

Interview with Belinda Wright [BW]

KB: So we all know that there is a tiger crisis but how serious is the crisis?

BW: Actually I don't think this is another tiger crisis. Actually I think this is the end of the road. I think it is a very depressing indication that as a nation, we in India are not interested in the tiger's future, and in saving the tiger. I truly believe that.

KB: So that's kind of...the tiger – it will go...

BW: Yeah, I mean it will be a slow and painful end and we will of course have isolated populations of tigers, which will be more like safari parks, in Kanha, Sunderbans, Corbett, you know, some of the bigger parks. But I think the result of the last minute changes to the Wildlife Amendment Act, and the general apathy in both the Ministry of Environment and the State Forest Departments... And the lack of enforcement in the states and very specifically, the lack of intelligence-driven enforcement... I think this is the price we will have to pay. And the Parliament demonstrated very clearly by accepting those last-minute changes that people come before tigers.

KB: So there is a gradual decline of tiger habitat and population over the last 30 years. What's been going on behind the scenes? In your experience with the tigers over the last many years, what do you think?

BW: Behind the scenes is the fact that...everything boils down to money and votes. Not surprisingly, and the tiger can really not provide either. So land is at a premium. Forest produce is at a premium. And the tiger habitat is one of the richest forests we have. So people want them.

KB: This was always the case. You see a sudden change of the politics of forest in the last few years. The politicians have jumped in. They are talking about the tigers and the tribals openly, in the public domain.

BW: I think in the early 1970s when the late Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, set up Project Tiger, there was a very clear-cut decisive decision made that we want to save tigers, and the way to do it then was to set aside tiger habitat and protect it. And it was a very, very tenacious and extremely successful conservation project. But it never moved with the times. And I think [that] was a political leader who was single-minded about the conservation needs of India. ... I mean, as far as Mrs Gandhi was concerned, leaving aside the politics and everything, for her wildlife conservation was a top priority. And she clearly made it publicly known. And her achievements during her time were extraordinary, and it's sort of been downhill since then, but much slower in the first 10 years. And now there is nobody – nobody to stand up. There were about a half a dozen Members of Parliaments who stood up and said nice things about the tiger and so on. But nobody really strongly stood up and said: 'Hey, wait a minute. Are we talking about a Tiger Conservation Authority or a Tribal Conservation Authority?' This bill that they were discussing in the Parliament is to protect the tiger. So why all these changes? ...the new legislation we've got means that the Tiger Conservation Authority, which is an independent body, cannot make decisions for the benefit of the tiger. The decisions are to be made locally, by the *gram sabha* and so on. And there'll be a huge conflict of interest and also – you and I know, you like it or

not – we live in a very, very corrupt world. That has also not helped the tiger in the last few years.

KB: Critics of the first system, [of] the way national parks and sanctuaries and Project Tiger was run... would say that there was no place for people there. People who were existing in that system were interlopers in any case. And today we are approaching a situation where tigers may be interlopers in a system where people will be given legal priority...

BW: I can only reply that our tiger population has crashed whereas the tribal population has multiplied 7 times during the same period. I think the tigers need a very, very strong helping hand and they are not getting it. So whatever argument anyone uses, the tiger is on the way out. I can bet my life on it.

KB: What I am trying to argue here is that maybe 15 years ago if we had talked about coexistence in a more practical way – not just that tigers and people cannot exist... The debate has been going on for some time, and if you look at the reality of the situation – maybe there is no land, there is no money to actually relocate everybody. So we are talking about inviolate zones and we are talking about another zone where there is a bit of coexistence with the people. The tigers, you know much better than I do, can travel out of the national parks.

BW: Yeah, they don't know borders.

KB: So they have to live with the people. Even if you have the inviolate zones inside the national parks, they will travel outside.

BW: Well, those are only – if you want to get into the nitty-gritty – those are the overflow tigers. Those are invariably the young tigers and the old tigers. Not the breeding population. They stay inside the national parks.

KB: I'm just corroborating what you are saying. That's why maybe we indeed started talking about tiger conservation and we talked about how people can actually coexist and make that happen practically. Rather than saying that there is no coexistence possible and tigers need inviolate zones.

