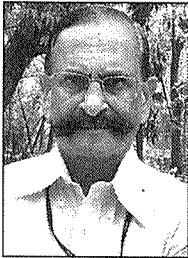


Tiger, tiger burning bright

Former director of the Wildlife Institute of India, V.B. Savarkar, talks about the declining number of tiger population, reasons and possible solutions

Laxmi Birajdar

In 1995, tiger population of the world was estimated between 5,000 and 7,000, with India sheltering around 50 per cent of this endangered specie. Five years back, India's tiger count went down to 3,500. Today, it is barely 1,411 — still 50 per cent of the animal's global figure.



V.B. Savarkar

“The tiger crisis, that took place two years ago, led to some development on the legal front. The current tiger census is an effort spanning the last two-and-a-half years,” said V.B. Savarkar, former director of the Wildlife Institute

of India (WII), who attended the session on ‘Tiger conservation’ at Vasundhara International Film Festival at NFAI on Thursday.

Tigers are found in 17 Indian states spread across an average area of 1,64,000 sq. km. The census study gave rise to several questions regarding tiger reserves and areas beyond the protected wild. “With the help of statistical data, we did extensive forest-mapping, studied density of trees and prey-base of tigers, the risk factors involved, the kind of road network in place, and the network of farms, dams, canals and other infrastructure in these areas,” says Savarkar.

Interestingly, 1,411 tigers comprise only full-grown, adult tigers. “If we include the cubs that are less than two-years-old, the number would go up to around 2,500 — which is still a declining number.”

Tiger research techniques include radio-collaring of the animal through GPS, camera-trapping and permanent line-transits in the forests. “We’ve even consulted international wildlife experts to suggest better ways,” informs Savarakar.

The status of the Project Tiger has been elevated. Most importantly, marking critical tiger habitat areas all over India, is happening in right earnest. “These will be areas that have tigers with... 500 to 1,000 sq. km.. These are the sensitive areas where



tigers breed. Even the corridors between two jungles can be treated as critical tiger habitat area.”

Hence, there is a need to rehabilitate people living in and around these critical areas. The government's rehabilitation package is interesting — Rs 10 lakh per family. “Around 273 towns have been identified for rehabilitation.” Training various military and paramilitary forces and the police is also being worked out by the WII. “In fact, the customs department regularly sends its probationers for a short training at WII.” A special sub-cadre of wildlife managers will be specially trained to prevent tiger poaching. “There's also a move to have fast-track courts to dispose off poaching cases.” There's a centralised Wildlife Crime Bureau in Delhi. “That will have regional nodes in each of the 17 states with proper supervision and evaluation. The national animal is regularly poached in large numbers in Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan. Between 2003 and 2005, maximum tigers were killed in Rajasthan, MP and Uttar Pradesh.

The history of tiger poaching in India needs to be considered too. Traditional Chinese medicine — which uses body parts of the tiger — steadily brought down the number of tigers in China. By 1980, focused tiger poaching began, when Chinese poachers started to find opportunities in northern India. “Killings escalated between 1980 and 1984. The solution for this problem is continuous bilateral talk between India and China, to stop poaching and illegal tiger trade,” says Savarkar.

The states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala have a decent number of tigers. “Soon, a Memorandum of Understanding will be engaged to further study on tigers. A steering committee, which will have chief ministers of each state as chairman, will be formed to monitor wildlife activity in each state.

Apparently, all these changes are taking place after amendments were done to the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act in 2006 and 2007. “In consideration is the controversial Tribal Forest Rights Act, 2006, which is important for the tribals,” says Savarkar.

Savarkar also stressed on how front-line staff of the forest department is worse looked-after and needs attention.