

India's Corbett Park: where the tiger still burns bright



TIGER STILL LORDS OVER THE INDIAN JUNGLES DESPITE THREAT TO ITS SURVIVAL.

By Sanjeeb Baruah

THE DISTANT roar of the tiger stirs the silence as birds squawk in alarm and deer scamper deeper into the forest. All the clichés about the woods being lovely, dark and deep, and the tiger burning bright in the forest of the night, come to life in India's Corbett National Park.

These are not the woods that Robert Frost waxed eloquent about, or the land that housed the "fearful symmetry" of William Blake's tiger. It is the sprawling, internationally known wildlife sanctuary ensconced in the Himalayan foothills in India's northern Uttarakhand state. A six-hour drive from New Delhi, Frost and Blake's words leap out.

The reality is there for all to see. India's oldest forest reserve is a repository of many rare flora and fauna -- most important of which is an estimated population of 164 tigers. These are over 10 percent of the 1,400-odd tigers left in India's forests. A little over 3,000 tigers survive in the wild all over the world.

This reserve, which includes grasslands and forested woods covering an area of 1,524 sq km today, was first set up as Hailey National Park on Aug 8, 1936. It was named after Sir Malcolm Hailey, then governor of the United Provinces.

In 1952, five years after India attained independence, the reserve was renamed the Ramganga National Park after the Ramganga River that flows through it.

In 1957, it was renamed Corbett National Park in memory of

Jim Corbett, the legendary hunter turned naturalist who helped in demarcating the park's boundaries and setting it up. Corbett lived in the area for decades before he migrated to Kenya following Indian independence.

It was here that Corbett shot some of the notorious man-eating tigers that had been carrying off local villagers. The narrative was the centrepiece of his two bestsellers: "The Maneaters of Kumaon" and "The Maneating Leopard of Rudraprayag".

Home to Asiatic elephants, leopards, the majestic Royal Bengal tiger and a profusion of smaller animals, Corbett National Park was also one of the eight reserves in which India's flagship conservation effort, Project Tiger, was launched in 1973.

The project was launched to protect India's tigers from extinction due to extensive poaching and felling of forests. At the start of the 20th century, some 40,000 tigers roamed the sub-continent, but subsequently their numbers dropped alarmingly.

It was believed that conserving the habitat of the tiger, which is at the top of the food chain, would also help save associated fauna. Corbett's sprawling grasslands at Dhikala are the favourite hunting grounds of these big cats. Different species of deer, antelope and wild boar that are food for tigers can be found there in large numbers.

The reserve offers varied topography - hills, plateaus, ravines, temporary marshy depressions and riverine areas that are home to a variety of endangered animals. The Ramganga river is also home to the endangered gharial and mugger.

Over 50 mammal, 580 bird and 25 reptile species have been listed in Corbett National Park. Smaller wild cats such as the leopard cat, the jungle cat, and the rare fishing cat are found here.

The sloth bear is found in the Bijrani-Malani areas, mostly seen in the early morning, digging termite mounds for food. Himalayan black bears are mostly confined to the hilly areas. Wild elephants are one of the main attractions. There are about 500, who make the park their home.

Most of the water birds are migrants and arrive in winter. These include the greylag, barheaded goose, various ducks, sandpiper, wagtail and others. Commonly seen raptors in Corbett are the Palla's fishing eagle and the harrier.

And it is to this wondrous world that tourists, domestic and foreign, flock. The park is open to tourists from November 15 to June 15 every year. You can clamber on to an elephant to spot a tiger hiding in the tall grass of Dhikala, or roam extensive tracks in open jeeps for that unique experience of being one with the wild.

In fact, around 46 percent of Uttarakhand is covered by forests, covering an area of 24,536 sq km. Some 13,000 sq km are important tiger-bearing areas.

In the 1930s, tiger shooting was in vogue in Corbett. Had it not been the contribution of Sir Malcolm Hailey, who recommended the setting up of the reserve, much of what exists today would have gone.

Maintenance of the park is not easy. During the monsoon, the Ramganga River often overflows and floodwaters damage the road network inside the park. Forest guards have to wade through the muddy waters for patrolling.

Every year the park management launches “Operation Monsoon” to deal with the situation - aimed at boosting the park’s security as well as to monitor animals in distress. The operation continues till Oct 1.

This year, for instance, some 300 forest guards and fringe villagers have been engaged to patrol the forest. Around 100 ex-servicemen have also been deployed as part of the tiger task force to patrol main roads leading to the reserve.

“Besides our guards, we have employed around 150 people from the fringe villages to guard the area,” Corbett deputy director, Parag Dagata, said, adding that it would boost security in all the 11 forest ranges here.

Recently, the adjacent 300 sq km Sonanadi wildlife sanctuary was merged with Corbett through a government notification declaring the area a critical tiger habitat. The additional area means greater protection to the animals. Besides, the government has earmarked about Rs. 5 million for habitat restoration,



OVER THE LAST DECADE, INITIATIVES TO PERPETUATE TIGER POPULATION HAS REACHED A FRANTIC PITCH EVEN IN PROTECTED RESERVES LIKE THE CORBETT NATIONAL PARK

agement of buffers adjoining the Corbett Park. The buffers help filter disturbances and pollution caused by humans passing into the core area.

People live in the buffer zones, tourists go there in the hope of sighting wildlife, and hence their management becomes a priority for wildlifemanagers.

And the forest stays pristine, keeping its secrets close to itself

and genetic and behavioural studies of tigers.

This was one of the recommendations of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to protect the big cats across the Shivalik foothills of the Himalayas and the northern edge of the Ganga basin, known as the Shivalik-Gangetic landscape.

The area extends from Kalesar in Haryana to Kishenpur and Dudhwa in Uttar Pradesh to the Valmiki tiger reserve in Bihar, covering 20,800 sq km.

In its report in February, the NTCA had called for active man-

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