

# TO PROTECT TIGERS, INDIA NEEDS MORE BETTER-EQUIPPED FOREST PERSONNEL

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At a time when there are almost daily reports of man-animal conflicts across the country, the Indian government's pledge to protect tiger habitats and tiger corridors is a heartening piece of news. The second part of the promise is of utmost important because, while India's total tiger population went up from 1,411 in 2006 to 1,706 in 2010 and 2,226 in 2014, the country recorded a 12.6% decline in tiger occupancy in connecting tiger habitats outside tiger reserves between 2006 and 2010, the latest period for which this data is available. This promise to protect tiger habitats and corridors was published on Monday in the fourth edition of the Global Tiger Action Plan.

Unfortunately, the action plan didn't release data on the decline in the tiger population outside protected areas for 2014. The 2018 tiger census estimations, likely to be released on March 31, may see an increase in overall tiger numbers but may not offer any trends on their numbers in corridors (outside the protected areas) because it follows a different methodology.

Saying that India has changed its approach to tiger conservation to focus on the corridors, The Global Tiger Action Plan adds that now the country prioritises "source-sink dynamics" (how variation in habitat quality may affect the population of tigers) by restoring habitat connectivity. This includes providing incentives to local people for conserving forests along tiger corridors and providing subsidised LPG connections to people to reduce dependence on timber from the forest.

Along with these steps, the Indian State needs to invest heavily in other areas if it is keen to protect tigers, no matter where they are: increase recruitment; improve ground-level infrastructure in forests (vehicles for patrolling, staff quarters with basic facilities); and provide better training and arming of forest guards, the first line of defence against poaching and illegal public intrusion, who at present, operate with outdated guns and little training.

India is currently the most dangerous country in the world for forest rangers. In 2017, 29 rangers were killed on duty in India; the Democratic Republic of Congo (17) and Thailand (8) made for a distant second and third, says a report of the International Ranger Federation. On January 27, unidentified poachers with weapons hacked to death two guards in the Valmiki Tiger Reserve in Bihar.

In January, in an unprecedented incident, more than 50 forest and police personnel were injured when a mob of relocated villagers brutally attacked them at the Melghat Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra.

To save tigers outside reserve areas — a hugely challenging task — the department needs better tiger tracking systems and specially trained teams to keep an eye on big cats moving outside the protected areas.

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