

LIFEFORCE PROGRESS REPORT JAN 2004 – MAY 2004

LifeForce's conservation strategy is built on two foundations

- 1) Helping to protect remaining forest habitat and its inhabitants - achieved mainly by supporting Madhya Pradesh Forest Department in terms of equipment, morale-boosting presentations and regular meetings to assess and discuss current problems, possible solutions and issues.
- 2) Working with local people whether towns people or tribal people living in the forests, to promote conservation issues, provide help with practical ways of reducing impact on natural resources and illustrate links between personal health and environmental health.

Support for M.P. Forest Department

Pench Tiger Reserve, south of Seonee in Southern M.P. suffers from extensive illegal fishing and poachers associated with the fishermen. The Forest Department are often effective in seizing the boats and their occupants but have had no means to actually confiscate the boats, which can be quite large. Nor has it been possible to transport large numbers of guards to an emergency situation such as a forest fire. LifeForce has a good relationship with the Park Director and can rely on his information. So in May this year LifeForce delivered an Eicher dual-cabin lorry with a large flatbed pick-up section to its rear. For additional benefit this section was fitted with folding bench seats and a tarpaulin, fitting over a removable framework to provide shelter during the rains. This donation is the first support to a Tiger Reserve other than Satpura and marks an expansion of LifeForce activities which will, hopefully, be the first example of many.

LifeForce is based in Pachmarhi which also happens to be the location of the Training school for Forest Guards who will be posted all over Madhya Pradesh. Each year LifeForce gives these guards a morale-boosting presentation focussing on the importance of their work from both a national and global perspective and provides them with copies of the presentation written in Hindi.

Five more homes for Forest Guards and their families needed walls plastering and a few other finishing procedures to be habitable when work was stopped by the Revenue Department with a dispute over building restrictions. The case has now been referred to court. LifeForce has done all it can to facilitate the prompt resolution of this issue and has high hopes for the houses completion and occupation before the year-end.

Voluntary re-location of the village of Dhain has now been completely approved by central government in Delhi which represents the final review stage. Funding to actually start the process has, however, still to be released. LifeForce raises this issue at all suitable meetings with senior officials and has, in May, requested Sri R. Gopal, Director Project Tiger, Delhi, to help with getting these funds released. This project, representing the welfare of tribal people, is an appropriate link to our next strategic category.

Working with Local People

LifeForce Health & Hygiene workshops include demonstrations of methods of simple water filtration, prevention of disease and illustrate links between individual and environmental health. Since the audience is illiterate the information is delivered in role-play by a number of student volunteers. These volunteers have, of course, other commitments and this year the team had to be re-formed with only a few of the original team able to continue. The team is now assembled and the workshops are continuing.

While public presentations also continue, schools will be particularly targeted for a condensed version of the presentation 'Tiger Conservation is People Conservation' to fit into their standard lessons but emphasise that this subject has not now been 'covered' like history or mathematics but is an urgent and on-going problem for us all to address.

Although the entrance fee to Satpura Tiger Reserve for Indian Nationals is only 10 Rupees, the cost of a 4WD vehicle (to hire or purchase) is, for the vast majority of the local population, prohibitive. It did not seem right that so many people were denied the opportunity to conveniently see their own national and natural heritage. To address this and contribute to the programme of raising environmental consciousness, LifeForce has arranged weekly Park visits using the LifeForce 4WD vehicle which are free of charge to any interested local citizen. Initially, groups of children will be taken on the trips which will become available to adults after all interested children have been accommodated.

Some sanctuary areas adjacent to the Park have problems with large-scale timber theft. On an individual basis, this can be combated by providing alternatives sources of heat and light such as bio-gas generators. However, this theft is on a large scale to provide timber for local saw mills. The saw mill owners use unemployed men to cut and remove the trees. Forest Department personnel are sometimes able to locate and challenge the thieves but are sometimes facing gangs of up to twenty armed men. A recent conflict in which five Forest Guards arrested twenty men resulted in two guards being hospitalised. One method of combating this menace is to develop training and employment schemes and thereby remove the cheap labour exploited by the saw mill owners.

Similarly, whilst tribal villagers are allowed to take one head load of fallen wood per person per day out of protected forest, excess and often cut wood is actually removed by unemployed women.

LifeForce has begun addressing the second problem by finding six girls to attend a six month training course at the Barli Institute for Rural Women in Indore (a large city in western Madhya Pradesh). This will be provided free of charge or costs to the girls who will learn a variety of skills including sewing with machines, fabric printing and design and public speaking, which can be brought back to their village and transferred to others.

The H&H workshops will also be conducted in the areas prone to timber theft providing a trusted link between the Forest Department and the tribal villagers. Since it is impossible to take a tree out of the forest without a villager

knowing about it, this could prove an invaluable information network to help protect the forest.

LifeForce is developing plans to provide training and employment schemes for the local unemployed men.

General

LifeForce has initially focussed conservation efforts on Satpura Tiger Reserve because it is part of one of the largest contiguous forest blocks left in India. There are also some (just!) remaining 'corridors' of forest connecting Satpura with Melghat Tiger Reserve in the neighbouring State of Maharashtra and between Pench, Kanha and Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserves, all in Madhya Pradesh. LifeForce has made regular efforts to help the process of getting the Indian authorities to classify these corridors as protected.

LifeForce was pleased to welcome Claudio Sillero of the Born Free Foundation on a brief visit during which these features were discussed. There are high hopes that BFF will fund LifeForce and other NGO's conservation projects focussing on these areas.

In April, Olaf Zieschang, a Swiss forester, also visited to assess the potential for applying his knowledge toward tiger conservation in Satpura. Olaf moved on to South Africa where he might secure a permanent position in conservation. If this position proves unsuitable it is hoped that Olaf will join LifeForce to strengthen and expand its conservation projects in India. In April, LifeForce also welcomed two lady volunteers who give valuable support to LifeForce projects and office administration in London.