

Suggestions to the Tiger Task Force constituted by the Hon'ble Prime Minister

1. Summary Statement:

Wildlife First is a science driven conservation organization that has been actively working for over a decade to conserve tiger habitats in Karnataka. Wildlife First is headed by K.M. Chinnappa, whose lifetime effort played a pivotal role in recovering tiger populations in Nagarahole Tiger Reserve. Individual members of Wildlife First have over two decades of collective experience and in-depth understanding of the field realities of tiger conservation. Wildlife First also networks with several local organizations in the Western Ghats, which is identified as a high priority Tiger Conservation Unit (TCU 55) by the Wildlife Conservation Society and other conservation organizations.

The stated priorities in the terms of reference of the Tiger Task Force are to strengthen tiger conservation (as opposed to national social reform). The central concern is that the tiger is in danger. Therefore, we must first outline the causative factors that precipitate and maintain threats to the tiger, its prey and the habitat. We then need to resolve these threats by clearly recognizing the ecological needs of the tiger and meeting them in the demographic and social context in which the tiger tenuously survives.

Our suggestions on the specific issues listed in the terms of reference include new measures that need to be initiated, revitalizing existing systems that are crumbling, and discarding systems and practices presently in use that are inimical to the long term conservation of the tiger. Some pictures that depict damage to the tiger, its prey and habitat are in Appendix – 1.

2. Suggestions on specific issues outlined in the TOR

2.1 Measures to strengthen tiger conservation in the country.

2.1.1 Eco development/Rural Development projects- Mission Drift

The *Mission Drift* from Protection Oriented management (that helped recover Tiger populations from the brink of extinction in the 70s and 80s) to a predominantly Rural Development focused management paradigm has been driven primarily by the flow of large sums of money from World Bank and other multilateral aid agencies into Protected Areas (PAs)/Tiger Reserves(TRs).

Biologically intact PAs and TRs that form less than one per cent of India's land area hold a substantial percentage of wild tigers and therefore it is vitally important to manage these areas based on the ecological needs of the tiger. Some of the core needs include increasing protection, reducing human population densities in a socially just manner, de-linking market pressures and creating biomass resources outside PA/TR boundaries to meet the bona fide needs of people.

Instead of addressing these core issues squarely Eco-development projects have entrusted the implementation of a whole range of economic related activities to PA/TR officials and staff, which completely diverted them from the core issues to peripheral but rural development type of activities.

The consultancy structure of the IEDP resulted in the hiring of technically unqualified or incompetent project consultants, mostly retired forest officials, to merely go through the motions of monitoring, leading to the total absence of credible scientific assessments. The IEDP assessment report is a 300 + page tome that starkly illustrates the absence of any credible ecological and sociological data to support its conclusions.

The infusion of massive amounts of funds (\$ 67 million in five years under the World Bank sponsored India Eco-development Project -IEDP) almost six times more than the annual budgets of individual PAs/TRs into the hands of a few officials completely distracted them from the thankless job of protection to lucrative rural development type activities outside PAs/TRs. In Nagarahole, which was one of the Eco-development project sites, Park Rangers and Foresters (who are key protection officials) had to organize and attend more than 500 meetings during a two year period leaving them little time for protection duties.

The micro-level socioeconomic interventions carried out under the IEDP outside the Park and delivered through the forest bureaucratic apparatus did not make any impact on illegal biomass extraction nor did such interventions change attitudes of local people towards the park let alone make them benign.

The efforts of Wildlife First and its conservation partners resulted in the uncovering of massive illegal timber felling, killing of 77 elephants, jaw trapping of tigers, devastating forest fires that burnt over 90 sq km of the park and financial corruption during the implementation of the World Bank IEDP. The negative impact of this project is highlighted by the findings and conclusions of the Hon'ble Lokayukta Karnataka after a thorough independent investigation covering the last three years of the project period.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions to address this problem:

- 1. Unburden the PA/TR officials from peripheral rural development activity to clearly focus on the core task of protection since there is no other agency which is empowered to do this important duty.**
- 2. Implementation of Eco-development type activities must be entrusted to other government departments like Tribal Welfare, Rural Development, Zilla Panchayats/Gram Sabhas or other agencies.**
- 3. The application of huge public funds allocated under the IEDP must be properly investigated, ecologically and financially audited and tracked by an independent agency (not paid consultants and retired officials) to actually determine whether they have reached the intended beneficiaries and reduced threats to the tiger , its prey and the habitat.**

2.1.2 Management plans and Annual Plans of Operation (APOs)

Protected Areas (PAs)/Tiger Reserves (TRs) in the country are being managed based on prescriptions made in Management Plans which are then slotted into Annual Plans of Operation (APOs). The National Wildlife Action Plan has recognized the need to review

and prepare scientific and ecologically sound Management Plans for all PAs. However, the design and implementation of many of these plans is causing serious damage to tiger habitats and posing grave threats to the tiger and its prey.

