



# Village Kids' Awareness Programme

**Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve  
June 2013**

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**Special thanks to:** Field Director, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve for the immense support provided during the entire programme.

## Introduction:

Awareness is defined as the state or ability to perceive, to feel, or to be conscious of events, objects, or sensory patterns. So it would seem natural that the children of the forest would already be aware of the need to protect the forests. However, the fact remains that the term 'awareness' applies to both rural and urban communities. In order to understand their problems, it is important for us (urban communities) to first understand the forests from their perspective.

For example, to us, a forest fire raging unchecked through the forest causes destruction, thereby killing the trees and other live forms existing in that area. But for the tribal, fire does not signify death. To them, it signifies new life! They burn patches of forests to ensure a good cultivation of their crops, growth of new grass for the cattle to graze on, it is also used as a method to clear up the dry leaves etc from the ground, which makes it easier to collect the flowers like mahua flowers, tendu fruits from the cleared ground.

However, these man-made forest fires when set off in an uncontrolled and unchecked manner can cause more harm than good. Hence, knowledge of both sides of this problem helped us bring up this point during our sessions. The challenge therefore, was to raise this point after assessing and understanding both sides of the problem. For example, when Archana a student living in Rohaniya village told us, "Tiger ki raksha karne se pehle humein apni raksha karna zaroori hai!", we were indignant. We wondered why they didn't want to save the tiger and how they expected to survive without it!

However, we realised that this statement is a reminder of the fact that these villagers are the original "tiger people". They have lived with the tiger for generations and have co - existed with the forest and its denizens, but now the crunch for space and the growing needs of mankind have dented this relationship. Also, this area has been riddled with several cases of man-animal conflict. Over time, they have come to believe that the tiger gets priority over them and thus, feelings of cynicism and hostility have risen from the fear of losing their land and livelihood to this animal. This has given rise to a mixed bag of responses towards saving or protecting the big cat. For example, while some felt that it is nothing short of a menacing beast looking to cause only destruction, others viewed it as a beautiful animal whose extinction would indeed be a self destructive move.

Thus, with these diverse perspectives we started our awareness programme hoping that by the end of it the feelings of antagonism would start changing towards respect for the animal and the need for protection of forests.



Image 1: Our base for the programme, the school at Rohaniya

### **The programme:**

The awareness programme, which was held between 1st-9th June, 2013 was attended by 240 students and 14 teachers from 4 different villages viz. Rohaniya, Banskutta ,Ghunsu and Pipariha, all of which lie in the buffer zone of Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. These students are from class VI-VIII in schools run by the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a scheme under the ambit of Government of India.

The awareness programme included taking the children from the 4 villages to the park in order for them to understand and appreciate the biodiversity of the park. The safari was followed by an audio-visual screening and an interactive session which primarily helped the students to understand the apex predator of the forest i.e. the Royal Bengal Tiger, its value to human kind, the challenges faced by this predator and what should be done to save it. Having gained knowledge from both communities about the perspectives of protecting wildlife and its forests, we were able to address some of the issues specific to this area like forest fires, illegal trapping of animals, etc.

The sessions was concluded by playing the - “Wild India anthem” (a unique assemblage of footage from across ‘wild’ India) directed by Sandesh Kadur in order for the students to appreciate, respect and protect the rich biodiversity that exists in our country.

In the end we can only hope that in an area riddled with cases of man-animal conflict, the children who are the greatest hope for the tiger’s future and survival, will help protect and conserve the forest and ensure the survival of one and all.



Image 2: Students and teachers watch “ The Truth About Tigers”



Image 3: Students pay a visit to the bats at Badi Gufa



Image 4: Ready for the drive



Image 5: Vidya Venkatesh interacts with students about the collection of forest produce in Bandhavgarh



Image 6: The effect the tiger has on all of us! Students during an audio-visual screening



Image 7: Shri Sudhir Kumar, Field Director, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve interacts with the students



Image 8: The students enjoying the biodiversity of the park



Image 9: Lunch time!



Image 10: The team! From L-R: Pramod Yadav, Umesh, Sandeep Burman, Vidya Venkatesh, Bhavna Menon, Pushpendranath Dwivedi and Sudhir

### Session details:

Session date	School location	Students from villages	Number of students	Number of teachers
June 2013	Rohaniya	Rohaniya, Chattan	181	11
	Baskutta	Baskutta	15	1
	Ghunsu	Ghunsu	29	2
	Pipariha	Pipariha	15	NIL
<b>Total number of participants</b>			<b>240</b>	<b>14</b>

## **Highlights:**

- Roping in a good number of students in the programme inspite it being a Mahua/Tendu leaves collection season
- Reaching out to schools and teachers during their vacations was a challenging affair since most of the teachers are not residents of the village, hence had gone back to their respective hometowns.
- These children were very responsive to the concept of protection of the tiger and its forests means protecting themselves.

## **Conclusion:**

These villages were selected owing to their history of man-animal conflict and forest fires (mostly man-made), which have been one of the highest in this area.

In order to throw some light and understand these issues better, it was deemed necessary to create awareness about the protection and conservation of the forest and its inhabitants in this stretch. However, after concluding the programme we also came to understand, that in such stretches, it is not enough to hold such programmes sporadically. Instead, they should be conducted on a regular basis so as to reinforce the need for protecting the forests and its tigers.

Each time we've interacted with the villagers through these programmes, we've gained deeper insights of their lives and their perspectives. This has helped us to carry forward the learnings into the next session.