

Battling for Pakke



NANDINI VELHO

This is one of India's lesser known yet astoundingly beautiful tiger reserves, which has been overshadowed by the glare of the spotlight that is almost constantly shone on such 'star' reserves as Ranthambhore, Periyar, Nagarahole and Corbett. Nandini Velho writes passionately about this fragile wilderness and points out that true tiger success depends on our unsung wildlife defenders who are able to pick tiger reserves up from the chasm into which they had fallen.

The Kameng river that waters the tropical semi-evergreen and subtropical broadleaved habitat of the Pakke Tiger Reserve originates from a glacial lake below the snow-capped Gori Chen mountains in Tawang district in Arunachal Pradesh. The intricate link between climate change and tiger forests such as Pakke is not yet understood by Indian planners.

During the day I see plenty of tiger signs along river banks populated by the globally-endangered White-winged Wood Duck and the one-of-its-kind Ibisbill. By nightfall I am lucky just to hear elephants rumble and not be confronted by them raiding our anti-poaching camp. I am in the Pakke Tiger Reserve, situated in western Arunachal Pradesh on the Assam-Arunachal border, home to three species of felids – the tiger, leopard and the clouded leopard. Every single day I spend here holds some spectacular and unforgettable sights. I am back after a year and a half; in 2008 I spent much time in Pakke on my Master's thesis on how rodents affect the life stages of plants dispersed by

hornbills. This time around, I am working to set the stage for some much-needed monitoring work with my mentor and guide Dr. Mahesh Sankaran for the National Centre for Biological Sciences, Bangalore. Pakke holds a special place in my heart – where else can one see 80 odd hornbills roosting on bare silk cotton trees along the open banks of a river whose water you can drink?

NURTURING HEROES

The lowland evergreen and semi-evergreen, subtropical forests and successional grassland and forests on floodplains of the Pakke Tiger Reserve are part of the Kameng Protected Area Complex, one of the largest contiguous tracts of reasonably



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intact forest that includes Nameri and Sona Rupai in Assam and the Sessa Orchid and Eaglenest Sanctuaries in Arunachal Pradesh. The 862 sq. km. Pakke Reserve, like most other Protected Areas in the country, is beset by problems, encroachments in the fringes of the park for minor forest produce and illegal hunting among them. Dynamite blasts in the Pakke river for fish and the slaughter of hornbills for their beaks (*Sanctuary*, Vol. XXII No.1 February 2002) add to the threats to this wild paradise.

Pakke is actually a fairly new reserve. It was declared a tiger sanctuary as recently as 2002. It was a Game Sanctuary until 2000, where all manner of unauthorised and authorised hunters had the run of the place. It was in fact a sign of 'bravery' among villagers to hunt a tiger and predictably commercial interests used the people living around the park as pawn in their lethal games. Tuskers, gaur and ungulates were systematically wiped out. Elephant *mahouts* and old time forest watchers recall how it was common to see *chang*s (elevated bamboo houses) all along the river banks where wild meat was dried and stored. Pakke had reached such a pass that gangs of poachers would demarcate their camping areas with red flags. Luckily, just in time, a few good men made all the difference and Pakke was prevented from following the path of other 'empty tiger forests' in Northeast India.

In 2004, Tana Tapi, took charge as the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO). This dynamic protector walked the reserve end-to-end to survey and identify locations to build anti-poaching camps and a patrolling road. He was joined in his surveys by a very special man – Prem Deo Majhi. Tapi fondly recalls about how Majhi was like his 'shadow' during the survey. Majhi, was known among his peers as *dhadiya* (for his long twirling moustache). After his death, post an encounter