We believe that the poor quality of Management Plans/APOs result from a lack of knowledge of wildlife biology, landscape ecology... which results in merely carrying forward prescriptions from previous plans without evaluation, or following generic prescriptions of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) which may not be relevant in a particular site. In many cases, the main motivation is the large sums of money that will flow in for (unscientific and ecologically absurd) prescriptions of habitat improvement/manipulation, civil and earth moving works that will then be executed by Rangers/other officials.

Some of the examples of such damaging “works” inside PAs/TRs include: bamboo hoeing and fertilizer application, gap planting of fodder and fruit trees, weed eradication, widening view lines, creation of water resources through construction of check dams, water holes etc, formation of interior roads, construction of elephant camps, captive breeding/release facilities...

Rangers enthusiastically devote a substantial percentage of their time for these lucrative “works” which leaves little time for core protection duties of providing leadership to frontline staff. This has a deleterious impact on core activities like patrolling, investigation, prosecution and fire protection.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions to address this problem:

- 1. The MOEF must constitute a high- level technical advisory panel comprising independent wildlife biologists/ecologists who have expertise in different endangered species, taxonomic groups and habitats to scrutinize and review all Management Plans of PAs to eliminate all unnecessary and harmful prescriptions. Guidelines to ensure implementation of recommendations of the technical panel and appropriate revision of APOs must be issued.**
- 2. All draft Management Plans/APOs must be available for public scrutiny on websites and in physical form to generate suggestions/inputs. Valid suggestions/inputs must be incorporated based on recommendations made by the technical panel. This panel can co-opt other biologists/NGOs with specialized expertise on specific issues whenever required.**
- 3. Guidelines to CWLWs/DCFs of PAs to carefully assess the funding requirements from Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) so as to budget for protection related activities like maintenance of Anti-Poaching Camps, fire protection, purchase of wireless sets etc since CSS funds are released only for specifically budgeted activities only.**

2.1.3 Revitalizing protection

State Forest Departments are charged with the task of protection and law enforcement within PAs/TRs through the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of all forest and wildlife offences. It must be recognized that Wildlife laws can be effectively enforced only when the overall law and order situation is satisfactory. Therefore the status of prevailing law and order situation in each State has to be factored into assessments on the kind of force that needs to be deployed. The geographic location of the State – international/porous interstate borders, PAs at tri-junctions, identified trafficking routes etc - also needs to be carefully considered in order to determine the threat perception and the type of force that needs to be deployed to augment the capacities of State Forest Departments.

Crime being on the State list of the Constitution, we believe that the primary bottom line responsibility of protecting PAs and TRs must vest with the Forest Department. However, urgent and major overhaul of the once effective protection mechanisms of the Forest Departments along with strengthening primarily at the State level with support from the Central government is needed.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions, which we believe will effectively address this important issue:

1. Prevention and Detection

a. In most States where law and order situation is satisfactory, the tried and tested multi-tier system of protection has to be re-vitalized/ re-activated. The three layers comprise Foot Patrols; Permanent Anti-Poaching Camps at strategic locations (at least three per range of approx 100 sq km), temporary camps based on intelligence inputs along with mobile day/night patrolling.

b. Expert trackers act as force multipliers in anti-poaching teams. Recruitment of local tribal people as trackers in sufficient numbers by reducing education and physical standards of recruitment would bolster protection efforts. This would to some extent address the staff shortage problem that needs to be urgently addressed, while at the same time providing gainful employment to forest dwelling tribal people.

c. The old system of compartments/Beats which were formed primarily for commercial forestry operations needs to be redesigned to ensure that the Section or Range becomes the unit of accountability. This would also help in reorganizing existing staff into more effective patrol teams for both day and night operations and minimize multiple jurisdictions, which is used to escape protection accountability.

d. For this system to work effectively, it is vitally important to ensure that the Ranger and Forester/Deputy Ranger provide quality leadership to their protection units. This mandates that they allocate at least 75 per cent of their time for protection duties and operate from their assigned HQs. (Eco-development projects have caused serious disruptions to this system).

