

## Bear-attack trends highlight need for conflict mitigation

Sloth bears can attack when tribes are collecting forest produce.

It's not wild elephants or man-eating tigers, but sloth bears that cause the most number of human deaths in central India's Kanha–Pench wildlife corridor. An analysis of bear attacks in central India, published in *PLOS ONE*, shows that there is an urgent need for conflict mitigation and improvement of compensation schemes for victims.

The sloth bear *Melursus ursinus* is endemic to the Indian subcontinent. Studies show that the largest population of sloth bears is in Central India. The species is common in the 16,000 sq. km Kanha–Pench wildlife corridor which connects the Kanha and Pench tiger reserves in Madhya Pradesh. The corridor is also home to 442 villages; many families here depend on fuelwood and forest produce such as tendu leaves used to make bidis for sustenance and livelihood. This brings them in contact with bears frequently — 255 bear attacks occurred in the area between 2004 and 2016.

Scientists at the Corbett Foundation interviewed 166 survivors of bear attacks from 120 villages in the Kanha–Pench corridor. Their results reveal that more than 80% of the attacks occurred in the forest, where the victims had gone to collect fuelwood and forest produce or graze their livestock; more than half of the victims did not see the bears before they attacked. Collectors entered forests in large numbers and engaged in the gathering activities silently and separately, increasing the chances of sudden encounters with sloth bears, write the authors.

Gathering information about the victims' socio-economic status, the team found that almost three-quarters of the victims were from the Baiga and Gond tribal communities.

While the State government provides compensation to victims of wildlife attacks, more than 80% received amounts as low as Rs.5,000 regardless of wound severity or gender; more than half the victims bore their medical expenses themselves. Victims unfamiliar with the process of applying for compensation were also at a huge disadvantage.

Apart from generating awareness of compensation schemes, ground models to improve conflict mitigation are key because sloth bears use not only forests but also human-dominated landscapes outside protected areas, write the scientists.

“We have conducted workshops in 30 villages on how best to avoid sudden confrontations,” says lead author Aniruddha Dhamorikar. The Madhya Pradesh government has also increased animal attack compensation rates since February 2016.

Energy equivalent to about one solar mass was emitted as a result.

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