

LIFEFORCE REPORT 2006 – 2007

Introduction

LifeForce has launched its largest project so far in terms of funding, land area, numbers of people and, hopefully, tigers, affected. This is good news and a ray of hope but needs to be set in context. This context, as you might imagine is, overall, a rather bleak one but the ray of hope can be expanded if the necessary support is forthcoming during the coming months.

Although tedious and depressing to repeat each year, the prospects for wild tigers (and many other species) become bleaker each year and, as populations dwindle further, the possibilities of improving those prospects and preventing extinction are, whether from global or local perspectives, increasingly fraught with uncertainties and great difficulties. Amongst the countries responsible for conserving their sub-species, India has a network of Tiger Reserves set amidst some of the largest blocks of tiger habitat left on Earth which also hold the largest populations of tigers remaining in the world. Although rarely enforced, protective legislation and penalties also exist and, despite numerous and enormous problems within India, these factors form some sort of foundation on which to base conservation efforts. Limited time, knowledge and resources in an unpredictable world make all assessments questionable but, all in all, India still appears to offer the best chances for long-term tiger conservation. Within India, it is the Forests of Madhya Pradesh which offer the best chances for the tiger and this is where LifeForce is working.

In addition to the problems inherent with any sort of nature conservation, last year's LifeForce report identified additional problems it faces as a small charity trying to contribute to tiger conservation in particular and to resolving wider and general environmental problems (- and if these problems are not resolved, conserving a single species is either of limited value or a complete waste of time).

So, a global tiger crisis, as part of a global environmental crisis, both deepening rapidly, in conjunction with problems LifeForce faces for itself, has led to a review of strategy. As a result, LifeForce will concentrate on a reduced number of projects - those dealing with the first priorities (i.e. representing the most immediate dangers to tigers and the environment) and, amongst them, those with the most immediate and wide-ranging effects. LifeForce will channel all available resources into a few broad-based projects launched within forests representing the largest block of tiger habitat left on earth. In the timescales remaining to the tiger, and its wider environment, this strategy and these projects are considered to represent the best remaining chances of preventing extinction - if funding is found to develop them fully and rapidly,

All other projects referred to last year have been put into abeyance. The Health & Hygiene Workshops, organic agriculture training...all the projects are important but LifeForce can hardly survive itself and resources have to be used to best effect.

Before describing the new projects a brief update on a project introduced in last year's report – in collaboration with Conservation Research Ltd. of Cambridge England, six

camera-traps were supplied to the Forest Department and training given during February and March 2007. It remains to be seen what use the Department will make of them.



Training in progress at the Training Centre for Forest Guards in Satpura Tiger Reserve

For the foreseeable future all LifeForce resources will be channelled into the following two projects, considered to be of most immediate importance and the greatest help to the tiger, its habitat and the environment in general.

As mentioned on the website, the central Indian Tiger Reserves of Satpura, Melghat, Pench, Tadoba-Andhari, Kanha and Bandhavgarh are still (but only just) connected by forest 'corridors'. It is planned, if funding is found, to extend the first project throughout these Reserves and the interconnecting corridors (more than 10, 000 sq. km.) - considered to be the largest block of tiger habitat left on Earth. The second project will also be expanded and developed as funding allows.

Employment Cell Project

Readers familiar with the LifeForce website will have seen some introductory information about this project on the 'Update' page. In summary, the greatest threat to the tiger and its habitat is now posed by unemployed tribal youths living in and around Tiger Reserves. These people are the common factor (whether directly or by complicity) between the various threats of poaching, timber theft, arson, encroachment, degradation of habitat, collection of forest produce and grazing of domestic animals in Tiger Reserves.

Since the creation of Tiger Reserves, the forests are now protected and the tribal people's traditional employment, which depended on the forests, has become illegal. Either no, or too few, viable alternatives have been offered to the tribal people by government or aid agencies; hence all the problems mentioned above have resulted. At the same time 'conservation' has become associated with problems stemming from unemployment and, without remedial action has, or will, poison the minds of thousands of people against it, when support for conservation initiatives becomes ever more needful. Alternative

employment, combined with education, would make the greatest contribution to solving this particular but very damaging and wide-ranging problem.

‘Alternative employment’ is easy to write and talk about but difficult to implement significantly in any society. In rural India it is beset with numerous fundamental problems which have to be solved before any actual employment can even be considered. For readers only familiar with Western culture, the following ‘sketch’ should give the Employment Cell some background.