Additional requirements of frontline staff can be mobilized by a combination of recruitments and redeployment from other overstaffed wings (higher ratio of staff to the area of good forests that they control) of the Forest Departments like Social Forestry, Forest Development Corporations, Research & Training etc. To handle exigencies Permanent Standing Orders can be in force to rush reinforcements from neighboring ranges or divisions without waiting for clearances.

e. In terms of equipment, there is a constant demand for “modern weapons”. Our view is that such rapid-fire automatic weapons are neither necessary nor effective in encounters in forest areas with thick cover. Furthermore, since most forest staff are not trained to handle such weapons, good quality 12 bore shot guns, some with pump action, .315 rifles must be provided. Sufficient wireless equipment, both static and handheld/mobile with Repeaters in hilly terrain along with 4 WD vehicles would also be necessary. Steps to create a small team comprising Armourers and wireless technicians at Circle level (2-3 PAs) would greatly help in maintenance and availability of weapons and wireless equipment. These suggestions are specifically for areas that are not affected by terrorism or law and order problems. Also, in certain areas like Kaziranga etc where poachers are equipped with carbines, special equipment would be necessary.

f. A Strike Force designated as Forest Police Force (FPF) trained exclusively for protection and law enforcement duties has to be created. The FPF will have only three ranks – FPF Watcher, FPF Guard, and FPF Forester equivalent to a constable/head constable/Sub-Inspector. This forest police force will be exclusively under the command of the PA/TR Deputy Director. The FPF will be equipped with necessary weapons along the lines of a State Reserve Police Force. In States where Forest personnel have not been empowered to use fire arms, necessary notifications as already issued in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu need to be issued.

2. Intelligence

Human Intelligence forms an important part of the effort to ensure protection of PAs/TR. While the Directorate of Project Tiger and some State Forest Departments do allocate Secret Service Funds this low key but important aspect of protection needs strengthening which will greatly help in maximizing the effectiveness of protection efforts.

We suggest that appropriate guidelines are issued to CWLWs of all States to create a Secret Service Fund account with Reserve Wardens of all PAs/TRs which is readily available and immediately disbursed to gather actionable intelligence at Range level.

3. Investigation of Wildlife Crime

Tackling wild life crime calls for a major component of investigation skills and a smaller component of wildlife knowledge. Most of the serious wildlife offences involving direct killing of tigers invariably have inter-state or international ramifications with an active and entrenched illegal trade network. Wildlife trade is also linked to arms trade / gunrunning – narcotics etc.

a. We suggest that an Elite Investigation Unit as a part of the State Police CID Wing be created. Forest Officials, who are not trained in investigation but have wildlife skills, may be posted on deputation to this Elite Unit. We can make detailed suggestions on the feasibility of this idea if desired.

b. We also suggest that such an Elite State CID Unit can be entrusted with investigation and prosecution of all poaching cases involving Schedule 1 animals in PAs/TRs only with sufficient budgetary support. Furthermore, such State level Units can interface, co-ordinate and assist the newly announced National Wildlife Crime Control Bureau which we believe will require substantial inputs and logistical support at the State level.

3. Forensic Labs at State level

We suggest that a separate wildlife section can be set up in the existing Forensic Science Laboratories that exist in all States. The forensic lab can have a panel of wildlife biologists on call, who can offer scientific advise on specific cases/species.

4. Deterrence

There have been massive amounts of timber felling in PAs/TRs over the last decade. The Supreme Court has also issued directions in WP 202/95 and WP 171/96 to identify all forest divisions where significant illegal fellings have taken place and initiate disciplinary/criminal proceedings against those found responsible.

We suggest that appropriate recommendations be made by the Task Force to ensure that deterrent action is initiated which will minimize the negligence of protection staff /officials.

2.1.4 Preventing fragmentation of tiger habitats

The issue of habitat fragmentation caused by the impact of planned and proposed developmental projects, human settlements... seriously threaten many tiger reserves and key tiger habitats. Fragmentation occurs when landscape continuity is broken – forests shrink into smaller patches to become honeycombed with settlements, which then disrupt connectivity.

It exposes tiger habitats to increased contact with human settlements, roads, railway lines, power lines, pipelines, irrigation canals and such formations. Some specific examples in Karnataka include improvement of a major highway through southern Nagarhole, mining in the rain forests of Kudremukh (which the government is still trying to support despite a Supreme Court Judgment to shut down) and formation of roads on steep slopes, a proposed railway line that will disconnect forests of Eastern Ghats from Nilgiris and Western Ghats, over 50 mini Hydel and Windmill projects...