BW: No, no, nobody is saying that. Listen, forget conservationists. Let's talk science. Tiger scientists throughout the world – not just India, you know, the big world out there – have all looked into this problem. The recommendations that have been given on how to secure your tiger population and let them multiply are extremely well documented. We don't have to reinvent the wheel nor do we need to be rocket scientists to save the tiger in India. But we have to be uncompromising about certain things and those are well documented. There is nothing, nothing you or I can do to change that. These are [very] well-documented things.

KB: What you are saying is absolutely right. There is no debate and argument about it because even today, even a person like Sunita [Narain] with her reports – she also talks about inviolate zones. Ashish Kothari, who has been a people's rights conservationist – he also talks about more land [to] be given [to the tiger], more than Valmik [Thapar] has.

BW: Then why do we have legislation that says that local people will now decide what the core area is, what the buffer zones are. You know, you can't do that. It's got to be people who have no vested interest.

KB: That's what I was trying to propose to you and get a response to. Maybe in the last 20–25 years, when people like you and us were talking about tiger conservation, maybe we didn't have a tactical plan in which people could have been integrated and could have lived [in coexistence]. The coexistence of inviolate zones and [people] was possible. In the absence of any kind of system, the politicians have come in and now the ball is completely out of the court of everybody, all of us, anybody, today. And they have probably reserved that space, that space which was not there...

BW: No, no, I completely disagree with you...

KB: Why? Why is that?

BW: Because as far as the enforcement of the wildlife laws are concerned and the protection of government-allotted tiger reserves and so on, that is in the hands of the government. You and I can't do any of that, so it's up to them. And the relocation of villages again is done by the government, and if it is poorly done, which it clearly is... – poor enforcement, poor relocation of villages, poor management of tiger reserves – the result is this. And the buck has to stop somewhere. You take a report like this, which has been brought out by the Auditor-General of India. This is the Govt of India speaking. And it is a damning report on what's being done. So I don't think you can turn around and say "what were the conservationists doing?" ... Or "now the politicians have taken over". Why weren't the socks pulled up of the people who were legally supposed to do these things?

KB: What happens to the individuals and agencies like yours? You know who have given their life and blood to the tiger? How do you respond to this?

BW: You know, I have fought on this issue for years and years and years and on a difficult subject which is enforcement. And I've put my life, as people know, on the line many, many times. And I think that we failed. And I think that I wasted decades of my life. Because all the evidence that was brought forward about the amount of, the seriousness of, tiger poaching in India was just continually denied. And then of course when I went to Tibet and China last year and collected all that information... about tiger and leopard skins from India, nobody took any notice. ... The press did. The people did. The organisations and the people [whose job it is] by law, they took no notice.

KB: So how do you think they get away [not doing] what they are mandated to do? Again and again? Repeatedly?

BW: I don't know. And there are some fabulous officers amongst them, really. Excellent. And they usually give up too. I mean, we have a rotten system. We have to work within this rotten system. But what I find so depressing is that this new legislation that's come in has not taken that into account. Has not taken the rotten system, the level of corruption, into account. And there is only one loser in this game. I mean, you and I live on this planet, you know, temporarily. We come. We go. There are plenty of humans around. But there's one big loser in the game and that's the tiger. And once we lose the tiger, it's gone forever.

KB: How has wildlife crime come into this?

BW: Well, if it's operated on a scale, well, it will be excellent. And we have been fighting for that since July 1996, which was when I made the first draft for that. And well, I should be celebrating because that's finally come through. Ten years later. But

it did come through. But it was essential that it was multi-agencied, which it is, and the recommendation was that it was to be headed by a professional enforcement officer. And as I expected that is the main thing that has been changed. It is now headed by the Head of Ministry of Environment and Forests. ... But provided we get people on to that, the Wildlife Crime Bureau should be very effective. It will work throughout India. It should for us be a one-stop shop from where we can take information securely. But let's see.

KB: Tell me some more about your work and how serious is this poaching trade issue of tiger parts?

