

Joining the Dots — a Review

Manoj Kumar Misra *

In today's information age media coverage marks the success or otherwise of an event or a product. The media went to town painting red the tiger crisis full blast before the Prime Minister appointed the Tiger Task Force (TTF) and also during the three months that the TTF pursued its task. However, as its report came out with a clear blueprint of revival plan, the media managers seemed to have found it to be a damp squib. A let down, as if 'making sense' was unworthy of media attention. While the crisis and the savvy asides of the Mumbai deluge and the Nanavati report on 1984 riots hogged the media, there really was no case for taking the tiger's smile away. In the process, the national media and so also the nation lost an opportunity to come face to face with the realities of the tiger crisis so competently brought out by the eminently readable report of the TTF, 'Joining the Dots' (<http://projecttiger.nic.in>). Even now after almost a fortnight of the report's publication whatever is appearing as an afterthought in the media, are unfortunately half baked and agenda driven reports rather than an objective assessment of the same.

When the Tiger Task Force was first set up in April 2005 following the Sariska expose, a lot of people, including this reviewer, had reservations about it mainly on two counts. First, its chairperson's tiger credentials were yet to be established and secondly the 3-month time frame appeared rather too short.

Interestingly on hindsight the PM could not have chosen better.

Sunita's lack of tiger experience it seems was the best qualifier for someone to act as a dispassionate moderator and facilitator amongst her admittedly more experienced fellow members. Her natural wont to go for ground truth and wide consultations across differing viewpoints is well known. Moreover, if in HS Panwar the team had a vastly experienced, celebrated and knowledgeable foot soldier for the tiger, then in Samar Singh, with his vast long experience as an administrator for the tiger, the team had access to rare institutional memory and history. Similarly if Professor Gadgil was the man of science in the team, Valmik Thapar as a member must have brought in lots of sound and fury as a die-hard tiger activist.

If there were apprehensions so were expectations galore from the TTF. It was after all almost 2 decades since the Indira Gandhi era that a Prime Minister had shown requisite political will and interest in tiger matters. The terms of reference (TOR) of the TTF were specific. The PM wanted the eminent members to not only review comprehensively the tiger conservation in the country but to also define the contours of a new conservation paradigm that could secure the future of tiger in the country for all times.

And what has it found?

The tiger crisis is basically a forest crisis and hence cannot and should not be addressed in isolation for its complete understanding and arriving at solutions that secure the future of the tiger in short as well as the long run. The tiger is being managed in a rather *ad hoc* manner with an acute dearth of good data on critical parameters to back up

formulation of sound policies and their implementation. The TTF's most damning finding is the fact that the tiger of late had become the victim of an 'exclusive' constituency that resultantly alienated all those who could have otherwise contributed to tiger's welfare. As the TTF went about its business it found 'the constituency of the tiger to be truly widespread.'

The most laudable of the efforts of the TTF contributing to the objective nature of its report has been in the form of its wide ranging field visits (Ranthambore, Sariska, Kanha, Pench and Periyar), focussed consultations at Delhi, Nagpur, Dehradun and Bangalore (attended by over 100 people) and inputs from around 120 knowledgeable people. This made the tiger conservation debate truly 'inclusive'. Yet another positive tenor of the task was its openness to elicit and appraise all points of view including those of the well-known heavyweights constituting the TTF itself. Even a rather arrogant 'note of dissent' entered in by a member has been responded to most logically and respectfully by the chairperson. In tune with its own recommendations for greater transparency, the report of the TTF was on the web almost immediately it was submitted to the Prime Minister on 29th July 2005.

The report has found that 'Sariska is not representative of what is happening in every tiger reserve. Yet it held that a lot more needed to be done to strengthen internal systems of management to ensure that Sariska-type situation does not recur. For Sariska the clear finding was a comprehensive management breakdown, since its available human and fiscal resources ranked well above the national average for all the tiger reserves. TTF has viewed Sariska crisis as a tragedy whose study unveiled an opportunity for devising strategies for prevention of recurrence of any such tragedy. It provided the nation led by its Prime Minister with an urgent cause to introspect and act.