In Bhadra Tiger Reserve we were part of a major voluntary resettlement effort that succeeded in motivating 432 families living in 16 interior villages inside the Tiger Reserve to move out. The key ingredients to this effort was the people's desire to move out, the constructive partnership between the Collector, the Park's Deputy Director and

conservation organizations supported by the then Project Tiger Director and the attractive site- specific package offered by the Government along with a completely transparent and people friendly approach. This win-win case study also highlights the potential of well-planned and sensible voluntary resettlement projects in delivering socio-economic benefits that people demand while ensuring consolidation of tiger habitat and elimination of human-wildlife conflict.

A similar incentive driven voluntary resettlement project is underway at Nagarahole Tiger Reserve which has shown promise. Our partner organization Living Inspiration for Tribals (LIFT) has played a critical catalytic role in motivating and supporting 250 landless tribal families who volunteered to move out and accept the government resettlement package of two hectares of land, housing and other facilities. What makes this project different is that LIFT continues to intensively work with the resettled tribal people and is helping them in carrying on agriculture, procuring livestock, vocational training, educating children, formation of Self Help Groups, and access to proper medical care. In this process LIFT has assisted tribal people to access several government schemes of the Social Welfare, Zilla Panchayat and other departments which dovetail with the BOTD scheme of the Directorate of Project Tiger. The project has also helped in instilling confidence among many other tribal families who are willing to move out. In both these cases, land and resettlement facilities were provided by Government of Karnataka even to people without any recognized rights but were marooned inside which has set a good precedent.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions to prevent fragmentation:

- 1. Ensure allocation of sufficient amounts of funding to the Beneficiary Oriented Scheme for Tribal Development (BOTD) of Project Tiger and strengthen the mechanisms for implementation of socially just, site-specific voluntary resettlement projects in PAs/TRs for disenfranchised people marooned inside.**
- 2. Strict Guidelines to MOEF to ensure that PAs/TRs and Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs) around PAs/TRs are made out of bounds for developmental projects and to proactively act to prevent intrusions. Furthermore, grant of lands and dwelling rights, under any law, inside PAs and TRs must not be allowed.**
- 3. The Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) mechanism has to be overhauled to ensure that all consultancy fees/logistics of site visit and other financial issues between the project proponent and the EIA consultant/expert has to be severed. Further, all Rapid EIA and EIA reports must be referred to the Technical Advisory Panel of wildlife biologists for peer review and placed in public domain before processing the project.**
- 4. An appeal in National Interest by the Prime Minister to Industry Captains/ CII and other trade bodies to follow a regime of Self regulation to avoid projects in PAs/TRs and ESAs.**

2.1.5 Recognizing the role of NGOs

Non-governmental Organizations play the role of watchdogs in ensuring that government agencies actively protect PAs/TRs. While NGOs can play a constructive role in strengthening the efforts of government agencies in ensuring protection, management of habitat, community education and public support and other conservation measures it is also necessary for government agencies to recognize the value of the independent inputs provided by NGOs.

The potential of such constructive collaboration between NGOs and government agencies is often understated but has immense value in resolving conflict/stalemate situations and usher in real change on the ground in favor of wildlife. Conservation of tigers involves a complex interplay of ecological and social issues and one government agency in our opinion does not have all the necessary skills to analyze and evolve robust solutions to solve such complex problems.

It is also the case that government agencies prefer to work with “go with the flow” type of NGOs to stifle critiques about poor management response to tiger problems. In some cases they even invoke wildlife laws, which are actually meant to tackle criminals who are destroying wildlife, as an instrument of threat and harassment. This is a disturbing trend, which NGOs and researchers are increasingly facing.

We make the following specific suggestions to ensure constructive public-private partnerships:

1. Ensure appropriate guidelines for implementation of the priority actions of involving NGOs in conservation and management of PAs/TRs as contained in the National Wildlife Action Plan.

2. Create a foolproof system including appellate mechanisms for curbing misapplication of wildlife laws against bona fide NGOs and Researchers.

2.2 Measures to incentivise the local community in conservation of tigers.

Please refer to the Bhadra Voluntary Resettlement case study presented in the Fragmentation of habitat section at 2.1.4.

2.3 Measures to incentivise local forest staff posted in sanctuaries/national parks and ensure an effective HR plan for tiger conservation/wildlife managers.

