

Leave Me Alone Campaign - Global Tiger Day, July 29, 2013
A Sanctuary Asia - Save the Tiger Initiative

POSITION PAPER – Six Steps to Save the Tiger

Sanctuary Asia and Save the Tiger are collaborating on a “save the tigers/save the climate/save the humans” initiative called the “Leave Me Alone” campaign. The campaign will consist of ongoing activities and events designed to aid India’s people in echoing the tiger’s plea to “leave me alone.” It is our hope that by joining our voices in a concerted campaign on behalf of the tiger, leading up to commemoration of the 3rd annual Global Tiger Day on June 29, 2013, India’s decision-makers will hear the public’s message clearly: the fate of the tiger, of the climate, of India’s human population, are intertwined. By saving tiger forests, we can save ourselves. If we don’t, not only are we in imminent danger of losing India’s magnificent and iconic national animal, we will destroy our children’s future.

Background

Tiger numbers have fallen steadily each year since 1990. India now has fewer than 1,800 tigers alive in the wild.

We have been at this precipice before and pulled back from the brink. Each time we reach this point, however, it becomes a little bit more difficult to save the tiger and all that it represents for India's environmental, political, and economic wellbeing. Not just one animal among many, the tiger is a keystone species, a metaphor for all of the flora and fauna in the ecosystems it roams, and for India itself.

Is this too inflated a claim for the tiger’s importance? We would argue that it is not. To survive, the tiger needs abundant forests and water. Not coincidentally, the Indian people need the same things, and will need them in increasing abundance in the coming decades. Forests perform a number of vital

ecosystem services, among them, protecting sources of clean water, and moderating the effects of climate change. India, however, is currently engaged in a reckless programme of industrialisation and deforestation of such magnitude and scope as to threaten nearly all of its still sizable natural holdings. If her natural environments are laid waste, gone too will be her drinking water and a climate her people can live with.

Our “Save the Tiger” battle cry therefore represents every creature large and small in every representative natural ecosystem... for this is the only way that India has any hope of delivering a secure quality of life to its people for generations to come.

But India is losing the tiger, and with it, the natural abundance the nation needs to survive. Many experts agree that the tiger can still be saved. In fact, many believe that within ten years, tiger numbers in India could climb as high as 10,000. The question is this: why not save the tiger, if to do so means to save ourselves?

Let's look at the steps that must be taken to protect the cat from the threat of extinction, not just temporarily, but permanently.

Six Steps to Save the Tiger

1) Get serious about poaching:

Poaching of tigers and their prey species is rampant in India. The Wildlife Crime Bureau must be strengthened and staffed with professionals. We need strong anti-poaching units on the frontlines, with open communication lines with trusted local community members, who could provide both information and field strength. In the case of hunting tribes, rehabilitation and measures to provide alternative livelihoods away from tiger habitats would be a vital step forward.

2) Make Protected Areas inviolable:

India has 90 national parks and 501 sanctuaries. Together, these Protected Areas (PAs) account for just 22 per cent of the country's forested area and 4.7 per cent of its land area. India's PA network is critically needed to combat climate change, secure water sources, and protect precious biodiversity. Many measures must be adopted or supported if India's PAs are to persist and expand.

Since each Protected Area has its own special set of circumstances, a 'one size fits all' conservation strategy is unlikely to work. The Management Plans of Protected Areas must include specially tailored short-, medium- and long-term strategies to secure each park through natural regeneration, particularly of corridors and critical habitats that have the potential to support prey species.

Involving youth in outreach to local villages is an excellent way of communicating conservation values and building better relationships with communities. Education, and opportunities for young people to experience the forest and express themselves through *melas* and fests can help build bridges within and among communities, to the benefit of PAs and local populations.

In theory, tourism can bring revenue to an area without harming biodiversity. However, existing wildlife tourism practices in India have not always been positive. Apart from a few notable examples, most wildlife tourism in India today poses serious conservation problems. Responsible tourism practices can change this situation, but the initiative must be taken by the tourism trade, which should recognise that conservation objectives must always supersede profit.

Finally, as any tourist who visits tiger reserves throughout India can attest, the forest guards who risk their lives to defend tigers and other wildlife live in abject poverty. They brave the elements with inadequate clothing and shoes. Indian corporates often provide guards with sweaters because the government fails to do so. Weapons for self-defense and enforcement of anti-poaching laws are unavailable, as are binoculars, field guides, and other items that would enable guards to execute their jobs with efficiency and dignity. Yet these people, many of

whom have had near-fatal encounters with poachers and local graziers, continue to serve out of a sense of duty to the wild lands and wildlife they are sworn to protect. Both central and state governments must allocate the resources necessary to bring the operation and staffing of Protected Areas up to the highest standards.

A return to traditional foot patrols, vastly improved intelligence-gathering, and communication with local communities must be supplemented by state-of-the-art protection backed by resources to equip and maintain the preparedness of field staff.

3) Address habitat degradation and fragmentation:

The science of island biogeography is no longer new. It is well established that animals living on islands, or in habitats that are so small and fragmented as to mimic island conditions, are far more vulnerable to local extinction than species that live in contiguous, undisturbed habitat. A phalanx of Indian conservation and scientific organisations are trying to provide security and contiguity to tiger habitats. Scientists overseas are working toward the same goal. Dr. Alan Rabinowitz of Panthera, for instance, has worked to establish the world's largest Protected Area for tigers in northern Myanmar.

