

Proposal for Employment Cell for Satpura Range Tiger Habitat

Introduction

Tiger Reserves located within the Satpura range and included in this project are Satpura, Melghat, Tadoba-Andhari, Pench, and Kanha. The geographic area of the Satpura landscape falls in the political districts of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra States. This is almost certainly the single largest continuous tiger belt remaining in the world and includes 14 existing Protected Areas (covering 6,488 sq. km.). This total tiger belt (including unprotected areas) spreads over 10,000 sq. km. of forest. As such, its protection and, where necessary, regeneration are vital in the battle to save the tiger from extinction (with a budget increased by an estimated 30-40% it would be possible to incorporate one more Tiger Reserve – Bandhavgarh and the remaining forest corridors that still just remain between the Reserves). Obviously, the task of protecting such a vast tiger habitat is extremely difficult and prone to innumerable problems and mistakes, but its success now appears to be essential for the continued existence of the tiger.

The Problem

There are human settlements both inside and around the Tiger Reserves referred to above and their families can only be fed by agriculture and 'Minor Forest Produce'. However, the current situation is that:-

- Agricultural land available around the settlements is insufficient for the rapidly growing tribal population and the percentage of landless families in some of the villages has reached approx. 60%. This has resulted in increasing illegal encroachments onto forested land. Tribal's are making strong demands on politicians and administration to legally allow their ownership of the forest land onto which they have encroached.
- Employment provided by logging operations has been stopped after the creation of Sanctuary / National Park / Tiger Reserve. Minor Forest Produce (MFP) can sustain locals without excess damage to natural habitat, but not wider commercial activities based on it. Due to alternative employment now being unavailable, many tribal's are trying to make MFP commercially viable. Legally it is not allowed. Hence wildlife staff take action against illegal commercial use of MFP and the unemployed youth are rapidly finding themselves on the "offender lists" of the Tiger Reserve and other Protected Area authorities.
- Even educated tribal youth have no employment opportunities in and around their village.

All these factors severely strain the relations between local wildlife staff and the tribal's, leading to extensive poaching, arson, illegal grazing and a wildlife trade in the Satpura Landscape.

The conclusions of Non Government Organisations (NGO's) working on the ground are shared by the recently created 'Tiger Task Force' (Indian central government) i.e. unemployment, most particularly amongst tribal youths, is currently the major problem in and around Tiger Reserves and other Protected Areas, adversely affecting protection and conservation initiatives and posing a serious threat to remaining natural habitat. Although youths travel extensively and regularly during

the four months of summer to other parts of the State in search of employment, the Reserves cannot generate enough employment for tribal's living in and around them for the remaining eight months of the year. Available agricultural land is insufficient for the growing tribal population and hence there is a high correlation between unemployment and increasing incidents of illegal activities such as poaching, poisoning and MFP collection by local villagers.

Melghat provides an example of loss of employment associated with just one Tiger reserve: There are approximately 58 villages in Melghat Tiger Reserve and the Conservator of Forests for the Amravati area in which the Reserve is located has computed the loss of employment opportunities on forest harvesting activity as 190,000 man-days for East and West Melghat divisions and 110,000 man-days for South Melghat division.

There are 20 villages in and around Pench Tiger Reserve, 30 in and around Priyadarshini Pench Tiger Reserve, 50 around Satpura Tiger Reserve and 50 villages in and around Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. Exact numbers for Kanha and Bandhavgarh have yet to be ascertained but they will be of a similar magnitude.

These statistics correlate with India's tiger population dwindling rapidly.

The Solution

This proposal represents the creation of a special Employment Cell which will help local NGO's, Tiger Reserve administration (integrating the support of other govt. agencies such as the Tribal Development Department) in creating permanent employment for landless tribal's and unemployed tribal youths. This will help reduce conflict between tribal's and tiger, human intrusion and habitat degradation inside the reserve while fostering co-operation with the authorities.

Methodology

A dedicated team of two highly qualified and capable people, the Project Director and the Employment Officer would work under the guidance of the Project Manager to take this ambitious project to successful completion.

The team would prepare a site-specific employment package for these five Tiger Reserves, designing training modules and identifying agencies that would train the unemployed youth, place them in employment, help create self-employment and monitor the development of all trainees. The project team would use local Field Stations and facilities within communities in Melghat, Pench, Priyadarshini Pench, Satpura and Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserves.

Training would be conducted at the field stations by various expert agencies and include production, trading, marketing and services and also assist tribal youths to become self-employed through SHG's and Micro finance institutes.

Schedule of activities:

First three months:

- 1) The project team of Project Manager, Project director and Employment Officer would prepare a site-specific employment package for all Tiger Reserves in this project.
- 2) The team would design training modules, identify agencies that would train the academically-qualified but unemployed youth and place them somewhere in the district as well as designing a package to create self-employment for skilled tribal youth.
- 3) The team would gather information about employment opportunities, both in Government and private sectors for qualified tribal youths willing to travel for such jobs and this reliable information about such opportunities would only be available at the Tiger Reserves in the project. This helps tribal youths not waste limited financial resources and energy searching for jobs in cities.
- 4) The team would conduct regular meetings with unemployed youth, local NGOs and Tiger Reserve authorities.
- 5) The team would encourage skilled youths for self employment and help form 'Self Help Groups' (SHGs).
- 6) The project team would form small groups of unemployed youths, help them open group bank accounts and start raising their own funds for their new businesses.

Next Three months:

The project team would establish rapport with Micro Finance Institutes (MFI's) to provide financial assistance to some trained and capable tribal youth for self-employment.

After first six months:

After the preparation during the initial six months, the team would schedule four training and 'capacity building workshops' every month in these five Tiger Reserves.

Capacity Building/Training and Employment Package (General):

- 1) Hotel and Tourism Management
- 2) Dress making
- 3) Photography
- 4) Driving
- 5) Preparing products like envelopes, writing pads and paper bags from used material.
- 6) Nature Guide
- 7) Trading of vegetables and agro-products
- 8) Value addition of agro-products
- 9) Cloth Painting
- 10) Craft items made from 'waste materials'

Anticipated Benefits:

- 1) Tribal youth from each family in the villages in each Tiger Reserve would begin to make a living but legally.
- 2) Reduction of dependence of these families on MFP and consequent reduction of human interference in tiger habitat.
- 3) Reduction of conflict between Tiger Reserve staff and tribal's.
- 4) Reduction of instances of arson, poaching, illegal grazing, poisoning etc.
- 5) Increased level of protection in these reserves (guards become more efficient with fewer intrusions to manage).
- 6) Tiger population (which is declining in these reserves) would stabilise and later increase.

Evaluation:

A database recording training and employment progress would be maintained for every individual in the programme, while income generation and economic development of his/her family would also be tracked. Offences, with regard to illegal MFP trade, poaching, grazing and incidents of fires associated with each village, would also be tracked. However, an estimation of the tiger population would be the best evaluation criterion after an initial three years of persistent efforts.

Sustainability:

After completion of the project and the withdrawal of the three project officers, local NGOs and the groups of unemployed youth would continue programmes that had been set up, creating employment for future tribal youths from the accumulated funds in the group accounts. NGO's would raise funds from their usual sources and locally to continue the monitoring mechanism.