The identified field realities showed that 'coexistence' was the only mantra that would work for India's forests and hence for the tiger. If people are dependent on resources from the tiger country, the biology of the tiger ordains finding spaces outside of its current lodgings. Clearly ways must be found to create not just inviolate 'breeding' spaces for the tiger but indeed render landscapes in the neighbourhoods amenable to holding naturally dispersing sub-adults from such breeding habitats. The tiger would have to be a co-user of the non-core habitats within these landscapes with the local people. Hence essentially both would have to re-learn to coexist. The report goes on to emphasise that the policies must accept this reality and where the people cannot either be relocated or their relocation is not an ecological imperative, ways must be found to make such coexistence legal, compatible and productive for all concerned.

* Manoj Kumar Misra, Executive Director of PEACE Institute is a former member of the Indian Forest Service <http://projecttiger.nic.in/>

Even in absence of hard data, the report establishes the critical and much more impacting role of the 'fringe' people as compared to people living inside the forests. The former live next to the forests and, whether legal or not, they draw on forest resources for domestic use and supplementation of their livelihoods. Enforcement action without providing alternatives has only antagonized them further and led them to turn a blind eye to commercial poaching and worse still even to abet such illegal activity. Hence these people must be brought aboard the conservation bandwagon, rightly argues the TTF. The report delineates different agendas, which would need addressing as the way ahead.

Institutional agenda

Between the options to 'centralize more' and 'to strengthen centre-state collaboration', the TTF has opted for the latter, fully conscious of the fact that the latter is onerous and difficult but the only way. It has suggested institutional revamping for this to work. Its recommendations - for reorganizing the MoEF into two separate departments of Environment and that of Forests and Wildlife; requesting the PM to chair the steering committee of the Project Tiger, even if initially for a few years; conversion of Project Tiger directorate into a statutory Project Tiger Authority; creation of state steering committees for project Tiger headed by the respective CM; creation of a representative management committee for each protected area in the state; creation of a sub-cadre within IFS of wildlife specialists and professionals and to conduct independent audits of each reserve annually putting this information in the public domain - are all well placed and deserve urgent attention of the government for early implementation.

Contrary to the blame game played through the media by the vested interests targeting the incumbent director of the Project Tiger at Delhi the TTF has found that it was only during the last few years after the new incumbent took his seat that the project Tiger directorate has started looking up and putting its own house in order despite heavy odds of multiple tasking and little institutional support to the Director. As a matter of fact the TTF terms the nineteen nineties (before the incumbent took charge) for the tiger as a lost decade, when crises at the project Tiger were 'managed' and not solved allowing things to move from bad to worse.

Protection agenda

Based on a well reasoned review of the extant state of resources in terms of man and material available in the field, threats from domestic and international illegal trade in tiger parts and products, and innovative protection strategies pursued at different places within and outside the country the TTF has done well to dump the alarmist path of more guns and guards to recommend the following:

- a) Each reserve must have a specific and detailed strategy for protection
- b) Locals should be given preference and even reservation in further recruitment of front line staff
- c) Training must be institutionalized
- d) Investing in basic facilities for the front line staff
- e) A thorough review of and remedial action to address the crisis in forestry services
- f) India must take proactive action to impress upon the international community through the mechanism of CITES

and also bilaterally to highlight the fact that 'unless international trade in tiger parts is checked, there will be growing pressure on the tigers of India.'

- g) The proposed wildlife crime bureau must be set up immediately as a lean, mean and effective statutory authority.
- h) The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 must be urgently amended on suggested lines to ensure that the wildlife criminals are not only investigated but are convicted too
- i) Innovative protection measures must be taken in each reserve (following similar examples from Periyar and one from Cambodia) to identify and involve local hunting tribes and communities through assured returns as foot soldiers for protection, weaning them from acting as the front line dirty taskers for the wildlife poachers and smugglers (as brought out by the CBI findings in Sariska).

