



Village Kids' Awareness Programme

**Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve
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Core Team:

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Supported by:



Conducted by:



Village Kids' Awareness Programme, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, March 2015

Introduction:

A programme started in the summer of 2012, The Village Kids' Awareness Programme (VKAP) conducted by the Last Wilderness Foundation (LWF) is in its 8th leg, and yet the learning from the students and the rural side of the wilderness continues. Attended this time around by 302 students and 13 teachers from the villages of Umaria (Bakeli), Bakeli and Salkhaniya, our participants, who were visiting the forest for the very first time, were absolutely elated at the thought of visiting the reserve and were perhaps the most enthused bunch of students we have taken so far.



Pic1: The students of Bakeli pose with the VKAP banner at the Damdama camp

However, since it was the very first time that the students were being exposed to this sort of a programme, it was important to start from the basics. To understand - why Bandhavgarh, the forest that they're so dependent on for a day-to-day living, is so important not only to them but also to other species living in the forest. On being asked "jungle kyun zaroori hai?" most students replied saying that the forest was important because it gave them fire wood, mahua, tendu, char, dori, amla etc. thereby making it important. But, on being asked "aap jungle ke liye kya karte hain?" there was deafening silence. Thus,

in order to fill this void, our VKAP programme stepped in. To reach out to the students about the importance of the forests and the existence of all those who are equally important and have equal rights to share space and exist peacefully alongside us.

The programme:



Pic 2: The post-safari de-briefing session in progress



Pic 3: Our volunteer Akshita Pungaliya explains the linkage between tiger and water to a rapt audience

The main aim of the VKAP is for the students to firstly see and appreciate the natural heritage our country boasts of. Before we can even propose the idea of conservation to them, we firstly work with the motto of - 'see, appreciate and then conserve'. LWF team does this by taking the students for a safari into the tiger reserve where they are encouraged to be more aware of their surroundings, understand the interconnectedness between organisms, understand the role of the frontline staff in protection of the reserve, reduce their dependency on the forest and forest products and finally contribute to the conservation of their reserve in their personal capacity.

During the safari, students wrote down whatever they had seen in the forest and also made a note of these alternative methods, which would ensure a start to the co-existence model. The safari was followed by a lunch with the students and then a screening of the movie – 'The Truth About Tigers' which talks about the tiger as the keystone species and the need to conserve it. This was followed by a presentation and de-briefing session summarising the reasons for the decline in tiger numbers, what can be done to save tigers, alternative solutions to reduce dependency on the forest and forest products and finally, what can be done by each one present in the room to protect our national animal.



Pic 4: Lunch!



Pic 5: Off to the forest!

Safari special:



Pic 6: Our safari bus taking the students through the pristine forests of Bandhavgarh



Pic 7: Our safari bus, which we had christened 'Jhilmil', drops students off at Pachpedi gate after the ride

Though the students were absolutely thrilled at the sight of a wild boar, spotted deer or even a peacock, they were in for a real treat! While travelling from the buffer zone to the park entrance our vehicles came across a family of four tigers - mother with 3 cubs! Apart from getting lucky with sightings of tigers (2 cubs were spotted in the core zone by the students themselves on the last day), the forest seemed to really open up to the students by treating them to a plethora of wildlife during the safari rides. Some of the mammals the students saw were: sloth bear, leopard, chinkara, nilgai, sambar, jackal, fox and mongoose. Even the avian world was seemingly kind with hornbills, robins, buzzards, vultures, thrushes, ibises, storks, and woodpeckers making an entrance for the enthralled audience.

Session details:

Session date	School location	Villages covered	Number of students	Number of teachers
Mar 15-21, 2015	Umaria Bakeli	Umaria Bakeli	149	6
	Bakeli	Bakeli	129	6
	Salkhaniya	Salkhaniya	24	1
Total number of participants			302	13

An evening with the villagers:

Apart from playing host to the conservation palate of the students, the Last Wilderness team also screened the movie (on special demand by the villagers) – 'The Truth About Tigers'. This was done for the villages of Umaria (Bakeli) and Bakeli which saw 500 + and 250 + villagers respectively attend the screening. The brilliant turn out proved to be a good platform for creation of awareness and sensitization with regard to tiger conservation.



Pic 8: The Forest Department staff and villagers come together to attend the movie screening



Pic 9: Enthralled villagers and a mass gathering

How does the Village Kids' Awareness Programme help? / Benefits of this programme:

- 1) It helps in sensitising the students towards wildlife (existing around them) and its importance in their lives.
- 2) Helping the students see and understand the co-relation between conservation of tiger and survival of mankind.
- 3) Involving the locals in conservation, creating contacts for information on poaching, forest fire and any other illegal activities.
- 4) Bridging the gap between the Forest Dept. and the communities.
- 5) Imbibing a sense of ownership towards the forest.
- 6) Educating /creating awareness among the students about issues of forest fires, man-animal conflict and dependency on forest products thereby equipping them with solutions to deal with the concerned issues.
- 7) Helps in thinking beyond the daily needs and thinking for long term conservation.



Pic 10: Understanding how to live securely around tiger reserves

Living with tigers: actions to avoid man-animal conflicts

- 1) Avoid grazing of cattle within the forest; unattended cattle can attract tigers towards villages.
- 2) To reduce your losses, make sure your domestic animals are well protected in the night in cowshed and when grazing in the day, that an adult is herding them.
- 3) Do not leave children alone in the dark hours.
- 4) If you see a tiger do not chase or throw anything at it, just move away, because otherwise it might attack you in self-defense.
- 5) Do not set fire to forest patches for mahua or tendu collection. Instead use more eco-friendly methods like spread a dark sheet or cloth or cement '*gobar*' / cow dung under the tree for easier and faster collection.
- 6) Do not set snares or traps for wild animals.
- 7) Do not buy or sell wildlife products.
- 8) In case of anything suspicious, kindly contact the beat guard, nearest forest '*chowki*' immediately.

Living with tigers: alternative solutions given to aid conservation

- 1) Plant one economically important tree like mahua or tendu per student, which can help in providing fuel; preferably around villages so that entering the forest is avoided thereby reducing human-wildlife conflict.
- 2) Attempt at growing grass near the village for the cattle to graze. This will not only help in reducing ill-legal grazing inside the forest, but will also help in reducing attacks on cattle and human beings (in case of a herder) by wild animals.
- 3) Be aware and spread the message.



Pic 11: Our best bet for conservation; the villagers and the Forest Department



Pic 12: Our team member, driver and in-house botanist, Mahendraji interacts with the students voluntarily during a break-time.



Pic 13: Bagh! (That's what we were shouting!)

Conclusion: The Village Kids' awareness programme provides for a great learning opportunity and allows both parties to learn a lot from one another. However, it is not only sufficient to have such programmes as a one-time effort, but to maintain proper touch points with these villages through constant interaction so that there is a reduction in the incidents of human-wildlife conflict or outrage by the villagers.

The future vision is that the villagers co-operate with the Forest Department in safeguarding the forest rather than being antagonistic about these large cats.



Pic 14: The future