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FOR THE LOVE OF SERENDIPITY

IT'S A BIRD'S LIFE IN ARUNACHAL

Last year, Day-2 of the Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival dawned bright and sunny. Salil, one of the founders of Earthbeat, an eco-conscious theatre group performing at the festival venue in Seijosa, Arunachal Pradesh, was preparing a motley crew of kids to act as Pakke's denizens. Think costumed tigers, hornbills, monkeys, and all. "Would you like to be the father hornbill?" he asked me out of the blue. "You are kidding? Of course!" Donning a beautifully made hornbill dress, I joined the team of amateur actors, and we pulled off a skit to great success. I was no longer just a spectator at Arunachal Pradesh's famed conservation festival, but truly a part of it. With baby hornbills running helter-skelter across the stage, us 'parents' tried to our best to retain some order while raising awareness about the incredible icon that the Great Hornbill is for Pakke and its people.

—SUTIRTHA LAHIRI

Cameras Don't Lie

The return of Pakke

Text by Nandini Velho, Photographs by the Forest Department staff of Pakke



I have spent the last five years doing field work in many parts of the Pakke Tiger Reserve. I often rue the fact that I have never seen a tiger, while other researchers have seen tigers from their base at anti-poaching camps. Even visitors who come for a quick visit have been lucky enough to have sightings! I remind myself that I went to spot a tiger, not just anywhere, but in the tropical forests of Pakke – the same forests where I have learnt so much about the serendipitous interaction between plants and animals, about how malaria decreases anti-poaching efforts and, more recently where I am comparing the efficacy of Protected Areas like Pakke

with the neighbouring community-owned forests. What makes this study more significant is that the naturally low prey base of these forests had plummeted even further because of unregulated hunting, but is now recovering. Other forests in Northeast India are yet to show such signs of recovery.

Pakke's reserve declassification narrative started as recently as 2004, with the coming of Tana Tapi, the legendary protector of this reserve. (See Sanctuary, Vol. XXX, No. 2, April 2010). Then, when he was transferred away from Pakke in 2008 (for political reasons), anarchy returned to Pakke, with photographic evidence revealing that poachers had resumed

their nefarious activities right inside the reserve. There was even one unsuccessful, yet audacious, attempt by poachers to steal bears temporarily kept in an enclosure pending their release to the wild. Two domestic camp elephants were also shot at by ruthless poachers. The heroic, front-line anti-poaching staff members, all employed as casual workers, were completely demoralised and for a while it looked like all the good work would come to naught.

ABOVE Forest guard K. Boyen's initial dispreasure of the location of his camera trap vanished quickly when he discovered, among many others, the stunning image of a tiger growling ferociously while looking straight at the camera!

Reviving Pakke

Then, mercifully, nine months later, Tana Tapi returned. Cut went the curtain boards and it was back to foot patrols, anti-poaching and forest-related work. In time, the staff's capabilities improved dramatically. In the last few months, for the very first time, the forest field staff has actually begun collecting data for Phase-IV of the tiger status assessment. The Forest Department has appointed a young field biologist to monitor their work. And in a collaboration with WWF-India, which has long been working with the Forest Department, the forest watchers have been trained and are currently undertaking a wild camera trapping exercise within Pakke.

Pakke is unlike any of the plains forests that most wildlife are familiar with. A vast tract in the northern segment of the park is virtually inaccessible due to dense vegetation, hilly terrain, lack of trails and the antagonism of residents towards the Forest Department. Tana Tapi tackled the problem of suspicion and unfriendliness towards the Forest Department head on. He met with residents from Lehlang village, and even convinced them to donate a piece of land to the Forest Department to set up an anti-poaching camp. Local unemployed youth from the village were hired as forest watchers.

But when hardcore enforcement began, poachers who had the run of the forest intimidated residents to threaten to burn down the anti-poaching camp and demand that the forest watchers at Lehlang be withdrawn. An unfazed Tana Tapi acted strategically by responding that they were free to burn it down. He explained to them how they would be charged with offences against the State under the Indian Penal Code. He also said that he had no problem if they wanted a fellow resident's job terminated, as long as they gave it to him, in writing, effectively deflating the agitation as no one wanted to give written proof that they were responsible for a fellow-villager losing his job.

At Sebha village, people went about 50 sq. km. of the park demarcated, out of fear that their growing population might leave them with much smaller land



ABOVE This image of a rare melanistic leopard was taken by M. Didiary. Camera traps have helped revolutionise field biology with minimal disturbance to wildlife. They are an inexpensive and yielding method to document evidence of rare and endangered species.



ABOVE This wild pig was captured on boat guard Wanka Tachang's camera trap. Wild pigs form the highest prey density in Pakke.



