

THE RIGHT COUNT

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Ever since they slumped to an all-time low of around 1,400 in 2006-2007, India's tiger numbers have increased. The last Tiger Census Report, released in July, put the population at 2,967, a 33 per cent increase over 2014 when tigers were last enumerated. But the achievements in conservation have been clouded by doubts over the counting methods. In September, an investigation by this paper revealed that the last tiger census had over-reported the population by 16 per cent. Following that investigation, the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) — which along with the Dehradun-based Wildlife Institute of India (WII) conducts the tiger census — has taken the first step towards introducing correctives. It has admitted the necessity of “bringing more scientific robustness to the exercise”.

In the 1970s, when India embarked on Project Tiger, conservation authorities sought to identify every tiger in the wild from its paw print. But scientists criticised this method as highly subjective and riddled with the possibilities of duplication. Their fears came true in 2005, when this newspaper reported that the Sariska National Park in Rajasthan had lost all its tigers — a year before, pug mark surveys had claimed that all was well at the reserve. Since 2006, tiger audits have relied on camera traps, they have estimated the animal's prey base and tried to gauge the health of the tiger's habitats. All this has helped the NTCA and WII to arrive at more realistic numbers. But doubts over methodology have persisted. The quality of camera traps has been a major issue in several reserves and scientists have contended that the NTCA and WII have not devised sound protocols.

The last tiger census, however, invited questions. It counted under-age cubs, methods used to identify the uniqueness of an individual animal were given short shrift and the problem of duplication resurfaced. These have led to renewed demands by scientists for transparency in the census operations. In the past, the NTCA has stonewalled such demands. It is heartening, therefore, that it has finally acknowledged the need for “accountability”. However, it is disappointing that the agency has dismissed calls to subject the tiger census procedures to peer reviews. Without passing this credibility test, India's greatest wildlife protection success story will not have a place in scientific literature. Worse, tiger conservation will continue to be linked to attempts to score political points.

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