In India, however, where forests once flourished from coast to coast, the country's tiger habitat now resembles a frayed, patchwork quilt. Because tigers do not observe human-imposed boundaries, up to half of India's tigers move outside of its Protected Areas. Because most of India's PAs are too small to sustain viable populations of tigers, India must adopt a two-pronged approach. The government must provide better protection to its existing PAs, and take the advice of experts who emphasize that effective tiger conservation will be a reality only if reserves are connected to one another so that there can be larger populations of tigers, with sufficient space to hunt and breed. Such 'corridors', of course, would need very pragmatic strategies and protection, since tigers using them would have to negotiate survival with humans on a daily basis. The most

effective way to restore more contiguous tiger habitat will be to facilitate (physically, financially, and socially) the outward migration of forest dwellers to habitations closer to jobs and markets in less ecologically sensitive areas. Degraded forests would automatically regenerate. And as humans improve the quality of their own lives, wild animals would be more secure.

4) Incentivise and assist communities to benefit from livelihood options through Community Nature Conservancies (CNCs):

The concept of Community Nature Conservancies (CNCs) involves expanding the habitat available to wildlife by encouraging local communities to convert marginal land holdings and farms to biodiverse nature refuges. Such refuges would offer those communities better and more assured livelihoods than marginal farming. This is a hypnotic possibility in a country where nearly 500,000 farmers have committed suicide because their farms were unproductive.

We are optimistic that groups and individuals across India will be able to come up with well-documented, replicable, and financially viable models, tailored to local, social, and biogeographic realities across different habitat types. The conservancies should be community-inclusive and commercially viable. Landowners and farmers would retain ownership and accountability for the health of their own lands, which would be part of a larger 'unfenced' forest cooperative. Communities would acquire far more resources, dignity, and security through 'ecosystem farming' than can possibly be attained from marginal agricultural farming. And community conservancies would turn the 'ball pen dots' that are our existing PAs into 'ink blots' of biodiversity, rapidly increasing the size of India's natural holdings.

The steps outlined above can only be achieved if people come to feel that they have a genuine and lasting stake in the survival of the tiger and its realm. If, for example, productive livelihoods can be associated, through CNCs, with the return of biodiversity and the regeneration of natural ecosystems, rather than with the exploitation of minerals, timber and forest produce, natural *and* human

India will reap enormous benefits. But for such an effort to succeed, the central and state governments must be fully committed to the reality that India's human and natural fates are intertwined.

5) Address climate change:

If our climate spins out of control, India will lose much of its biodiversity. And if we allow our biodiversity to be lost, fighting climate will become well-nigh impossible because of the umbilical connection between the biosphere and the atmosphere. India must therefore address climate change at all levels – central and state governments, corporates, and individuals. We must adopt a "we are all in this together" approach, rather than wait for evidence that other governments are taking steps to correct their own contributions to the problem. Studies show that India is being hit particularly hard and early by climate change, with more frequent and intense drought, flooding, cyclones, storm surges, food scarcity, and disease on the way.

India prides itself on its market-based democracy. A rethinking of the role and function of markets will be essential if they are to take a constructive role in the crisis. Government and the corporate sector must adopt a new paradigm in economic thinking that accounts for the costs of environmental consequences of growth and the benefits of "ecosystem services" as key indices of the health of the economy. A "sustainable development" or "green" index must be calculated that takes account of the erosion of ecological capital and the enormous annual costs of pollution, as well as the economic benefits derived from healthy natural environments.

With an economic growth rate of 8-10 per cent, and just six per cent of India's power generation coming from renewable sources, India will soon rank third, behind China and the U.S., in the global ranking of greenhouse gas emitters. India's emissions could increase to 3,000 million tonnes by 2020, twice the level in 2000.

Forest destruction is responsible for over 20 per cent of India's greenhouse gas emissions. Forest restoration is one of the most effective and least expensive ways to sequester atmospheric carbon. An important obstacle to halting forest loss is our economy's failure to capture the values of carbon storage, water purification, biodiversity, and other ecosystem services provided by forests. We must address the fact that financial incentives to destructively log or clear forests are stronger than those to restore, conserve, and use them sustainably. The government must create financial incentive structures to encourage carbon storage. In addition, it has been estimated that electricity consumption in India could be reduced by 25 per cent, with greater efficiency in manufacturing processes, homes, and offices, and by using better irrigation pumps. Let India be at the cutting edge of economic and environmental thought and practice.

6) Use science as a management tool:

Our commitment to wildlife conservation must be based on the soundest wildlife science. It has been science and the dedicated work of Indian and non-Indian wildlife biologists that have clearly shown what is needed to preserve this animal. Without the lifelong efforts of the likes of Dr. Ullas Karanth, Dr. George Schaller, and Dr. Alan Rabinowitz to wed science to conservation, the tiger might already have passed into oblivion. Today we have a very credible cadre of younger Indian scientists and economists who are redefining nature conservation and its pivotal role in ensuring the quality of life on the Indian subcontinent. The central and state governments must be prevailed upon to incorporate such science into management plans of Protected Areas and provide full support to ongoing wildlife conservation science of the highest quality.