BW: ... You've to remember that [for] poachers it's a way of life – this is what they do and this is what they do best. The growth of poachers can go into a tiger reserve, a national park or wildlife sanctuary, and systematically clean it out. That's been established and proven by what happened in Sariska. And the people who did it in Sariska said that they knew that the management was weak there, that many of the border *chowkis* were empty during the monsoon months etc, etc. ... I am giving [Sariska] as an example to say that these people are organised enough now to go to any national park or sanctuary which has weak management and wipe out certainly the big cats or the elephants or anything else that's valued in the trade. And you have to look at India as a supermarket. The rest of the world – I mean mentally – comes shopping here. We have the species valuable in the trade. We have tigers, we have leopards, we have elephants, we have musk deer, we have bear. We have rhinos and so on and otters, and a fantastic, fantastic array of herbal plants... So [to] anybody in this 6 to 10 billion dollar international trade, India is, you know, the greatest, along with Brazil, source country. Yet [that] we don't have whatever it is [required to protect them], is pathetic.

KB: The last time I met you, you had said that the ways and methods of the poachers are also [getting] refined...

BW: Yeah, organised wildlife crime has evolved through the years and nowadays they are phenomenal. They fold skins, like tiger or leopard skins, just as in high-class department stores so that each one is folded to a centimetre of the other one. Paper-thin tanning and then folded this way, this way, this way. I mean, it's all very, very systematically done and then signed also on the back. And the reason for that is if you just fold a skin any other way and chuck it in, it takes a lot more room. But by folding it very, very precisely, as though you are folding a shirt or something like that, you can then fit many, many skins into one small packet. Simple. So there are all sorts of things that they've evolved and the traps have changed and lots of things. So they use traditional skills but evolve the methods that they use for transporting and machinery or equipment, I suppose.

KB: So it's not that the Forest Department or the State Forest Departments don't know about these things. Obviously they know about these things. And they have been told about it by you and by even a person like Raghu [Chundawat] in Panna. What is it that happens between your information and their action, which is not there?

BW: Sometimes they don't know what is happening in their back garden practically. I mean there have been some interesting cases of traps being laid just a few yards from the forest outpost. Actually. A week ago, there was a raid, I won't tell you where, and...one of my colleagues was in the raiding party and there were 5 huge tiger traps.

And the Forest Officers who were in the raiding party said “*ye kya hai?*” And [this] was a tiger habitat and poaching [was] going on in their jurisdiction and they didn’t know what a tiger trap looked like. They have all been to training seminars but maybe they were asleep during that time.

KB: So [do you think using] guns is the only effective approach to cut through poaching?

BW: I don’t think that enforcement is being given a chance. I mean the efforts have been so poor that we certainly haven’t tried good enforcement as a conservation measure, as a protection measure. Number 1. Number 2, because of the nature of the beast, which means that local people are involved and a lot of this is always smuggled out of the country into other countries such as Nepal and China. It has to be intelligence-led and there is no systematic intelligence-led enforcement going on in this country. And until the enforcement is improved and is intelligence-led, I think tigers will continue to get killed. And with this new legislation they won’t be safe anywhere. So that’s why I think this is the end.

KB: Do you think local people’s participation, their developing a stake in the forest, could also help in intelligence gathering?

BW: Frankly, a lot of these local people are very good friends of mine and I’ve debated this with them, sitting in the forest or in the villages. How do they benefit? They say this to me. They say: “How do we benefit?” From the presence of the tiger in the forest how do they benefit? They benefit emotionally and culturally, but they don’t benefit in any other way. They do not benefit financially, because they are not getting anything from the tourist industry. They don’t benefit when their cow or buffalo gets killed. They only benefit if they assist the poacher to kill one and they might end up with Rs 5000 in their pocket. I mean it’s very important that people should be stakeholders but where are the benefits?

KB: Now we are going back to the earlier discussion that we were having. ... That’s a very solid theory – that people have been cut off from forests and that they have lost all stakes, all responsibilities...

BW: Who is cut off from the forests?

KB: I mean, they don’t see the forest as their own.