ABOVE Although several of the camera traps set up were damaged by elephants, encroaching images, such as this one of an elephant emerging from the forest with her calf, made the effort worthwhile.



ABOVE Together with field biologist Subrata Gayen, K. Toyen set up a camera trap at a location that turned out to be the haunt of such spectacular felines as this marbled cat.



ABOVE A camera trap that Faham Langlang placed had a pair of marbled cats come by.



ABOVE This mesmerising camera trap photograph of a tiger by post guard Arun Tripan would have been a strong contender for the cover photograph of acclaimed wildlife photographer F. W. Champion's book, *The Jungle in Sunlight and Shadow*.

hiddings in days to come. They have put tremendous political pressure through the local MLA, Forest Secretary and even the Chief Minister, to stop officials from denuding the boundary of the tiger reserve. Unperturbed by such political pressure, Tana Tapi and his team – Kanda, Bohi, Milo Kimo, Faham Langlang, Tangru Mji, Loguna, Welly, Wangta, Balingham and Sankar Ntung – continue to go about their work. All below 35 years of age, this tough group forms the core of the Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) of the Pakke Tiger Reserve, which has evolved into a rapid response team of 30 forest-fit youth, deployed to tackle any emergency. In 2012, they undertook a two-week operation to locate an old path from Lebung village, which was used by poachers to access the lower areas of Pakke. For two days, they camped in a remote area, eating raw rice, with no access to water. Tangru Mji, a skilled naturalist and ex-hunter, showed them an epiphyte, which held water. They stuffed their pockets with this epiphyte and would chew on it whenever they were thirsty. No one could use for better on-the-job training in jungle craft.

When they finally reached the village, they were indeed at with some misgivings by people who mistook them for army personnel, but they were lucky to find a generous person who gave them food and a place to stay that night. Unfortunately, they did not reach Lebung village. But they were determined and embarked on a second mission... facing similar hardships. This time, they cut a patrolling path along an old hunting trail. That same year, STPF members and beat-guards that patrolled the northern boundaries seized three truck-loads of cane being illegally extracted from the tiger reserve.

Eye in the forest

There are no shortcuts to effectively protecting forests. Poachers walk and protectors must therefore walk too, and they must know their jungle better than the intruders. In just two and a half months, the steps taken in Pakke have produced spectacular results, all captured on camera.

Adding technology to old-fashioned patrolling is an easily replicable strategy that must be used across India if we are to stay ahead of those who would destroy our wild heritage.

We launched a Best-Camera-Trap-Image Contest in Pakke to raise staff morale. The images depicted on these pages highlight the efforts of the staff here paid off. Unhappily, in addition to cameras damaged by elephants, six camera-traps were stolen.

In Pakke, Tana Tapi, (a Secretary Wildlife Award winner, Vol. XXX, No. 6, December 2010) leads by example and as a result like him, his staff wear many different hats. Everyone has to work in and for the forests, wherever they are, whatever their formal designations. While going through the camera-trap pictures, I found one of Tana Tapi and I as we were driving along the patrolling road which runs through Pakke from east to west. I remember him reassuring me that I would see a tiger. He had then stopped at one of the anti-poaching camps to see whether there was a camp elephant that could take us into the forest, but they had not yet returned to the camp and so we returned to base without exploring the jungle. And just as luck would have it, on the very trail we were to explore on elephant back, that very night, a tiger showed up on the camera trap again!

By the time this issue of *Sanctuary* reaches readers, an exciting session of camera trapping will have ended in April 2013. I remain unsure as to whether I will ever see a tiger, marbled cat or clouded leopard in Pakke's forest. But as long as they continue to thrive, well-protected by a reinvigorated staff, they keep the magic of a tropical forest alive, on the ground and in my head.

Thank you, Tana Tapi and the Forest Department staff, for your dedication to saving Pakke's wildlife. These camera-trap images are not just pixels on a computer... they are the visible symbols of the magic of nature, alive and well in Pakke, arguably one of the most exciting tropical jungles in the world. 🐾



ABOVE Sajna Tachang, a member of the STPF took a photograph of a melanistic and a normal leopard together, similar to the one from the forests of Kamaloka published by Secretary Ase (Oct. XXX, No. 6, December 2010).



ABOVE A member of the Special Tiger Protection Force that has rejuvenated the forests of Pakke, Milo Kimo, is caught here in a candid moment on one of the camera traps that have brought this wilderness to life.



ABOVE A man who understands all too well the hardships one faces in the service of wildlife, Tana Tapi is seen here at the memorial site of yet another wildlife soldier, forest guard P. D. Majhi who lost his life at the hands of poachers.