



ARUNACHAL PRADESH FOREST DEPARTMENT

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# Tough Task

## Dealing with human-wildlife conflict in rough country

By Nandini Velho

The village chief (*gaon burah*), a *Nyishi* tribal contacted Tana Tapi, the legendary Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) of Pakke Tiger Reserve, to let him know that a tiger had killed four mithuns in the village. Mithuns *Bos frontalis* are a semi-domesticated cross between gaur and domestic cattle. "Mithuns are akin to gold," writes Kago Gambo from Dera Natung college in Arunachal Pradesh. The animals are not only used in barter and bride-price; but when discord arises, their sacrifice is believed to bring harmony to the village.

The death of these four mithuns did not bring peace to the village. These cattle-killing incidents took place in Dipik village in a Reserve Forest, away from the buffer zone and villages abutting the Pakke Tiger Reserve in Arunachal Pradesh.

Clearly, we had a problem. Their complaints to the Forest Department's Territorial Division were unsuccessful. Quoting jurisdiction, the buck for the problem would have been passed. But, the chorus of voices from the ground reached Tana Tapi, a pro-active officer

who has worked with residents to build a constituency for conserving Pakke.

Getting to Dipik village was no mean task. We had to cross multiple stretches of the fast-flowing, monsoon-fed river, which the DFO and his staff expertly navigated to survey the paths that our vehicles would need to traverse. Amazed, we commented on how to be a DFO in tough terrain, you also required other skills, such as river navigation. We made it across in two Forest Department four-wheel drives, one over a decade old. On inspection it turned

out that two of our fuel tanks had been punctured and a boulder had broken a tyre rim and cut the tube.

### NOT EASY GOING

Over the next few days we realised, of course, that rough-country skills paled into insignificance compared to those needed to deal with human-wildlife conflict. On reaching Dipik village we were now in the thick of things. We informally divided our tasks. While some set to mixing *chun* (lime) and sugar to make local M'seal to fix the fuel tanks, Rubu Tado, the Deputy Ranger, busied himself helping residents fill out compensation forms. All compensation claims had to be 'processed' through a committee, after a post-mortem certificate had been issued by a veterinary officer. This also required a Range Forest Officer's verification, and confirmation from the head *gaon burah*... then a signature by an Additional Deputy Commissioner was needed to ratify it. The only person permanently present was the head *gaon burah*, the one who called us about his dead mithun. If the usual scheme of compensation claims had to be implemented, people would have to brave the journey we made to attempt this compensation process (as seldom do officials make it across such rough terrain). So residents must take a photograph of their dead livestock (usually using a mobile phone), then make visits to the veterinary officer, range officer and local administrative officer at their respective stations. Most officials are empathetic, but that takes nothing away from the tedium! Once processed, the claims are forwarded to the office of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (PCCFs). In the case of Pakke, the DFO arranges for compensation to be cleared at his level as soon as he is able to verify the genuineness of the claim. The alternative, waiting for six to eight months for reimbursement, would seriously damage the relationship between Pakke and its people.

The problem is by no means unique to Arunachal. The situation in some states is worse. Dr. Krithi Karanth and her colleagues surveyed over 2,000 households across five Indian tiger

### CREATING POSITIVE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN HUMANS AND WILDLIFE AROUND PROTECTED AREAS:

- Understanding hotspots where negative human-wildlife interactions (conflict) occur.
- Trying site-specific conflict mitigation strategies (predator-proof fencing for livestock, rapid response teams, mobile-operated elephant alert lights, seasonal paddy fences).
- Making the compensation process more accessible to residents or creating portals like Wild Seve, which helps residents.
- Setting compensation prices that are reflective of market prices (change the *ex-gratia* relief price of mithuns).
- Increase the compensation given to families of Forest Department staff who lose their lives while on duty.



ABOVE Photographs such as this of a black panther in the Pakke Tiger Reserve are confirmation that strong protection initiatives are paying off.

FACING PAGE Tigers, too, are thriving in the park, but the tedious process to get meager compensation for cattle killed by wild cats puts a strain on the people-park relationship.

reserves to discover just how slow, almost apathetic, disbursement of compensation amounts can be. Quite naturally, resentment against both wildlife and the park authorities is constantly brewing.

