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Interview with Shri R. Sreenivasa Murthy, Field Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh

On successful completion of 5 years of the Panna Tiger Reintroduction Programme, Last Wilderness interviewed Shri R. Sreenivasa Murthy on his views of the Panna Tiger Reserve debacle and it's turnaround.

It has been 5 years, since we first heard of the tiger's extinction from Panna. This situation has now moved from 0-30 tigers through these 5 years. How would you describe your experience of this 5-year journey in one word?

It has been a real Challenge as a forester. However, It has also been highly gratifying to rebuild a tiger population in the landscape in the shortest possible time. It is a 'dream come true' for a wildlife professional in his life time as one of my well wishers put it.

According to you, what was the main reason behind the 2009 debacle?

Can anyone attribute one reason for the death of 'Abhimanyu', son of Arjun of Mahabharata? Similarly, no single reason can be attributed to the Panna debacle of 2009. But some of the main reasons are:

1. Loss of last female tiger in 2006 and the non- detection of this important biological aspect of tiger population dynamics, in time by the management can be attributed as the main reason.
2. Security - another important reason that got side tracked.
3. Dacoit problem between 2007-2008 (for eight months) compounded the security issues further, which is simultaneously responsible as a disturbance factor for tigers within the park.

What were the important steps taken by you for reviving Panna Tiger Reserve from 0-30 tigers?

The first step was, building the morale of the staff & making a Panna team, bringing back T3, 24x7x365 telemetry based monitoring and security cover to tigers, strengthening intelligence, adoption and execution of preventive strategy of protection, involving local people in tiger conservation in tune with the "Jansamarthan se baagh samrakshan" principles and finally soliciting experts technical advice and implementing them.

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**Were the necessary resources available to you to execute these?
If not, how did you manage them?**

Resources were not an issue. Major funding is received from NTCA and MPFD. Some small but necessary support for field units in the form of necessary field gear have also been received from NGOs like WWF-India, Wildlife Conservation Trust, Last Wilderness Foundation.

Through this 5-year journey, did you, at some point, feel like the situation was slipping out of your hands? If yes, how did you manage to overcome this?

Not really. But some turbulence was experienced whenever an officer at the field level was changed. However, these are part and parcel of the package. Regrouping the staff and motivating them continuously was the real challenge.

What in your view is the role of local communities in protection of the reserve?

Involvement of the local communities started with the adoption and execution of the "*Jansamarthan se baagh samrakshan*" principle. From the beginning we were trying to implement it in letter and spirit by first, organizing a big conclave with the locals on 5.11.2009 before the start of the project.

In this conclave, all the people (locals) discussed the Panna Debacle thread bare and came to the conclusion that poaching is one of the main reasons for the Panna Debacle and promised us, that they will not encourage/support poachers in the region in the future and pledged their support for the Panna Tiger Reintroduction programme. These consultations have been continued for the past five years and we have received unstinted support.

Mr. Nagendra Singh, the present MP, Khajuraho has been the keystone of the political support at local level from the day one.

Tourism is slowly returning to Panna. Do you think tiger tourism has the potential to act as a conservation tool or is it a hindrance for carrying out conservation activities?

Although tourism needs to be properly managed and handled, it will actively help in tiger conservation. In 2009, the park tourism was around 10,000 visitors, but now it is touching 20,000. Elevation in tourism will aid the livelihood of the locals staying in regions like, Madla and Khajuraho.

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What is your advice to the other parks where tigers are on the verge of extinction?

Realize/identify the problem in-time and accept it so that repair can be done without facing embarrassment. After identifying the problem correctly, finding the necessary solutions is not difficult.

What are the hindrances faced by a Field Director while protecting a tiger reserve?

Resistance from members of the staff who did not want the positive change.

Your staff has been through the rough phase of Panna National Park. How did you manage to motivate them and change their attitudes to bring about this positive change?

When I joined Panna in May 2009 the field unit was in a state of Shock and Shame. Some staff members were unaware of the details of the debacle, while there were some who knew but did not have a detailed account of the same. It was then, that I started meeting the staff, right from the casual labour to all levels involving all the stakeholders. My idea was to first, know and pinpoint/identify the problem. More than 100 such meetings were organized in a highly informal way. The main issue that came up was the 'feudalistic' society/attitude of the landscape that prevented the genuinely interested staff to act against the might of the locals who wished to coerce the staff.

