

WHAT IS TIGER RELOCATION ALL ABOUT?

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At a time when the killing of tigress Avni in Maharashtra has triggered massive outrage, the death of a tiger in Odisha has sparked fears among forest officials and experts over the fate of the first inter-State translocation of tigers in the country. On November 15, the death of a male tiger was reported from the Satkosia Tiger Reserve. Forest Department officials ruled out poaching and the post-mortem report said a wound infested with maggots on the left side of its neck led to septicaemia, causing death. However, the fact that a young tiger died within five months of being translocated from Madhya Pradesh has raised more questions than answers.

With decades of efforts at conservation bearing fruit, India has 70% of the tiger population in the world. The count increased from 1,411 during 2006 to 1,706 during 2010 and 2,226 during 2014, according to census figures. Experts and tiger biologists say many tiger reserves in the country are dealing with the problem of plenty. Tigers are territorial animals, and there are reports of the wild cat straying from the reserves, a few travelling hundreds of kilometres in search of food. In the past, tigers have been relocated within the reserves of a State. The translocation of tigers from the reserve of Madhya Pradesh to Satsokia was, however, far more ambitious. The project involved the Forest Departments of both States and needed the approval of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and scientists of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

The translocation ran into trouble within weeks of the animals being brought to Odisha. As part of the exercise, first the male tiger was brought to Satkosia from the Kanha Tiger Reserve, and within 10 days, a female tiger was brought from the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. Within days of the tigers being brought to Satkosia, villagers living on the fringes of the reserve started protesting. They burnt property of the Forest Department and attacked officials. More trouble broke out in September with the death of a woman, allegedly mauled by the tigress, though the post mortem did not establish it. In October, another person was killed, and the tigress was held responsible. In the first week of November, the tigress was tranquillised and shifted to an enclosure at Raigoda, where it was first kept after being brought from Madhya Pradesh.

The tranquillisation of the tigress, and the death of the male tiger, will set back the translocation exercise. Experts blame the Forest Department for not sensitising the people in advance before the tigers were brought to the reserve. Questions have also been raised about the monitoring of these translocated tigers after they were released in the wild.

Though the developments have raised questions over the fate of the ambitious project, the translocation of tigers from Madhya Pradesh to Odisha has not been shelved. NTCA officials who are taking stock of the situation at the Satkosia Tiger Reserve have said they are not rushing through any decision.

What is still an advantage for the project is the good prey base and forest cover at the Satkosia Tiger Reserve. The plan was to introduce three pairs of tigers at Satkosia from the tiger reserves of Madhya Pradesh gradually. The fate of the first inter-State relocation of tigers will have a bearing on future inter-State restocking and tiger augmentation projects in other parts of the country.

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