

Blundering down the Catwalk- Dr K U Karanth, Indian Express.

The tiger crisis has been going on for decades, urgent steps need to be taken to save natural India

by K ULLAS KARANTH (The writer is a conservation scientist, Wildlife Conservation Society, and trustee, World Wide Fund for Nature-India)

Just a few months ago, the Ministry of Environment had planned a multi-million rupee celebration of Project Tiger,s 30th anniversary: this plan is currently on hold because some of us complained that there was nothing to celebrate, and the money would be better spent helping tigers survive. Now, following the disappearance of tigers at Sariska, the media have proclaimed yet another tiger crisis,.

The tiger is depicted as a victim in a hit-and-run case, who can only be saved by some emergency treatment or other. NGOs are screaming for action: whatever first-aid they fancy at the moment. On the other hand, officials appear unworried, except about the bad press they are getting. But the most creative explanations so far have come from Rajesh Gopal, Director of Project Tiger. Quotes attributed to him range from the bizarre explanation that tigers have migrated away from prey-rich Sariska forests to the dubious claim that the tiger,s future can be secured through a piece of fancy GIS software he is waiting for. This web-based genie will apparently tell him what is happening to his tigers across the country. A pity really, if only the poor Sariska cats could have sent real-time messages while they were being clobbered.

In the opposite direction, Gopal,s boss, the Director of Wildlife Preservation appears all set to initiate a ban on radio-telemetry, bird banding and other standard tools of wildlife monitoring. Only a handful of wildlifers are worried. If he was in charge of telecommunications instead of wildlife, he would probably try to ban telephones, wireless sets and computers ~ and have a riot on his hands. Meanwhile, the Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) is reportedly asking for further proof that there is indeed a crisis.

The truth is that the real tiger crisis, has always been around. If we don,t take notice and institute long-term cures, even the larger and currently more secure tiger populations like the ones in Kanha and Nagarhole-Bandipur could disappear over a long term. When P K Sen, the current head of WWF,s tiger programme, took over as Director of Project Tiger in 1996, he recorded problems of tiger protection in brutally frank official notes. No one in the Ministry above him bothered. He struggled for four years to introduce science-driven tiger monitoring. Most of his colleagues ignored his directives. No wonder, after retirement, Sen is an angry man. Fortunately, dedicated individuals like Sen, Chinnappa of

Nagarahole and Reddy of Ranthambhore can still be found sporadically within the tiger's domain. However, their dogged solitary efforts are becoming increasingly irrelevant in the context of a massive systemic failure. Worse still, failures that stare us in the face are being covered up by official reviews, of tiger reserves and projects. These superficial reviews are often generated by doling out fat consultancies to persons of dubious ability and integrity.

Before a cynical reader dismisses me as yet another wild-eyed green missionary unconcerned with human welfare, let me just point out that natural India with its full complement of wild animals and plants is now confined to a mere 3% of our landscape. The remaining 97% is overwhelmingly reserved for human welfare.

There are three major facets to the tiger crisis. First, tigers would be long gone but for a strong personal intervention by Indira Gandhi over three decades ago. The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 and Forest Conservation Act of 1980 were two laws that buffered India's wild nature from the ravages of humans. Subsequent politicians have worked hard to dismantle the two legal brakes, that Mrs Gandhi had fitted to protect natural India. The Ministry of Environment, the skilled mechanic supposed to keep these brakes in good repair, has become an agent promoting commercial penetration of the protected areas, deftly applying a pro-people, polish over its handiwork.

A second aspect to remember is the remarkable recovery of India's wildlife between 1970-1990, before the present decline commenced. It was made possible because of a strong commitment to basic protection on the part of the Indian Forest Service that implemented Indira Gandhi's laws. Subsequently, this professional commitment has nose-dived. On-ground protection has given way to a massive wave of escapism in the form of expensive, corruption-ridden community-based conservation, projects. And, to costly pretenses of carrying out wildlife management while in reality destroying perfectly good natural habitats through unnecessary manipulations driven by greed or ignorance. While there are apparently tons of money available to pay an ever expanding army of senior forest officials, levels of tiger protection on the ground, in terms of men, equipment, vehicles, patrolling systems, and even prompt payment of wages to lower staff have all plummeted. Compared to the mid-1980's basic protection capacity stands reduced by more than half. No wonder one by one, tiger populations are being pushed over the edge by poaching, prey depletion and habitat fragmentation.

A brand new professionally trained wildlife service must be established, not just another generic UPSC cadre as envisaged in some quarters. Engineers, surgeons and airline pilots get rigorously trained before being allowed to practice their professions. Similarly, wildlife professionals at higher levels should have five years of rigorous training in biology, management

and law enforcement. The lower echelons should be manned not by semi-literate small-town boys who want to escape at the first opportunity as at present, but by genuine forest dwelling people with traditional skills suited for nature protection.

The third major area of deficit is the neglect of genuine scientific research and monitoring in tiger conservation. Millions of rupees spent on so-called wildlife research (conducted mostly by unqualified officials or consultants) have not produced even a dozen scientific articles in peer-reviewed international journals in three decades. This anti-science culture permits individual MoEF officials to inject their personal whims and fancies into wildlife management policies. Meanwhile, attempts are made to keep out genuine wildlife research and monitoring through blind application of draconian laws originally meant for dealing with wildlife criminals. This science-deficiency has been criticised widely internationally, but the MoEF does not even acknowledge these criticisms. Its proposed solution to the problem is mind-boggling: invite yet another UN-style bureaucracy, IUCN, to set up shop in Delhi.

Take the example of camera-trap sampling of tiger populations, which has been demonstrated to work well across India's major tiger reserves. It holds potential for monitoring some of our critical tiger populations. Apart from providing reliable estimates of tiger numbers, such sampling can measure vital parameters like annual survival and recruitment rates. While admittedly not applicable at wider geographic scales, it is highly relevant to monitoring medium to high-density tiger populations at key sites that are now targeted by poachers. Moreover, unlike pugmarks, DNA codes or blips on a GIS map, photos of flesh and blood individual tigers can be identified by ordinary citizens and enforcement officials without special skills. Such photographic monitoring of tigers may even permit authorities to trace the origins of at least some tigers when seizures are made.

The broad solutions I suggest above are neither quick nor easy to implement, but there is urgent need to arrive at a political consensus to arrest the critical decline of natural India. Until they do, there will always be a tiger crisis.