While Protection Staff of Forest Departments work in extremely hostile conditions, the benefits, allowances and facilities that they receive is extremely poor compared to what the Police/other security forces receive. As regards an HR Plan for wildlife managers, there is an urgent need to thoroughly revamp the foundation training and refresher training courses at the Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy and the Wildlife Institute of India which is still heavily oriented towards commercial forestry. Similar revamp of training at Ranger Training Colleges and Guard Schools is necessary.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions to motivate Staff:

- 1. The Recommendations contained in the Biplap Dasgupta Committee Report on overhauling the WII must be implemented in order to address the issue of a effective HR plan for Wildlife managers.**
- 2. Refresher training for front line staff in anti-poaching techniques, field craft, handling of fire arms... must be regularly organized at field level.**
- 3. The interiors of PAs/TRs (anti-poaching camps, chowkis...) should be designated as Non-family stations and special allowances, rations and extra pay for 24 hour duty must be sanctioned to temporary and permanent staff as per Police allowance standards.**
- 4. All protection staff – both permanent and temporary must be provided proper insurance policies to cover medial expenses for treatment of injuries, disability allowance, ex-gratia to the family in case of death while defending the Tiger and its habitat.**
- 5. Hostel facilities for children of staff and quarters for the family at Taluk/District HQs must be provided. Children of staff who get killed in the line of duty must be provided hostel and education facilities free of cost.**
- 6. State awards must be constituted to recognize good protection efforts along the lines of Police Awards; For Exceptional/heroic Service must be recognized with Presidential Wildlife Medals**

2.4 Measures to improve the methodology of tiger counting and forecasting.

We suggest that a system of sampling based scientific methodologies carried out by independent and competent wildlife biologists must be adopted. The data and results must be subject to rigorous peer review before official acceptance. The detailed Guidelines issued by the Directorate of Project Tiger in April 1997 followed by additional guidelines in May 2001 must be implemented by all State Forest Departments.

2.5 Methods of transparent professional audit of wildlife parks and placing data on tiger conservation in the public domain.

At the present moment there are no transparent independent systems of ecological audits of wildlife parks. In most cases, evaluation and audit is carried out by field managers (forest officials) themselves. This is somewhat akin to Finance Managers of a company carrying out Audits themselves without entrusting it to independent Auditors. In recent times, consultants have been handpicked and selected through opaque bureaucratic processes and paid huge consultancy fees to conduct audits which are labeled as independent and professional.

We therefore make the following specific suggestions:

- 1. A mechanism to assess, estimate and audit tiger habitat damage caused by fire, timber felling, livestock grazing (legal & illegal) etc must be introduced. Objective Assessments must be based on satellite imagery from Cartosat and other sources along with proper ground truthing, habitat plots to monitor regeneration against baselines, stump enumeration etc. Scientific assessment of damage caused by tourism (roads, salt licks, vehicles, buildings...) must be carried out.**
- 2. PAs that have already suffered such damage must be identified and referred to the technical advisory panel for providing specific advice to initiate appropriate remedial/ restoration measures including addition of area, buying of private lands to consolidate PAs, curtailing tourism... Funds for such restoration efforts could be provided from Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) or any other budget head.**
- 3. A system of Control Registers and Deviation Registers must be introduced to record implementation as well as deviation of recommendations made in Management Plans. Inspection and Evaluation of Management Plan implementation/deviation in atleast five percent of the PAs by the technical advisory panel must be made mandatory. The panel should decide the PAs that require evaluation.**
- 4. All developmental project proposals that affect PAs/TRs must be available to NGOs/public. This should compulsorily be in the public domain through websites and available at the Park office and the office of the Chief Wildlife Warden.**
- 5. All project proposals to multilateral aid agencies must be made available in public domain before submission.**
- 6. All TORs of consultant type audits including draft reports backed by data (not subjective assessments) must be in public domain before acceptance / rejection.**

2.6 A new wildlife management paradigm that shares concerns of conservation with the public at large.

Late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's message on the occasion of the launch of Project Tiger in 1972 - ***"The tiger cannot be preserved in isolation. It is at the apex of a large and complex biotope. Its habitat, threatened by human intrusion, commercial forestry, and cattle grazing, must first be made inviolate."***

A visionary statement that encompasses the core issues that India needs to address to ensure that the tiger survives into the next century. Our appeal to the Hon'ble Prime Minister is to simply endorse this Vision and re-dedicate and strengthen the National Mission to achieve this goal.

SAVING THE TIGER

Suggestions To The Tiger Task Force

JUNE 2005



WILDLIFE FIRST

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