Due to culture, history, lack of resources in general and money in particular, along with a lack of literacy (let alone education), tribal people living in rural and basic conditions, cannot ‘check classifieds’, ‘surf the net’ or telephone friends or contacts in towns and cities to assess opportunities. Without the acumen and assurance born of education, employment and familiarity, tribal people are not even confident in opening a bank account in their nearest town. Before beginning the necessary education and training for employment, these factors and their effects have to be understood and allowed for. For cultural reasons, the structure of the tribal families has to be investigated to ensure the appropriate members of the family (usually the elder son(s)) are trained. Interviews include an assessment of each family’s most immediate problems and needs. For these reasons it is essential to have native people as Project Officers ‘on the ground’ who speak and understand the tribal people’s language and way of life. Hence LifeForce is pleased to be working in collaboration with local NGO’s (Non-Government Organisations): Nature Conservation Society Amravati and the Satpuda Foundation. Together we have launched an Employment Cell project to address all of the above requirements. When the Project Officers have gained the tribal people’s trust and confidence, trust and confidence are generated in the projects and opportunities they represent. The information gleaned by the Project Officers is compiled in an extensive database, followed by the provision of appropriate training, advice and facilities to actually place the individuals in employment or establish them as self-employed.

So far these surveys and interviews have been conducted in Melghat and Pench Tiger Reserves (Pench Tiger Reserve is officially classified as two Tiger Reserves since it straddles the border of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra and has separate administrations). After the surveys, Pench Tiger Reserve was first for training and placements of people into work. So far, 51 youths have received training in the hotel industry, 17 as security guards and 12 of them (as of July 2007) have found employment in the nearby city of Nagpur.

The following is from a report published in the Times of India:

“Ray of hope for youths around tiger reserves

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

19 June 2007

Nagpur: There is a ray of hope for tribal youths residing on the periphery of Pench Tiger Reserve. These youths otherwise, due to lack of employment opportunities, are lured by the poachers to kill a tiger or leopard for a paltry sum.

Around 34 youths now hope to lead a better life after being trained in hotel management and catering technology (*by the*) Satpuda Foundation, an NGO working for tiger conservation. These youths will now have a fair chance to get employment in the hotel industry coming up fast near reserves in Madhya Pradesh and Pench.

"This is a right analysis of the ground situation," says Nandkishore, chief conservator of forests (CCF), wildlife, while lauding the Satpuda initiative. "People talk a lot about the decline in tiger population and serious efforts to conserve them but very few practically take initiatives in this direction," the CCF said while addressing a gathering of villagers at Pench.

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) while declaring the recent tiger numbers had predicted growing unemployment among tribals as the prime reason for dwindling wild cat population. The Satpuda Foundation has decided to address the problem by setting up employment cells at five tiger reserves in central India with the financial support from LifeForce Charitable Trust.

"The programme launched at Pench is our first initiative. Youths who registered themselves in self-help group (SHG) were short-listed for the workshop on hotel and tourism management. The youths were trained in Government Institute of Hotel Management and Catering Technology, Nagpur, in six sessions," informed Kishore Rithe, chief of Satpuda Foundation.

Talking to Times of India, Giri Venkatesan, executive director, Satpuda Foundation, who also heads the employment cell, said: "More and more institutes in Vidarbha are coming forward voluntarily with market-orientated training packages for these tribal youths. We are planning to conduct nine such workshops in each reserve. The data collection work has already been completed."

RFOs Kishore Mishrikotkar, Londhe and Naik said that in the long run these employment cells would make a big difference in conservation."

In addition to funding this project in terms of equipment, salaries, accommodation and other expenses, resources already donated include the first two vehicles seen in the foreground of the first picture below plus a specialised vehicle (the Tata Sumo pictured separately) just acquired and now working full-time for the project. This latter holds a laptop, VCD player, LCD projector and inverter (generator) necessary for education and training.



The LifeForce Fleet for Tiger Conservation





Villagers attending preliminary meetings outside Pench Tiger Reserve
(Project Officer below right)



Bio-diesel Project

Energy in one form or another is essential for tribal people to meet their basic needs such as cooking, heating and lighting. In India, with its predominately rural population, energy is mostly obtained from forest and agricultural sources e.g. wood and charcoal, cow dung and where available, coal. In addition, fossil fuel based products like kerosene, petrol, diesel and LPG have also become important. Of these, kerosene and diesel are the most widely used, especially for fuelling engines and pumps providing domestic water, irrigation and lighting.

