wild meat that drove massive local hunting. These challenges were overcome and tiger recoveries occurred, but only sporadically in a few reserves.

Around 2000, things began to change. There was a decline in political commitment to conservation and the gradual transition of the field-oriented Forest Department to one whose primary aspiration was to be like the multitasking Indian Administrative Service. This was followed by unnecessary and massive borrowings from the Global Environment Facility-World Bank combine to create new models for tiger recovery. Some of us conservationists, including Valmik Thapar and the late Sanjoy Debroy, wrote to the World Bank to abandon the proposed eco-development model, but to no avail.

This tiger walked 3,020 kms to find a home

This mission drift in tiger protection overlapped with the upsurge of emancipatory political movements for the release of wildlife habitats for cultivation and exploitation by loosely defined “forest-dwellers”. This populist movement led to the implementation of the Forest Rights Act of 2006, which has turned into an open-ended process of forest conversion even within wildlife reserves. Impacts on tiger habitats have been severe.

At the end of the 20th century, accompanying these broader social changes, personnel changes too played a part in weakening tiger conservation. When Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee

promoted his capable and enterprising Environment Minister Suresh Prabhu, the portfolio landed in the lap of garden-variety politicians of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam. When one of the most capable leaders of Project Tiger, P.K. Sen, retired, he was replaced by a bureaucrat who managed to game the system to stay on for an unprecedented 13 years.

The tiger extinction in Sariska Reserve caused a public outcry in 2005, leading to the appointment of a Tiger Task Force (TTF) by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Unfortunately, the TTF turned out to be unequal to the task. Its politically correct ideologies and muddled science resulted in a report that created a tiger management model that benefited the forest bureaucracy more than it did the tigers.

Crouching tiger, hidden data

Based on TTF recommendations, the United Progressive Alliance government began investing heavily, but not very intelligently, in tiger conservation. Excessive funding of a few reserves while neglecting large areas with greater recovery potential became the norm. Progress on voluntary village relocation schemes from within reserves slowed down (except in Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, where major initiatives funded by these States greatly helped tiger recoveries). Tiger reserve managers were soon attracted to the massively funded eco-development activities originally formulated by the World Bank. In reality, they needlessly replicated the rural development work already being done by several other agencies and NGOs.

Another feature of this emergent government monopoly over tiger management was the lack of data transparency and rigorous, independent tiger monitoring.

The tiger was fully bound in red tape. One had hoped when the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) took over in 2014 and began to wind down bureaucracies in favour of new initiatives and enterprise, that the red tape strangling the tiger would also be unwound. But there was no such luck: within two weeks of the NDA assuming power, the same national and international bureaucratic apparatuses that ran the show after 2005 performed a trapeze act and clasped the hands of the new masters.

Therefore, the show goes on: One prime example is the aforementioned Global Tiger Forum, an international bureaucracy snugly entrenched in Delhi. It has done so in defiance of its own original charter and attempts by multilateral aid institutions to pry it loose and park it in Southeast Asia. Another case in point is the National Tiger Conservation Authority. It has bloated in size, swallowing up schemes totally unrelated to tigers, such as the recovery of snow leopards and translocation of African cheetahs to India.

India needs to get out of this tiger circus. The role of the forest bureaucracy should be once again restricted to wildlife law enforcement. Merging Project Tiger with other Central schemes for wildlife conservation would be a good first step. Government monopoly over domains of tiger conservation such as tiger research, monitoring, nature education, tourism and possibly even conflict mitigation should be erased. The vast reservoir of talent and energy in society should be drawn in to engage with these diverse domains, by involving private enterprises, local communities, NGOs and scientific institutions.

India’s tiger conservation needs a reboot to match the scale of the country’s aspirations in other domains — a new vision that encompasses the talents and aspirations of a growing number of citizens who want to save tigers without turning the clock back on material progress.

K. Ullas Karanth is Director, Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru. Views are personal

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