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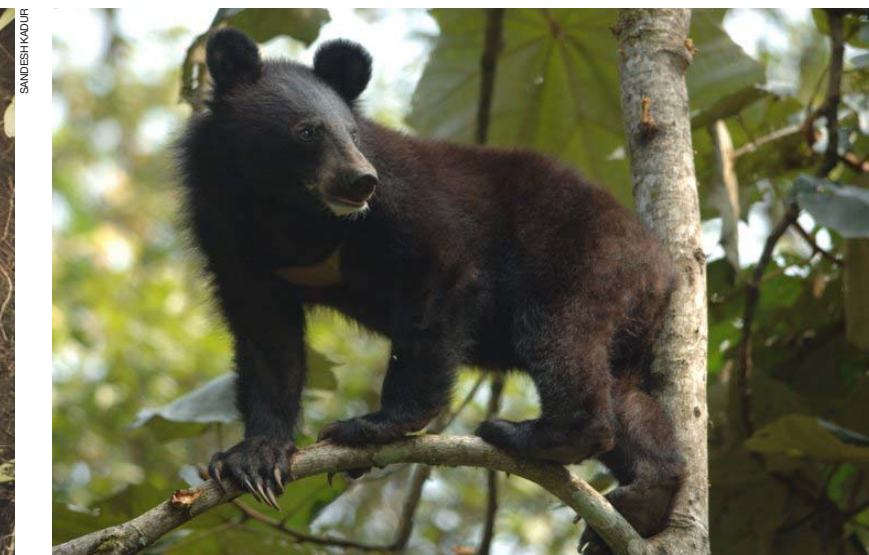
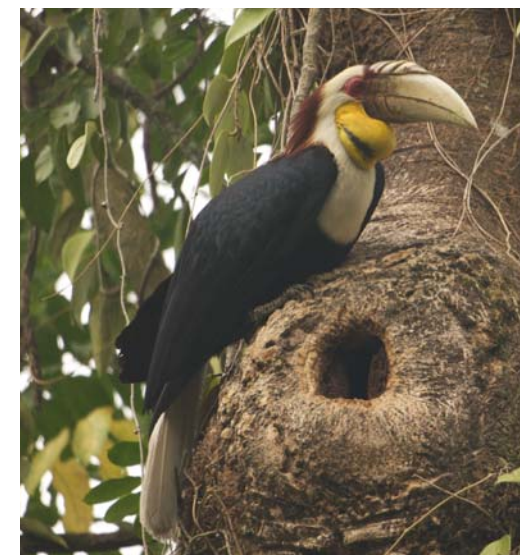
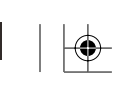
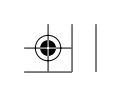
with poachers on April 19, 2007, he is rightly respected as the true hero, star and *ustaad* of the Pakke Tiger Reserve. It is only thanks to people like Majhi, that Pakke now and Pakke then present completely different pictures.

Today when I hear young forest watchers, call Majhi 'baap' (father), I understand fully how they feel. He was after all responsible for their transition from boys to men! Sanjoy Tissa (now a member of the rapid action team) recalls how every night Majhi would look for campfires by following smoke-filled trails in the sky. Trying to avoid one such late night patrol, Sanjoy recalls pretending to be sick and being severely reprimanded by Majhi who said he had no time to treat sick people

This cache of metal snares and traps (above left) were seized by the late Prem Deo Majhi (below) in an encounter with poachers. Each guard patrols roughly eight square kilometres of Pakke's undulating and rough terrain including waterways (above right) that poachers use to cross over from both Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The credit for Pakke's stringent anti-poaching measures goes to veteran forest guards, such as Majhi, who died in an encounter with poachers in 2007. His colleagues fondly remember him as Baap or father. His love for and dedication to Pakke has inspired a generation of forest staff.



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and gave him marching orders back to Seijosa village. Sanjoy went patrolling with Majhi that night, a stronger, braver man.

Today, qualifications of a minimum of a tenth standard plus are required for posts of forest guards. But the field reality is that most often higher the education, lesser the enthusiasm for hands on action. Unacknowledged for his dedication, sidelined for his arrogance and suspended for his straight talking ways, Majhi was well on his way to becoming one of those disgruntled guys who would have been neutralised without being given a chance to put his passion and genius into action. Fortunately, however, Tana Tapi recognised Majhi's abilities. Limited by manpower and placed against the organised might of poachers. Majhi's dedication and fearlessness was in fact just what Tapi was looking for. Majhi was put in charge of a small team of men who would scour the forests and conduct guerrilla-type sting operations by night. In the process he was involved in many encounters and managed to seize a massive consignment of metal traps meant for large carnivores, poison-tipped arrows and country made guns.

One man actually did make a difference.