Science and Research agenda

In tune with the demands of its terms of reference, the TTF's science and research agenda has been dominated by its search to recommend the best way forward to determine the number of tigers in the country. Based on a series of consultations and reviews it recommends that it is 'time to go beyond the pugmark count method (aiming at a total census), to a sample-based approach' and believes that the 'revised methodology for estimating/monitoring tiger status and its habitat as proposed by the Project Tiger directorate and the Wildlife Institute of India is a move in the right direction.' It endorses the proponents plan to use this evolved methodology to conduct a national tiger estimation beginning November 2005.

Additionally the TTF has noted the presence and usefulness of a variety of tools like photo-identification, radio-telemetry and DNA based genetic studies for intensive research and monitoring studies. For the field researchers, the TTF has felt the need of a 'single window' clearance mechanism in the form of national and state level panels of experts for granting official approvals. It notes that the management plans for each tiger reserve must be better designed and implemented taking into consideration the scientific and socio-economic research that has been conducted. Above all it recommends setting up of a mechanism for conduct of independent audit of each tiger reserve as a vital tool for decision-making and for informing all including the national parliament of its progress. Ruing the fact that 'the most serious lacunae in our approach to managing information on tigers has been a lack of openness and willingness to take everybody along', it recommends that all such information, unless of national security concern, must be made available on the web.

Relocation, Coexistence and Fringe agenda

While acknowledging the fact that ideally the tiger needs inviolate spaces and the founding fathers of the Project Tiger had recommended setting aside of core areas with no human activity, the TTF regrets that '30 years hence, the picture is far from perfect.' Working with rather incomplete information base regarding the number of villages inside the reserves and their impact on the tiger numbers, the TTF has learnt that against only 80 villages with 2904 families that have been relocated during the last 30 years, an estimated 273 villages with 19,215 families still reside within the core of 28 Tiger reserves in the country, and 'the

track record of previous relocation exercise has not been uniform or praiseworthy'. It has estimated a cost of Rs 3200 crores for the relocation of the remaining 273 villages currently inside the core of the 28 tiger reserves. Fully conscious of the fact that not all 273 villages within the designated core areas may need to be relocated for ecological imperatives, it recommends that a mechanism be set up at the central level to oversee the identification (within a period of one year) of villages whose relocation is essential as well as to monitor the implementation of this all important activity and its follow up over the years.

For the TTF, 'at the end, it is clear that even if the massive task of relocation is undertaken, it will still leave a large number of people within and on the fringe of the protected areas and tiger reserves, for whom the issue of 'coexistence' would be paramount.

TTF found that 'nobody really knew how many people live' within or on the fringe of the tiger reserves. Rough estimates suggested millions of people and livestock. They or their needs can't be just wished away. Accordingly the TTF says that the policy must accept that people will continue to live within protected areas and those in the fringe will continue to impact them. If people thus live in, or impact the protected areas, ways must be found to secure their use of resources (in case of people living inside) and livelihoods (of both). Coexistence of people living inside and inclusive existence of people living on the fringe is then the only way ahead. Issues of legal access to resources, speedy payment to affected people of commensurate compensation for loss of life and property to wildlife and imaginative and forest friendly eco development gain importance, since in the words of TTF, 'the tiger's habitat cannot be secured unless we secure the future of the millions who live within or on the fringe of tiger reserves'.

Tourism agenda

Realizing that the tiger is a tourist attraction *par excellence*, the TTF also looked at the state of tiger tourism in the country. It appraised tourism strategy and operation in Ranthambore and Periyar tiger reserves, two of the most visited tiger reserves. While at Ranthambore it found that tourist interests, if allowed to take precedence over conservation can be extremely detrimental to the park, in Periyar it was found that the park authorities had reduced poaching threats by converting ex-poachers and other regular trespassers into eco-tourism guides. A poor grazier woman the TTF met in Ranthambore complained that not only had she lost her grazing land to hotels but that they were also guzzling and draining ground water. 'We are better dead than alive' was her lament. Accordingly the TTF calls for the framing up of an eco-tourism policy under the Environment Protection Act, 1984 for harmonizing the land use around the tiger reserves. It also recommends that hotels within a radius of 5 km from the boundary of a reserve must contribute 30 percent of their turnover to the reserve (claiming 100 percent income tax benefit for the same as an incentive). There should be a tourism plan for each reserve and the benefits of pilgrimage activity to shrines inside the reserve (as in case of Periyar) must accrue to the local communities.