BW: No, no, the tribals do. Even the fringe tribals, they go in everyday. And they still trap and they still fish. They go in every day, because the enforcement is really poor. If the enforcement is poor for tiger poaching, it is poor for them too. ... One of the problems with this fact [of] people still going in every day is they come out with information that is useful to tiger poachers. They come out with information saying that on this water hole they found tiger pugmarks. A tiger has killed an animal here. They get money for giving that information, quite good money. Just for giving information on a kill. All you have to do is to verbally tell somebody. You get money. You don’t take part in the crime.

KB: So what you are saying is that at this present level of enforcement, every park in this country, every tiger reserve, is at risk of probably losing huge numbers of tigers, if not every.

BW: Well, what I am saying is that every wild tiger in India is walking around like a cash register.

KB: You know, this is one thing that I want to ask you. ... Where have we failed? We need possibly to ask ourselves: what happened, why has the situation become so dismal today? Especially people like you, Valmik, Ullas [Karanth] or Raghu [Chundawat]. All of us, we have all been working... I mean, there is no doubt [about] your commitment... My question is: is it just a pointer that we were elitist in our conservation perspective? Did we talk about conservation in a particular way [so] that we precluded a whole lot of people or stakeholders?

BW: Well, I think there have always been only a handful of tiger conservationists. Historically. Starting with Corbett. I think it has been certainly perceived as being elitist by the fact that it's always been a handful of educated people who have been doing that. But this brings us back to the benefits. The tangible benefits of having the tiger are not really applicable to the local stakeholder. This is one of the problems. I think is big enough and old enough and mature enough certainly to turn around and say that the tiger is the most charismatic mammal on this planet. And therefore no price, no effort, is big enough to save it. The tiger belongs to the planet and India is the custodian of the tiger and I think we should be big enough to say that. What you're saying is a very emotional point, but I see it as a hugely bigger picture actually. I think we failed.

KB: To me personally, it's very amazing. How can a state be in a continuous situation of denial with figures cropping up? I mean, Buxa is a major case in point. We tried to cover that as well. Everybody knows there are no tigers there. But there are sighting reports. There are pugmarks. Everything is very organised.

BW: Yeah, that happened in Sariska too. There were still sighting reports of tigers. It's like it's a system we've to work with and try and improve. But it seems to be a very uphill task. And the saddest thing is that 2006 gave the forest management an opportunity to sit up and say: now we can give the correct figures or whatever. Because of Sariska, because of what happened, the PM's TTF and the CBI report also saying that the figures have been fudged for years. It was a wonderful opportunity for people to come clean. And they haven't done so. So even the census since the TTF and CBI, it's the same old thing. Up one here, up two here. It's extraordinary.

KB: You don't give tigers any chance?

BW: I'm afraid not. 2005 was a critical year for the tiger because so much information came out, including Sariska, our report about the huge tiger skin trade in Tibet, and I think 2006 is a disastrous year for the tiger. I don't think the tiger will survive this and I am very sad to be a minor part of that.

KB: But doesn't this have a kind of bounceback?

BW: Yeah, it's a very resilient animal. But it's only so much and we go back to the same circle where it has an inviolate space with food and water. And it's not even allowed that. It's true. I don't know whether I have argued it well enough, but it is true.

KB: Emotionally it's just difficult for a filmmaker to be so depressing. He doesn't want to be. It's not good...

BW: ... I am saying this again and again. I read the reports. The parliament thing. I read a huge amount of other people's opinions and whatever. ... I am the most

positive human being you'll ever meet but I've also spent a very focused lifetime on one subject, which is wildlife. I am really [about] one animal. I worship the tiger. That's what I live for. Every now and then, there is a little spark that goes... maybe if... But I think it's too tenuous. Maybe if...local people, gram sabhas, this and that... But why should they? They have no stake in it. There is no stake in it for them. The stake is for the planet. Not a local issue. ... So if you find something to be positive about, I'll be glad to be positive.

KB: (BRT in Karnataka)As a case study. Tigers have certainly come back. The population has increased. And there are people there – Soligas – and they are making their livelihood. But of course there is a very strong ATREE presence there and there is scientific monitoring. People's organisations monitoring this.

BW: If you could replicate that – honestly and fully – if you could replicate some of these wonderful projects such as that one, yes.