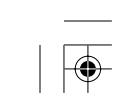
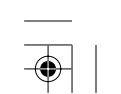
PROTECTING PAKKE

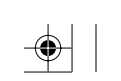
Pakke now has 24 anti-poaching camps, with 140 people patrolling the jungle. But this is still only a modest field strength. Each person must consequently patrol on an average about eight square kilometres of this undulating and difficult terrain. Tana Tapi runs the show with management-guru like proficiency. The road network of 41 km. running east to west is used to provide food rations to each anti-poaching camp. In the monsoon when the road is inaccessible by vehicles, eight domestic elephants get the rations to the field staff... on time. Each camp is manned

by three to four beat guards who together patrol an area of 20 sq. km. As of now there are 14 locations with wireless base stations. More than 40 handsets have been given to watchers who are constantly on the move. In 2009, a quick action team headed by ex-army personnel and skilled watchers was formed. This mobile 'strike force' comprises 16 people divided into two sections and is equipped to rush to the 'site' to help resident anti-poaching teams. At any given time, there is always enough stock of rations for this 'strike force' at all anti-poaching camps!

Tana Tapi and Majhi lived their dreams with eyes wide open. From 25 to 140 men, from tree top *machaans* to 24 permanent anti-poaching camps – Tapi is thankfully still around to tell the story of their journey. He is also Majhi's greatest admirer and longs for his trusted lieutenant's bravery to be remembered. Majhi's legacy lives on and he has inspired a generation of watchers.

The lowland semi-evergreen and evergreen forests of the Pakke Tiger Reserve offer safe haven to varied lifeforms including this male Wreathed Hornbill *Aceros undulatus* (above left), seen next to its hole in an old-growth forest tree. The Asiatic black bear *Ursus thibetanus* (above right) is threatened and vulnerable and is seldom seen. Tiger pugmarks (below) found during a recent tiger survey in Denai in the core area of Pakke highlight the importance of the park as a safe haven for the big cat.





Shivcharan, an elephant trainer, narrated an incident about how a poacher threatened to kill him when he went home to his village. An unfazed Shivcharan's simple response was that the verdict will be out in the 'maidan' (battle field), that is the Pakke Tiger Reserve! What motivates people such as Shivcharan who earns Rs. 2,500/- a month, I wonder? Without people like Majhi, Tapi and Shivcharan, my research work would just not be possible. I owe them personal gratitude, but the nation owes them even more.

PAKKE'S FUTURE

While protection teams go about their business, my project this year hopes to establish and map permanent one hectare plots to monitor how plants respond to anthropogenic disturbances such as climate change. Additionally, we are also trying to identify important plant species vital to fruit-eating birds in undisturbed sites within the tiger reserve and disturbed sites in the adjacent reserve forest. In the long term, in consultation with the Forest Department, we are also interested in specific avenues of research that will help the management of the park enhance the potential of grasslands to aid prey recovery for the long term persistence of large carnivores.

Going about my field work, I am delighted to see that some of the changes implemented in the last few years have already begun benefiting wildlife. Committees formed by tribal heads to penalise wildlife violations have resulted in a noticeable decline in illegal hunting. The 'grains-for-grains' scheme of the Wildlife Trust of India initiated in 2005 which involves providing foodgrains to farmers whose crops were destroyed has helped reduce hostility towards wild elephants and there is a general wave of support for wildlife conservation.

When I walk through Pakke today, I see well-armed guards patrolling this difficult turf. What a drastic change from the dark days of the past. I am happy to be afforded a modicum of optimism for the future. Home to a rare breed of brave humans who care for its myriad four-legged and avian species, Pakke is a magical place. I applaud the pluck, tenacity and courage of its protectors – the forest guards – who I hope will be empowered to walk on, and continue to be strong and safe... for Pakke, for me and our country. 🐾

Anti-poaching camps (top) like the one at Balukhpong ghat (top) are being set up across the Pakke Tiger Reserve. Effective anti-poaching measures were instituted only as recently as 2004, but have yielded encouraging results already. Recent camera traps placed by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), the Forest Department and WWF-India have revealed a healthy tiger population. This image (bottom) was from Doigurung, which was P.D. Majhi's turf till he was alive. Animals such as this small Indian civet *Viverricula indica*, (centre) are vital fruit seed dispersers, a critical service for the forest.



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