Ecological services agenda

'Almost all tiger reserves are watersheds for major and

minor streams and rivers.' This ecological service being rendered by the reserves is in the words of TTF 'not being rewarded'. The TTF convinced of the fact that 'we have to make conservation pay, so that the burden on the poor is reduced' recommends that 'the Project Tiger directorate must take urgent initiatives to begin a definite and time-bound programme for payment of ecological services to stakeholders like the reserve and the local people, by charging the city/area/districts that get water from the watershed secured by the reserve'.

Appendices

There are some useful appendices to the report including a note on the proposed methodology for estimating and monitoring tiger status and habitat by Jhala, Qureshi and Gopal; A critique of cadre-building in the forestry sector and suggestions for human resource improvement by HS Panwar (a TTF member); Amending the criminal provisions of the WPA by PILSAC and a list of guidelines on the establishment of wildlife wings etc issued during the period 1973-1981.

SWOT

Finally, no report is ever perfect or complete in all respects. It may be thus useful to carry a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) on 'Joining the Dots'.

Strengths

- It is a reader friendly result of a sincere and 'inclusive' effort
- It carries a logical analysis of extant field situations
- It does not mince words
- It highlights well the awful lack of good data on most matters relating to tiger and wildlife conservation in the country.
- It brings to the fore the systemic failures within MoEF, especially the dumping of the 1983 IBWL Task Force report the implementation of which could have averted the crisis.
- Cogent identification of the different agendas, tracing their background and analyzing the relevant factors has placed all aspects of the tiger crisis in a clear perspective.
- It carries a set of feasible recommendations on different relevant agendas meeting the terms of reference of the Task Force
- It highlights well the fact that some of the recommendations of the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to the Hon Supreme Court should have resulted from better understanding of their implications to avoid severe hardships suffered as a result by large number of forest dependent people
- Praiseworthy completion of task in time measuring up to the urgency and gravity of the tiger crisis – a task which otherwise with lesser commitment and knowledge base would have required a much longer time frame.
- It carries a well-reasoned response from the chairperson to the 'note of dissent' from a member

Weaknesses

- The report, not without reason, gives one the impression of being a rather hurried effort
- It is based on limited source material
- There are mistakes of facts and names at a few places
- No mention of 'cultural needs' of forest residents as an issue for consideration under the relocation agenda is surprising to say the least
- No mention of the fact that human demography in the country has changed phenomenally over time to become a major factor for forest degradation and the tiger crisis.
- No recommendation to address the urgent need of reviewing the

current boundaries of parks and sanctuaries as a conservation imperative

- A little more effort would have made available some useful data relating to villages inside the reserves in the WWF vs GOI (writ petition no 337/95) case files, in the form of submissions to the Hon Supreme Court made by the various state governments
- The Science and research agenda despite noting generally 'the necessities of working in a broader landscape framework', fails to highlight the urgent need to secure crucial corridors in view of the dispersal needs of the wandering surplus tigers in a reserve