Worryingly, only 31 per cent of households reported that they received compensation for their losses. In other words, in many other Indian states, there could be situations where well-intentioned and hands-on officers like Tana Tapi put forth compensation claims that are actually rejected by higher authorities. Possibly there is also a lack of hands-on officers like Tana Tapi who truly understand the vital importance of timely processing and disbursement of genuine dues to aggrieved residents. The fact that 69 out of 100 people living around tiger reserves did not receive

compensation at all, is a genuine short coming that needs to be addressed. This resentment manifests in many forms: decreasing cultural associations between humans and animals, perception of animals as government property and retaliatory killings.

With such high hoops to jump through, the question arises as to whether the tedious process of claiming compensation is even worth the effort?

Consider this. The *ex-gratia* for a plough bull, ox or a buffalo, according to an order passed by the Arunachal State government on August 4, 2010, is a mere Rs. 5,000. This is not only much lower than the market price, but the compensation for mithuns is also pegged at the same amount. Assuming that the lowest price for mithun meat in a rural market is Rs. 300 per kg., the actual amount that the resident gets



### TANA TAPI

Tana Tapi was given the Sanctuary Asia Wildlife Service Award in December 2010 for bringing the Pakke Tiger Reserve back to life. During his tenure he has built anti-poaching camps, patrolling roads, initiated on-ground active protection and has encouraged, involved and supported several local organisations to become partners in conservation. He was given the award jointly with Takum Nabum of the Ghora Aabhe Society. With minimum resources at the time, he raised the profile of the then little-known Pakke Tiger Reserve to what is now one of the best managed Protected Areas in Northeast India. This is despite the odds of militancy, lack of permanent staff, political pressures and the hunting and logging challenges that this area faces. It is difficult to imagine that such a turnaround is possible, but today we have a constituency of people battling for Pakke.

amounts to something in the vicinity of Rs. 17 per kg. for an individual animal that yields around 250 kg. of meat. In other words, residents lose 85 per cent of the meat price they might obtain from the market for a single mithun.

### DOES PRICE MATTER?

People react in different ways to the legal policy that field officers like Tana Tapi must contend with and implement. The realistic average price of a mithun is Rs. 50,000/-. Residents ask if perchance the Rs. 5,000 *ex-gratia* amount has a missing extra zero. Another said the amount was less than what he would get for a goat. As a fellow *Nyishi*, Tana Tapi was empathetic – he told them how grievances for higher compensation are put forward at the State Advisory Board meetings time and again. He explained how compensation prices were not set by him and went on to explain two scenarios that spanned a spectrum: one

that subsidised some costs, such as low ration prices at government depots, and at the other end the inadequacy of the *ex-gratia* relief. Eventually, of course, he had to be an officer first and fellow *Nyishi* later. With lowered tolerance levels, residents' propensity to poison tiger kills was rising, so he explained the legal provisions of the *Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972*. There are other problems when trying to motivate his staff in these situations. If they are killed by an animal, the family is paid one lakh rupees. But when any other government staff from other departments die while on duty, their family gets paid four lakhs. This does not merely breed unhappiness, it also puts into question how safe our field-level staff are when patrolling their beats. Protecting our living national treasures is more risky than the work of most other government departments.

Dealing with these instances of conflict is not just about the 'removal'

of suspect predators. A whole slew of policy decisions must be called into play. We need, for instance, to streamline and offer better resources (such as vehicles, patrolling clothes, boots and tents) to our Forest Department staff. We need to offer adequate compensation when lives are lost on duty. One wonders if the territorial wing of the Forest Department, where much of our wildlife and our wildlife conflict problems exist, are oriented and trained to deal with wildlife issues. And what happens when turf or territorial conflicts arise between departments with officials being non-cooperative? Strictly speaking, Dipik village did not even fall in Tana Tapi's jurisdiction. But the animals he protects make no such fine distinctions. Is there a possible framework to ensure that intra and inter-departmental cooperation is guaranteed so that residents and the wildlife we want to protect are offered a sensitive and fair deal?

With wildlife and forests being concurrent subjects between the Central and State Governments, it is vital that higher level policy decisions are taken to offer real assistance to both wildlife officials on the ground and residents that live with wildlife.

Being in Pakke during my defining years of being trained as a wildlife biologist has made me realise that there are many different dimensions to this issue. Yet, there are no easy, pat solutions. But it is not beyond us to come up with adaptive policies that allow officers on the ground to assess circumstances to the advantage of wildlife, residents and India itself. Far from the simplified writs of New Delhi, the on-ground realities in Pakke Tiger Reserve will hopefully make us go beyond the facile debate... to cull or not to cull. 🐘



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