

May 2017



## **Interview with Shri. Sanjay Shukla, Field Director, Kanha Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh**

*On being the Field Director of one of the most prominent tiger reserves in our country, Last Wilderness Foundation interviewed Shri. Sanjay Shukla to know more about his experience as a manager, the challenges he has faced in the management of the reserve, the importance of volunteers in conservation and his conservation ideology.*

Being in charge of a prominent tiger reserve, what has been the biggest challenge for you?

Protection and improvement of wildlife and its habitat is the most serious challenge for me. Besides a wide number of wildlife species, Kanha has also successfully conserved the endemic hard ground barasingha and endangered tiger. As the core zone is islanded in a sea of humanity, and the buffer has a number of villages, the tiger reserve faces biotic pressure and consequently threats from different forms of poaching. The hard ground barasingha is also a food specialist and needs healthy grassland for its survival. We also need to maintain grassland habitat throughout the year for this endangered cervid and for a host of other ungulate species on which depends the survival of tigers.

Kanha is renowned for the successful revival of the Hard-ground Barasingha, how difficult was it to revive the once dwindling population of this endangered herbivore? What were the measures taken to revive the species?

The resurrection of the Hard-ground Barasingha is one of the most inspiring success stories in wildlife conservation. In the late 1930s, there were around 3000 barasingha in and around the present Kanha Tiger Reserve. The population gradually declined due to poaching and habitat loss, and reached the lowest ebb in 1970, with only 66 animals. As the species is a food specialist, almost a total graminivore, with a rather long gestation period of around 9 months, the revival was very slow and difficult. The Kanha management had to resort to the adaptive management strategy or “learning by doing”. A wide range of conservation initiatives, including stringent protection, village relocation, ensuring water availability, grassland improvement, daily monitoring etc., were taken to revive the species

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population. It has also been a great learning lesson for the Kanha management.

Another herbivore, the Blackbuck, has been successfully re-introduced into Kanha, how has the experience been so far?

The local extinction of the Blackbuck from Kanha was a disappointment to the concept of biodiversity conservation. It is, however, true that the antelope has specific habitat requirements, rather difficult to meet with at Kanha. But the idea behind the reintroduction was to have at least a small population in its former distribution range. We successfully captured and translocated some animals from Seoni, and kept them in a large enclosure at Kanha for acclimatization. After some time, around 25 animals were released into the wild. They are doing fine. The others are still in captivity for multiplication, and will be released in the future.

Many researchers have worked in Kanha and have published scientific papers. Do you think these research/ studies have been applicable for the park's management practices?

The Kanha management always encourage applied researches whose findings can strengthen/ improve conservation or solve our problems. However, not all researches/ studies are directly applicable to field conservation. As these studies also add to the advancement of knowledge about wildlife ecosystems, I do not see any harm if a few such studies are pursued in the protected area. They should, of course, be related to conservation and related topics in Indian context.

The Kanha-Pench corridor walk (having recently completed its 3<sup>rd</sup> leg) has gained significant popularity. However, in your opinion, do such initiatives aid conservation and how?

The Kanha-Pench corridor walk is arranged to spread awareness about the importance of such linear areas with so much potential for wildlife conservation. Such programmes also attract attention of influential people whose interest/ involvement in the cause also support us in many ways. Creating conservation awareness and involving people is also part of our job.

You have a particular affinity towards snakes, and the Forest Department has even supported the production and launching of education material as a means of outreach and awareness in tandem with other organisations. A

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brilliant initiative to address the misnomers about the reptiles, in your opinion, what else can be done to address the conflict between man and snake?

Snakes are extremely important as animal species, and are appreciated highly under the concept of biodiversity conservation. We have to do much more than producing and launching educational material for their conservation. We also need to spread awareness about conservation in villages of tiger reserves thorough trained volunteers. They can hold small gatherings/ workshops and talk about the importance of snake conservation, venomous and non-venomous snakes, precautions, avoidance, innocuousness of most snake species, and first-aid treatment etc. We can also train paramedical staff to administer anti-snake venom in emergencies, and ensure availability of the best polyvalent vaccine in as many villages as possible.

Addressing the biggest stakeholders of conservation, the people living around the tiger reserve, the Forest Department has successfully initiated a Nature Education Programme as a means of outreach. In your opinion, does outreach help aid conservation in the long run?

Yes, the outreach programmes do help aid conservation in the long run. Firstly, the target group is able to understand, in an interesting way, the actual importance of conservation for in general and for locals in particular. Besides, continuous interaction and get-togetherness help build mutual trust between the Kanha management and people. Most of these oriented target youths/ people also spread conservation awareness. But it has to be done in a missionary zeal.

Kanha has a new mascot. Tell us a little bit about the idea behind “Bhoorsing”

This is an amazing example of green humour or humour in conservation. This is the first tiger reserve in India to officially introduce this mascot, Bhoorsing the barasingha. As we know, the hard ground barasingha is an endemic and endangered deer species at Kanha. The mascot has become very popular and is a unique identity for Kanha, which not only makes it look distinct but also helps spread awareness and allows the younger generation to connect with all wildlife. Around 3 months back I met Nagpur’s award-winning cartoonist Rohan Chakravarty, who makes cartoons and illustrations on wildlife, and we hit upon this idea.

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An example to other parks with regard to tiger conservation, Kanha has also been lauded with successful relocation of villages from within the park. Known to be a complicated procedure, what has been the biggest learning with regard to relocation?

The biggest learning has been that if our village brethren are treated with kindness and courtesy, they so deserve, and are convinced gently about the benefits of relocation and the national mainstream of development, relocation programmes can be made easy and totally uncontroversial. We also need to listen to their problems patiently and make the entire process very transparent and hassle free.

Has relocation of the villages positively affected the health/renewal of the forest?

Village relocation has been extremely helpful for the recuperation of land under chronic non-conservation land use, and its gradual integration into the surrounding wildlife habitat. We have been able to reclaim a large chunk of land after village relocation programmes, and most of this land has been developed into excellent grassland to support more ungulates and tigers.

In your opinion can volunteers help strengthen the conservation model of the park? If yes, how?

Conservation volunteers can play a great role. They can actively participate in the awareness programme to orient target people positively and put across the importance of such a great nature reserve in the region. They can also take part in wildlife estimation and surveys. If they have expertise in a specific field relevant to conservation or rural development, their help can also be sought by the Kanha management.

What is the one conservation ideology you work by?

The conservation ideology is very basic: “conserving the tiger reserve to conserve nature, improve climate and of course save humanity on this planet”

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