

# Forest fires: strict measures, deterrent action needed

By Praveen Bhargav

We have just witnessed yet another round of devastating forest fires in Nagarahole National Park, followed by media exposes and the usual efforts by the authorities to underplay the damage. In an attempt to find a quick scapegoat, the Park director floated the ridiculous theory that NGOs must have set fire to the forest! Fortunately, his boss, the Chief Wildlife Warden, quickly negated this scurrilous accusation in a statement to the media subsequently.

The Forest Survey of India (FSI) Report of 2012 has documented that there have been 1402 incidents of forest fire in Karnataka between 2008 and 2011. Yet, no lessons seem to have been learnt. Questions about the causative factors or administrative lapses are quickly washed away and even the cursory assurances of action against those responsible are not followed up.

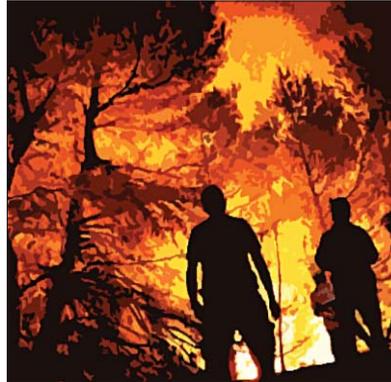
In 2012, massive fires singed the Nagarahole and Metikuppe Ranges, which accounted for the bulk of 2450 hectares burnt as documented by National Remote

Sensing Agency (NRSA). But apart from registering a few offence cases, not a single culprit has yet been punished. Instead, the two assistant conservators who were in charge of Nagarahole and Metikuppe subdivisions, and the then Park director, were rewarded with promotions.

Virtually, all forest fires in tropical forests are man-made, caused mostly by encroachers, cattle grazers, minor forest product collectors, or local disgruntled elements trying to settle scores with the Forest Department. Fires also occur when forest staff burn fire lines at the wrong time of the day, in windy conditions, or with in-sufficient staff or supervision.

## Devastating impact

Whatever the reason, the impact of annual forest fires on wildlife habitats is devastating. Many important under-storey plants get annihilated and are replaced with inedible weeds, affecting the availability of nutritious forage for herbivores. This has an impact all the way up the food chain. Fires also destroy insects, reptiles and even the young of deer and tiger.



What really is the problem? A shortage of resources or money? Not at all. Nagarahole and other tiger reserves have multi-crore budgets from the National Tiger Conservation Authority, and access to money from a huge compensatory afforestation fund (CAMPA) for fire protection. As for infrastructure and staff, Nagarahole has at-least 10 vehicles, an effective wireless network and over 300

protection staff. In addition to these, more than 200 fire-watchers from local settlements are hired on a temporary basis during the fire season.

The main problem evidently is not one of resources but of ineffective leadership and misplaced priorities. In the recent instance, key personnel, including the range officer and an expert fire spotter were reportedly tasked with other low priority jobs outside the Park instead of completely focusing on fire protection.

The importance of good leadership in fire protection was demonstrated effectively in 1999 by the then director of the Bhadra Tiger Reserve. With far fewer resources than what is currently available in Nagarahole, he motivated his staff to perform, and also successfully reached out to local people and NGOs. As a result of this, not a single incidence of fire was reported in Bhadra that year.

## Dead bamboo

While the non-removal of dead bamboo in Nagarahole-Bandipur is being cited as a major fire hazard, it is worth noting that

a similar situation prevailed in Bhadra in 1999. The diligent handling of the situation by the then Bhadra director and his staff not only ensured that there were no fires but also established that dead bamboo, on its own, is not a fire hazard, if appropriate fire protection measures are in place.

It also effectively demonstrated that after bamboo flowers and dies, the seeds scattered around the dead clumps, which begin to sprout and regenerate, are most effectively protected by the dead bamboo itself. Acting as an effective cage, the dead bamboo clumps prevent ungulates from grazing or trampling the regenerating seedlings.

Therefore, the policy of non-removal of dead bamboo in order to facilitate regeneration is extremely important and the idea to seek removal by labeling it a fire hazard needs to be urgently reviewed. The forest department would do well to draw upon the wisdom of those officers who have effectively prevented fires at the Park and range level. A standard operating procedure can also be developed based on such practical knowledge and by inviting outside experts as well.

As part of a comprehensive prevention strategy, a moratorium on all civil works, including "urgent" financial year-end works must be enforced. These not only distract the attention of officials, but also eat into precious time and other resources during the peak fire season. This is a particularly important measure as the forest department executes most of such "works" directly and not through contractors. All tourism zones must be closed for both private and government-run resorts during the fire season, and tourism vehicles should be re-deployed for fire protection.

A system must also be put in place to gather and review human intelligence on disgruntled elements, who may be waiting to indulge in arson, based on a thorough review of cases booked during the year and other field assessments from rangers and frontline staff. Lastly, there must be strong demonstrable action for negligence or administrative lapses in tackling forest fires and prosecution of offenders. For, without accountability and deterrent action, our forests will continue to go up in smoke.