

TIGER ALERT

MOST URGENT – 7 March 2009

On 3rd March 2009, a tigress was tranquilised in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve and taken by road to Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh. Although the Government of India had given permission in 2008 for two tigresses to be translocated to Panna, the recent operation was carried out without close consultation with the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) or known tiger experts.

We are deeply concerned that there has been absolutely no evidence of *any* tigers in Panna Tiger Reserve for over a month. The last lone male tiger was sighted in December 2008. If the safety of this single male tiger cannot be secured, then what is the future for any introduced tigresses?

Panna has become the second Sariska – a premier tiger reserve with no tigers. We are deeply distressed by this and shocked that the Madhya Pradesh government continues to deny this fact, despite all the evidence to the contrary. In fact, the state authorities have been persisting with these denials for the past five years, while the tigers of Panna steadily disappeared. As long as this denial process persists and is left unaddressed, no long-term solution for the disappearance of tiger populations will be possible.

Scientific studies prove that Panna's tiger population at one time had a healthy 35 to 40 animals. All of these tigers have now vanished. At least twice as many tigers have been lost in Panna than were killed in Sariska. The government instituted a CBI enquiry in Sariska to establish the cause. We believe that a similar high-level enquiry *must* be carried out in Panna. Referring to Sariska, the Prime Minister's Tiger Task Force recommended that accountability should be fixed to act as a deterrent to prevent the "unacceptable" "shame" from reoccurring. However, accountability was never effectively addressed, which no doubt hastened the Panna tragedy.

The Parliamentary Consultative Committee of the Ministry of Environment and Forests again raised the subject of accountability as recently as 11 February 2009. When the members "expressed deep concern on disappearing tigers in Sariska and Panna", the Minister "assured that action will be taken against responsible officers through State Government machineries." We emphasise that accountability must happen this time to prevent more such disasters.

Every wild tiger is precious and its interests should be paramount. We believe that such an important and high-risk enterprise as the shifting of adult wild tigers should be done openly and using all possible expertise. The latest move of the tigress to Panna, however, has been shrouded in secrecy and done in unseemly haste. The operation was carried out even before the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) had completed the latest census report for the park; advice from NTCA, and IUCN guidelines (which stress the need to identify and eliminate previous causes of decline) were not adhered to; and there has been no reference to any of India's experienced and knowledgeable tiger scientists and experts. Indeed, the Panna operation was done so hurriedly that even an appropriate collar to keep track of the newly moved tigress has yet to be procured.

Furthermore, the exercise was carried out without taking the local communities and stakeholders into confidence. Because of this, in Kanha Tiger Reserve from where

the second tigress is said to be coming, villagers, tribals, drivers and guides have united to oppose the move of a territorial tigress.

Relocation is becoming a new trend. Since June 2008, three tigers have also been relocated from Ranthambhore to Sariska. A protocol with consultation and transparency is therefore vital to ensure both the survival of tigers in new locations and to prevent the depletion of tigers in the source location.

Our national animal the tiger is under grave threat throughout India, and it is the duty of all of us to do everything possible to save the dwindling populations that we have. Re-establishing lost populations is a bold and vital move and it is not our intention to hinder this, but it must be done transparently with all possible care and expertise. The way the Panna translocation is being carried out gives the impression of a cover-up, rather than a tiger conservation undertaking.

Recommendations:

1. We believe that a HIGH-LEVEL ENQUIRY is essential and should be instigated immediately into the disappearance of tigers in Panna, and that *all* translocation efforts should be halted until this is done. In particular, the enquiry should address the issues of ineffective protection, departmental cover-ups, and accountability, and action should be taken against any responsible officers including those who continued to deny the loss of tigers in Panna,
2. A detailed TRANSLOCATION PROTOCOL should be developed by NTCA, WII and independent tiger experts, which will cover all the critical issues of relocating a tiger. This should include the essential requirement that established, adult tigers should not be removed from the core of a protected area.
3. An EMERGENCY TIGER PROTECTION PLAN should be drawn up for each state in collaboration with NTCA and tiger experts, to prevent further depletion. This should include a list of imperatives in terms of protection and habitat management, and a choice of senior staff with a proven track record for Tiger Reserves, approved by NTCA.
4. State-level TIGER STEERING COMMITTEES and Tiger Reserve BUFFER ZONES must be immediately established in all the tiger bearing states, as per the 2006 Amendment to The Wild Life (Protection) Act. Some states have already done this, but *not* the state of Madhya Pradesh.
5. During the FORTHCOMING ELECTIONS, no vehicles or staff should be diverted from the task of protecting wildlife habitats, as per the guidelines issued by the Election Commission of India in 1998.

Statement issued on 7 March 2009 by:

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