Some members were made party to wrong actions through coercion. When you are made party to a wrong doing then you will not come out with the truth for your own sake. Once I realised the issue, we called for the conclave on 5.11.2009 where all the locals pledged their support to Tiger Reintroduction with the management.

Then the management was faced with T3's sojourn outside the park for 30 days when we all stayed together. T3 was instrumental in making the Panna Team. He also gave us an insight into a tiger's life and learn Radio telemetry monitoring skills. With the successful managerial intervention of urine lure, T3 and T1 met in no time and 16th April 2010 brought a smile to the faces of the Panna Team with first litter of T1. From then there is no looking back. Every Tiger reintroduction and their successful littering added to our energy. Till now Panna's tigers have littered 14 times and produced 32+ tiger cubs.

We used every one of these occasions to motivate the staff by rewarding them with letters of appreciation and cash incentives. Tiger tranquilizations were made easy and

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these occasions were also used to motivate the staff. First Tiger Birthday was celebrated in the presence of none other than the then MoEF Minister Mr. Jairam Ramesh and he distributed certificates of appreciation to more than 100 of the staff with his own signature.

NTCA recognized our efforts with Award of Excellence in "Active Management" in 2012. MPFD Rewarded 14 of our officers with Wildlife Conservation Awards in 2012. Thus, with every small event we managed to motivate ourselves to move as a TEAM. Of course this is a continuous effort. To keep the flock together is easier said than done. But Panna is a living example for this.

Can you share any unique/ creative strategies used during this revival phase?

Basic Cardinal: "Protection and Management is our Responsibility where as Creation is Nature's work". Do not disturb when nature is at work.

On Tiger Front: 24x7x365 monitoring. Anticipation and advance planning based on daily monitoring reports, providing exclusive and undisturbed domain to tiger, urine lure technique to reign T3 within tiger reserve and to attract T3 towards T4 to help her re-wilding and postponing the re-introduction of second male to avoid possible killing of cubs to ensure the lives of Panna Progeny Tigers.

On Staff Front: Motivation and Team building, rewards and cash incentives, punishing more than 4 staff members and not sparing them when their connivance in forest offence was beyond doubt.

On Protection front: First ever carnivore poaching case conviction in two and half decades of Panna where all the 10 accused were convicted, high and mighty were not spared for violations of law, National level researchers found guilty were booked for offence.

On people's Front: Adoption and application of *Jansamarthan se baagh samrakshan*" slogan to rope in locals in conservation movement, continuous consultation with public on formal and informal channels, creation of Friends of Panna platform for the processes, organizing "Panna Nature Camps", an ongoing nature conservation programme for locals in partnership with WWF-India for last five years.

Till now 87 such camps have been organized wherein more than 2600 participants have taken part, pan India "Panna Vulture Estimation" programme from 2011, getting locals support when tigers move into the landscape and continuous PR with Tiger Bulletins and official press notes to avoid spreading wrong information.

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If you could change one thing in the running of the tiger reserves in our country, what would it be?

Getting loyalty of staff members and support of the local communities for the respective TR.

If you had not been a field director (thank god for us and Panna that you are!), what would you rather have been?

A teacher. I love capacity building of HR. I have used those skills of mine to a large /optimum level with my Panna Family (staff).

There are many people who have come forward and shown a keen interest in volunteering and working in tandem with the Forest Department to aid conservation. How do you think people can help? Whom can they contact?

Yes there are many who helped us all through the journey. Mr. Ravi Singh from WWF-India, Mr. Anish Andheria from WCT, Mumbai, Mr. Nikhil Nagle from Last Wilderness Foundation, Mumbai to name a few who represented organizations outside the government setup. Number of individuals who helped Panna's revival is quite high, and their support is always regarded and solicited.

Certainly people from outside the Govt. can help the causes of conservation. First they have to get in touch with the in-charge officers of field units to know the exact requirements at field level and then they can approach the Chief Wildlife Warden of Madhya Pradesh who is also the Chairman for M.P.Tiger Foundation Society and can help through this body who is authorized to get donations/aid for the support of Conservation in the State. One can also write to fdptr82@gmail.com to volunteer with Panna TR.

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