Opportunities

- Usher in a new conservation paradigm based on the principle of 'coexistence' and 'inclusion' against the existing 'hands off' and 'exclusion' which has clearly failed to secure the future of India's forests and its tigers
- Rapidly identify major forest and non-forest natural landscapes across the country and develop landscape scale management strategies in order that the inclusive coexistence agenda can be implemented with significant benefits accruing to tiger as well as local people.
- Bring about the long over due division of MoEF into separate departments of Environment and that of Forest and Wildlife
- Widen the constituency for the tiger to enable people from different walks of life to contribute meaningfully in securing its future
- Bring about the much needed revamping and upgradation of project Tiger directorate resulting in a much more professional steering of tiger conservation in the country
- Establish a functional and effective Wildlife Crime Bureau for combating crime against wildlife including tiger
- Strengthen reserve administration and promote innovative protection strategies
- Ensure accountability backed up by independent and transparent audits of tiger reserves
- Bring in additional resources to the reserves and the local people through tourism cess on hotels and by charging the users on ecological services like watershed security
- The core areas of the tiger reserves must be made inviolate. The real cost of relocation of 273 villages from the reserve cores is actually only Rs 480 crores (there doesn't seem any justification for the state to charge any cost of land for relocation as it as much

gains land within the reserves with added conservation returns) at an enhanced rate of Rs. 2.5 lakhs per family as estimated by the TTF. This is certainly an achievable task.

- Put to test the WII-PT developed new methodology for the estimation and monitoring of tiger population, its prey base and habitat on a countrywide framework. The role of the Wildlife Institute of India, WII in capacity building of the field units who would implement the suggested task is going to be critical. It would necessitate an urgent and sustained revitalisation of the WII itself from an unfortunate low it has suffered from systemic failure in recent times.

• Promote meaningful interdisciplinary research supportive of better management of protected areas and the development of landscapes surrounding them.

• Review the crisis in forestry services from front line to top line, the former requiring restoration of depleted cadres with infusion of local candidates and all across organized capacity building for the realization of paradigm shift in forest and wildlife management.

Threats

- The report remains unimplemented and forgotten with the 'newest' tiger crisis dying itself down with passage of time
- The 'vested interests' amongst the existing 'exclusive' tiger constituency succeed in rubbishing the report whereby its pluses get drowned in an ugly 'guards and guns' vs 'coexistence' mayhem.
- The MoEF succumbs to the bureaucratic indolence and fails to derive the maximum and timely benefit from the report
- Politics and events meriting greater national attention overwhelm the fate of the tiger and in turn ignore the recommendations of the report

Epilogue

The PM's task force has delivered. The state must now ensure that the threats as enumerated above are not allowed to junk the TTF report to the dustbin. It is an opportunity that must not be missed. Our 'national animal' can ill afford the luxuries of an inconsiderate state or the fancies of a few romantics. A clear-cut, feasible and sensible road map is in hand. Let us walk it. AMEN.

Final Announcement

National Symposium on "Wildlife Health and Husbandry Constraints"

Fourth Annual Convention of Association of Indian Zoo and Wildlife Veterinarians

Collaboration: Assam Agricultural University, Guwahati & CZA, New Delhi

Venue: College of Veterinary Science, A.A.U., Khanapara, Guwahati, Assam, PIN: 781 022

Annual convention of the AIZ&WV and "National Symposium on Wildlife Health and Husbandry Constraints" are programmed to be held on 25th and 26th October, 2005 at College of Veterinary Science, Assam Agricultural University, Khanapara, Guwahati (Assam) with Cooperation of Assam State Zoo, Guwahati. The veterinary science professionals of Zoo and Wildlife Organizations, academic and research institutions are invited to participate, present their works/ observations/findings in the form of paper and on the aspects of wildlife health and husbandry management matters. The wildlife managers are also invited to participate and contribute.

For registration please contact one of the following **Dr. B.M Arora**, President, AIZ&WV, Bareilly (UP) **Ph: 0581-2541644 / Mobile 09412463136**

Organizing Secretary, **Prof (Dr). Dharmeshwar Das** Head, Division of Animal Genetics & I/C Wildlife Health Centre, College of Veterinary Science, Guwahati, Assam-781 022, **Ph: 0361-2331135**

Joint Organizing Secretary, **Prof (Dr.) Apurpa Chakraborty** Head, Division of Pathology, College of Veterinary Science, Guwahati, Assam-781 022, Email: <apurbachkraborty@fastmail.fm> **Ph: 0361-2336833**