

Nothing startling to find some tigers around: No cause for panic

Environment Helpline convened a meeting on 3rd December 2015 to discuss the causes and consequences of man–animal conflict arising out of expansion of Bhopal city, especially of frequent sighting of tigers in Kerwa, Kaliasote, Nabibagh areas. Dr Suhas Kumar, PCCF, was invited in his personal capacity to share his views on the reasons, consequences and possible strategies.



Environment Helpline is a recent initiative by NCHSE and Friends of Environment to create awareness and to facilitate activities of individuals and institutions involved in protecting environment.

Dr Suhas Kumar explained that the City of Bhopal sits within a tiger habitat and has, over the past 15 years grown rapidly eating further into the wilderness and destroying tiger's home. Bhopal is surrounded by a garland of forested habitat. Though, human habitations and development infrastructures have fragmented it at places the tigers still move through this garland taking advantage of nalas and riparian vegetation (along the river banks).

Ratapani sanctuary, about 43 km off Bhopal, is a secure habitat where tigers have been breeding. Over the years the habitat has improved and the number of tigers has increased, necessitating young tigresses and tigers to move out from within the sanctuary boundary to the forests outside the reserve to find suitable breeding and foraging places. Dr Suhas said the tigers' movement in Kerwa has been reported every year since 1996, but media was not so proactive earlier to seek out tigers and publish news about them. Kerwa area was also not so full of academic institutions, human colonies and a heavy tourist inflow. The only noticeable change in the behavior of tigers is that some of them have now begun using Kerwa and Samardha forests for breeding and raising cubs.

Sadly the media is portraying the tigers as a grave danger and refuses to comprehend that the real and bigger threat to the city dwellers is from the rising number of criminals in Bhopal and from other animals. According to Dr Suhas city people are more prone to contracting rabies from a huge population of stray dogs as well as their pet dogs and cats and getting a deadly bite from the snakes that have become more active as their dwelling holes and crevices are being dug out and destroyed by colonizers. He said around 46,000 people die each year due to snake bite in India. He explained that on the other hand the tigers around Bhopal pose a marginal threat. In fact, they are themselves seriously threatened by humans.

Tigers are not the intruders in Bhopal; it is the man who is encroaching upon the tiger habitat through unplanned development in green areas. Dr Suhas Kumar said 'No' to any suggestion to shift the tigers inhabiting Kerwa and Samardha forests to other areas. The reason is obvious. Once a tiger is removed, the dispersing tigers from Ratapani will occupy the vacant territory. Besides, we do not have any area left where we may safely release tigers from outside. He said that we have to create such safe release areas to accommodate tigers that are threatened by human intolerance.

Regarding declaration of Ratapani forest as a Tiger Reserve, Dr Suhas Kumar opined that it would be the most logical step to follow, but it may take some time to materialize.

Strategies that seem possible to resolve the problem was discussed and is as below:

1. Plan the expansion of the city rationally in order to preserve the garland of green belt around Bhopal. Don't allow construction in these areas.
2. Identify all movement paths that a tiger might use to stray into human dwellings, fence them off with a combination of mesh-wire and solar power fence. Both types of fences would need intensive up keep and monitoring.
3. Train and place at least 6 professional teams to monitor and report tiger moment 24X7 outside Ratapani sanctuary and issue timely alerts.
4. Identify suitable potential tiger habitats outside protected areas (in territorial divisions and buffer zones), carry out required habitat augmentation to enhance prey base, build capacity of the staff and equip them in a way to combat wildlife crime and monitor tigers in their areas. Once this is achieved the wildlife wing may be able to rehabilitate tigers straying out of natal areas into towns in such potential habitats.
5. Improve habitat protection and development of grasslands in Kerwa, Kathotiya Ratapani, Baadi and Samradha forest and augment water sources where necessary in these areas. Once the habitat improves translocate chital from PAs with surplus chital population.
6. Implementing this plan will entail a huge capital and recurring expenditure, but in a state that is committed to conserving its natural heritage, this is the only logical way to protect the Bhopal tigers from vanishing into oblivion.
7. There is need for creating public awareness regarding tiger, their need and behavior so that informed citizens should react sensibly towards tigers.
8. Media should also be sensitized against creating hype about tiger sighting in Bhopal. Media bulletins at regular intervals should create awareness instead of prompting people to rush to the sites of tiger activity. Tigers need lesser interference from man.