The current project is running in a village next to Melghat Tiger Reserve and uses the seeds of Mahua, Pongamia, Kusum and Behra trees. The trees and their seeds are amply available in the area without felling, planting or any other interference. The seeds are fed into a 'seed decorticator' machine which expels the oil and which can, without further treatment or refinement, be used in a modified diesel engine. Use of seed oil reduces or eliminates use of fossil fuels, reduces pressure on and disturbance of the forest (since it removes any need to collect fuel wood) and also provides employment opportunities associated with running and maintaining the machines. Additional benefits include improved relationships between tribal people and the Forest Department, education and less pollution. Other direct benefits include the likes of the following incident. A few months ago, a villager was known to have poached a sambhur deer (a principal prey species of the tiger) but the other villagers threatened to set fire to the forest if the Forest Department arrested him. The Bio-diesel project officers spoke to the villagers and said that the choice was theirs but that the project could not continue if known cases of poaching were allowed and protected in this way. After some deliberation, the villagers handed over the guilty party to the authorities.





Progress to date:

In November 2006 preliminary meetings were conducted at Khamda to introduce the concept to the villagers. Suitable individuals attended concept demonstration and training at the Viswesvaraya National Institute of Technology in Nagpur during November 2006 and a generator was purchased in the same month from Indore. The preliminary survey for village electrification followed in December along with the design of a 5 litre capacity bio-diesel plant suitable for the village. Village electrification (laying of cables and placing of equipment), and a successful trial using 'petro-diesel' and bio-diesel ran through February and March 2007. In April and May trials ran on the unit which would make sufficient bio-diesel to supply all required electricity. Hands-on training for Khamda villagers to make bio-diesel were given in June and July 2007. The project will complete in October/November 2007

Tigers and the Tribal Act

The Indian government's Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 poses one of the greatest threats to the remaining areas of natural habitat in India – which are already alarmingly small: 10% of that land mass has habitat remaining which is suitable for tiger, 4.5 % is protected by law but this includes 'sanctuary' (where it is illegal to cut trees or kill animals but where people are allowed to live - meaning that tigers do not live there). Hence, disregarding sanctuary which has limited benefit to tigers, just 1% of India's enormous land area is totally protected (and that in law, but not necessarily in practice). If this Tribal Act becomes law, any tribal can do anything they want to any natural habitat e.g. cut forest and plough land in a Tiger Reserve, encroach on Protected Areas, claim ownership and have that claim recognised in law! It has left sincere members of the Forest department and NGO's feeling helpless and hopeless as this legalises everything these groups have struggled against for decades. The unchecked disturbance, pollution and inevitable hunting, killing and timber cutting will rapidly accelerate the disappearance of the tiger, followed by other species, then the forest, then the topsoil.

The Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, unopposed by any Indian political party, has passed all stages of ratification, with only one remaining, before it becomes law.

The activities that the Act legitimises, whether or not any actually take place, are, as LifeForce understands it, in contravention of internationally binding agreements drawn up by international bodies such as the I.U.C.N. (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) and to which India is a signatory.

The Bigger LifeForce

The valuable aspect of the current media concern over global warming is the consciousness-raising in those members of society who chose to ignore all the consciousness-raising efforts of NGO's for the last three decades. This, however, is only of value if it leads to beneficial action i.e. that people change their life-styles to environmentally-friendly and/or ethical ones in as many ways as possible, however small or seemingly insignificant. You can read in last year's report, LifeForce's attempt to influence commerce in the right direction whilst bringing immediate benefits to all those businesses and organisations invited – the ideal 'win-win' scenario. Not only was the meeting a failure (four attending out of 33 invited) but also the subsequent appeal in last year's report for positive suggestions and remedial adjustments received no replies whatsoever. More people must take more action if we are to avoid the worst repercussions of the environmental crisis.

Another worrying feature common to both media coverage and responses from the public is the stress on human preferences and life-styles that should be taken into consideration when planning remedial measures. The stark truth is that none of these human perspectives, nor any individual, nor the whole human race put together, has any importance whatsoever from nature's perspective. The water surging into people's homes during the recent floods in England, China and India did so regardless of human perspectives or whose home it was flooding. The same applies to the consequences of any other extreme weather conditions we may experience, rising sea levels, or the results of pollution, loss of topsoil, depleted ozone, deforestation or species extinctions.

Our obsession with ourselves, with all things human and human priorities has brought about the environmental crisis in the first place. Implacable laws determine our fates and our only hope is to comply with them, whether or not it is convenient, fashionable, or in accordance with human legislation, politics or preferences. The sooner we start doing so, the better for all of us - and other life forms, including tigers. Nature's laws first, our preferences next.

The largest page on the LifeForce website is the 'Take Action' page suggesting life-style choices you can make. One option mentions that giving some of your 'disposable income' to an environmental charity is not a gift but an investment and LifeForce needs money to maintain and develop the work reported on here. Despite the bleak situation we can, with your help, increase the rays of hope as mentioned in the Introduction and the Times of India article. Please help brighten that light if you can. Good luck with all your efforts to protect the environment and hence your loved ones and your life force.