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## ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Tribal Rights Won't Trouble Tiger Health

By Keya Acharya

**BANGALORE, Mar 12 (IPS) - Walking through morning sunlight streaming through tall teak trees, A.K. Singh deputy conservator of forests, points out the 'core, critical tiger habitat' in the heart of this sprawling national park.**

"As per government of India mandate, we have identified Nagarhole as a critical tiger habitat and are now relocating tribals outside core areas," says Singh describing conservation efforts in this 5,500 sq km area, officially called the Rajiv Gandhi National Park, in the southern Karnataka state.

A 2008 report, 'Status of Tigers, Co-Predators and Prey in India', brought out by the National Tiger Conservation Authority and the Wildlife Institute of India (WISI) at Dehra Dun, has thrown up a dismal scene of decimation of tiger populations in India, mainly due to poaching and shrinking of wildlife habitats.

India's rare Royal Bengal Tiger population has plunged down to 1,411 of the big cats, a drastic decline from earlier estimates, the report says. The last survey, in 2002, had placed the number of tigers in India at 3,700, with the population of those in protected sanctuaries estimated at 1,500.

But, the earlier census was made using the inaccurate method of counting pug marks.

Karnataka currently has one of the country's largest concentration of tiger populations -- 290 inside four identified forests in Nagarhole, Bandipur, Dandeli and Bhadra. Central Madhya Pradesh state has a similar number.

Karnataka's tigers, though, are down from 401 at the last census five years ago. In the state capital, Bangalore, principal chief conservator of forests Indu Bhushan Srivastava discounts the earlier census, which used pugmarks, as misleading.

"There were too many assumptions in the last census. As per the current report, our tiger populations are quite healthy."

However, India's Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, granting forest land to tribals residing within them for at least three successive generations, has come under criticism from wildlife activists as detrimental to the viability of both tigers and forests.

The Act however does have a clause stipulating that critical tiger habitats be free of human habitation. The Act is currently in the process of implementation with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in Delhi and the states have been asked to submit lists of legitimate candidates by Mar. 15.

Srivastava says the Act's mandate will not interfere with tiger conservation in Karnataka.

"We are proceeding to secure core tiger habitats and remove all human habitation within them to outside tiger reserves", says Srivastava. "We have no option but to make arrangements for relocation", he says.

At Nagarhole, approximately 320 of the 1,750 tribal families have been relocated out of the park. The target is to shift 100 families in a year.

Srivastava believes the relocation package of 3 acres of land and Rs. 1 million (25,000 US dollars) being offered by the Indian government to each family is attractive enough to stop all protests on relocation.

At Nagapara relocation camp in Nagarhole, 25-year-old community leader Harish says they are all "a little adjusted now", having been moved here in 2002 from core areas inside the national park.

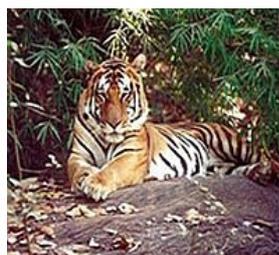
Singh says adjustment takes time because settled agriculture and the raising of poultry and cattle is new for them.

At the latest relocation camp in Sollepura outside Nagarhole, there is discontent and frustration at the lack of water, electricity and food facilities.

"Our mandate is to provide land, housing and seeds for crops; our work here is over. Now it is up to the district authorities and tribal welfare department to take over", says DCF Singh.

Srivastava agrees that the relocation process 'takes time and moves in stages', agreeing that the forest department needs to initiate co-operation with the administrative authorities for better facilities in the relocated zones.

In New Delhi meanwhile, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has recently issued a memorandum to all chief



Tiger in an Indian national park

Credit: NIC-India



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ministers of tiger-inhabited States to personally oversee conservation efforts.

The federal government has allocated Rs. 500 million (125,000 dollars) for tiger conservation in its current budget.

In January, the Prime Minister set up a national wildlife crime prevention bureau in a bid to control poaching.

But the 2008 tiger-census report still holds out hope for India's beleaguered tigers, saying that there is potential, within each identified geographical unit to manage some of the tiger populations as 'meta-populations.'

"This enhances the conservation potential of each of the single populations and probability of their long-term persistence," said the report.

(END/2008)

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