

Habitat Loss Worsening



A CORMORANT at River Ken in the Panna Tiger Reserve.

On a late afternoon waiting on the banks of the River Ken in the Panna Tiger Reserve for a boat, we heard the thud of the axe against wood. Villagers were removing forest cover and there was no forest official to stop them. The dhabas at Panna use wood as fuel and most of it could have only been trawled from the forests.

The poor have to live and cannot afford gas cylinders. They do not have any meaningful employment to talk of. But when the forests go, the poor will be the worst hit with policy makers taking the first flight out to the US. There are five villages with 1,900 families inside the Panna Tiger Reserve and have to be relocated, said Shahbaz Ahmad, Chief Conservator of Forest and Field Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, and added eight villages have been relocated.

With the passing of the Tribal Bill will the five villages be relocated? Narendra Singh Parihar, Range Officer, Madla range, admitted to grazing being a major problem. We took the boat ride to watch crocodiles sunning themselves on the river banks but could not see any. It was the same at the 45.20-sq km Ken Gharial sanctuary.

A long 26-km ride over kutchra roads from the reserve took us to the Ken Gharial sanctuary and the guide promised to show us a gharial sunbathing in the River Ken. Work is on to rebuild the road and widen it, which could eat up some of the oldest mahuwa trees in the region. The river bed is rocky being made of granite, dolomite and quartz and during rains get submerged.

For about 30 minutes, Dinesh and myself floated down Ken without spotting a gharial with the adult male sporting a pot-like growth at the tip of its mouth. There is no sight better than the Ken in Panna. The river offers an easy fluidity to the forest made mainly of teak, mahuwa, salai and bamboo. The forest and its denizens know they will live as long as the river lives. One has gone to a few tiger reserves but there is nothing like the Ken with its ancient dignity still in place.

The Ken River Lodge, built on wooden stilts, on the banks of Ken (outside the reserve) offers a good birding site and we noticed darters, cormorants, including the large cormorant and a painted stork, basking under a winter sun. A guide at the lodge told us of the nesting of a pair of Sarus cranes at the far end of the river. In 2005, the Ken went wild during rains breaking banks and damaging quite a bit of the forest and signs of the destruction are still there.

The Government hand out on Panna lists the common trees, animals and birds populating the area and like all such documents is far off the mark. We did spot two Egyptian vultures, a few painted sandgrouse and vultures inside rocky pockets. The herbivore population is not well-built and there are some who doubt whether it can keep up a large tiger population.

A report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India noted, "The Kanha Tiger Reserve had 7 per cent of the area as grasslands which was to be increased to 15 per cent. On a comparison of the availability of grasslands during 2000-05, it was seen that except in the Badhavgarh Tiger Reserve, three other tiger reserves (Panna, Pench and Kanha) witnessed a decline ranging between 0.001 and 0.05 sq km land availability per herbivore. The decline in availability of grassland was due to increase in the number of livestock in these tiger reserves. The livestock population severely causes fodder shortage in the tiger reserves, which needs to be tackled while planning for grassland and meadows development in the reserves." The final notification to declare Panna Tiger Reserve a National Park has not been issued till March 2006 though the reserve was created in 1975.

A note of the Wildlife Institute of India says, "The rationale for taking landscape as a unit is that tigers are long ranging animals (at times ranging over 250 sq km), and also that their prime habitats are subject to high turnover of individuals. It will, therefore, be naïve to assign any absolute number to a given administrative unit. Another important point to be mentioned here is that the density of tigers in an area can vary widely over time due to natural process of recruitment, dispersal and mortality. Breeding success or failure of even a single female may drastically change the prevailing densities. Therefore, present assessment done by WII is useful more as a baseline for long-term monitoring of the status of tigers in the area rather than giving absolute numbers."

Are we ducking the critical issue of trying to get at a firm estimate of the tiger population in India? Some tiger experts believe India's forests today could at best hold about 1,200 tigers (1,500 tigers on the higher side), while there are unconfirmed reports of the government pushing for a higher count of 5,000.

In the absence of any estimate, one can today firmly believe the CAG 2006 report castigating the Project Tiger Directorate. It says, "... . Poaching and unnatural deaths of tigers outnumbered the natural deaths. There was a decline in the tiger population in many reserves. Conservation efforts in the Tiger Reserves by and large remained ineffective due to inordinate delays in the settlement of acquisition rights under the Wildlife Protection Act 1972, inadequate wildlife corridors connecting tiger reserves with other Protected Areas, slow progress of relocation of villages outside the Tiger Reserves as well as poor tourism management." It may be noted that along with the tigers, other animals are getting scarce.