



# Village Kids' Awareness Programme

**Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve  
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**Supported by:**



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# Village Kids' Awareness Programme, Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve, February 2016

## Introduction

Through the years, almost 4 years now, the idea behind our Village Kids' Awareness Programme (VKAP) has been about providing insights and solutions to the students that we expect for them to take back with them. This leg of the programme, which happens to be the 10<sup>th</sup> in this initiative, turned out to be one of the most learning-oriented sessions. This time, us being the students, made us learn and gain insights into the different attitudes, mindsets, maturity and reasoning of the villagers that often goes beyond our myopic thought process. A through and through learning experience, we are convinced that if learning's from both ends of the fence (the decision makers/department/authorities and the people of the forest) are given equal importance and are discussed in a common environment, wildlife in this country faces a more than positive future.



Pic 1: Let the fun begin!

## **The idea behind the programme**

Conservation and protection of species in a fast developing world is not easy and promises to get tougher especially since the protection means standing up against our own kind against the decimation of species and the environment. However, what makes it possible is standing up against our own kind by roping in some of our own kind too! This is what our model is based on: working in tandem with your own kind, by roping in the communities that live around the forests, who, if given the right direction and alternative solutions, can form the buffer between development and nature, thereby reducing the blow or impact wildlife otherwise suffers at the hand of mankind.

## **The programme**

The VKAP, which was conducted from 14<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> February 2016, saw participation of 389 students and 22 villagers from the villages of Badwar, Chirwah, Ghaghdar, Dhaurkoh and Pathrehi.

## **Programme details**

The participants were taken for a safari by the Last Wilderness Foundation team where they were 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. These were advised to do by following a few simple methods like- planting of trees, collection of forest produce like mahua and tendu in smaller quantities so that an equal share is available to the herbivores and most importantly to try and practice entering the forest at a reasonable hour to collect the said resources so that conflict with the wildlife can be avoided in the best possible way. The students were also encouraged to note whatever they had seen during the safari and also make a note of the alternative methods suggested, 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 – “Bagh: Hamara astitva = Sahastitva” which translates as, our existence is linked to co- existence, a 7 minute movie put together by the Last Wilderness team which encapsulates the essence of co- existence and conservation in a narrative form featuring ‘Van Devi’ or the forest goddess. The screening was followed by a presentation, which reiterated whatever had been told to the students through the day and the children were encouraged to ask questions and think for themselves about how even a slight imbalance due to negligence on our part may cause for the entire ecosystem to falter.



Pic 2: Pre safari excitement. The sign up rate could rival a rock concert!



Pic 3: During the safari



Pic 4: Fun time, break time



Pic 5: A session in progress. Mohit, a class 7 student, addressing other participants on the importance of the tiger

## Participant details

Session date	School location	Villages covered	Number of students	Number of villagers
Feb 14-19, 2016	Badwar	Badwar	89	4
	Chirwah	Chirwah	45	2
	Ghaghdar	Ghaghdar	130	8
	Dhaurkoh	Dhaurkoh	39	4
	Pathrehi	Pathrehi	86	4
<b>Total number of participants</b>			<b>389</b>	<b>22</b>

## Silver lining

When we speak about us learning and gaining an insight into the attitudes, mindsets on this side of the fence, we say so from experience. For example, due to understandable course of events where a cowherd had been mauled and probably eaten by a tiger, in the very first village (Badwar) where we were working, the response we got was nothing short of commendable. In a village which was shrouded in explainable hostility towards the big cat and should have been anti forest, when school children (despite being encouraged not to go into the forest by anxious villagers) were asked whether they would want to go to the forest, leaped at the opportunity with a deafening roar of “haan, hum jungle jayenge.” Another huge surprise was in form of Ram Milan who is the son of the man got killed recently by a tiger. “inko bhi le jayeije jungle” he said with half smile as he urged his children to join the programme, despite the recent turn of events. If this isnt a mindset beyond our thinking and reasoning and then I don’t know what is. Lastly and this is probably the highlight of all our projects is when children take guard as tiger ambassdors and address other children in the room as to why it is imperative to safeguard the tiger. In the past, we have seen this ambassdorship being taken over by innumerable children irrespective of whether he/ she is a Yadav, a Baiga or even a Thakur. Once they experience the beauty of nature and understand the value/ and are appreciative of what they need to protect, caste or creed seems to have made no difference to take over the duty of a protector of the tiger’s realm.

## Villagers and conservation

This time, apart from our usual participants (the children) we encouraged villagers to be part of the programme (1 village elder in each center). They were not only taken for the safari along with the children but were also invited to be a part of the conservation sessions. The support we got from these village representatives were huge and they also seemed appreciative of the programme. Village involvement became even clearer when villagers from Dhaurkoh requested a wildlife movie screening in their village. The villagers were shown “Bagh: Hamara Astitva Sahastitva” and “The Truth About Tigers” which was met with enthusiasm by the people present.



Pic 6: Movie screening at Dhaurkoh

## Benefits of this programme

- 1) Helps in sensitising the students towards wildlife (existing around them) and its importance to their lives.
- 2) Helps the students see and understand the co-relation between conservation of tiger and survival of villagers.
- 3) Involves the locals in conservation, creating contacts for information on poaching, forest fire and any other illegal activities.
- 4) Bridges the gap between Forest Dept. and the communities.
- 5) Imbibes a sense of ownership towards the forest.



- 6) Educates /creates 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.

### **Protective measures suggested to avoid man-animal conflicts**

- 1) Avoid grazing of cattle within the forest, unattended cattle can attract tigers towards villages. Stall feed or growing grass within the village area are alternatives.
- 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 try to save your cattle in case of a big cat attacking your cattle. Do not risk your life to save the cattle.
- 4) Do not wander alone in the dark hours.
- 5) If you are going out alone in the night then sing songs or play songs on the mobile so that the tiger knows it is a human being and not a deer or a prey. If you see a tiger do not chase or throw anything at it, as this might instigate the animal to attack you in self-defense. Just move away.
- 6) Do not go into the forest at very early hours to collect forest produce. Enter only when there is sufficient light and visibility. Also, try going in groups so as to best avoid conflict situations.
- 7) Do not set snares or traps for wild animals.
- 8) Plant at least 1 economically important tree like mahua or tendu for every tree felled for the purpose of fuel and household purposes, preferably around villages so that entering the forest is avoided thereby reducing human-wildlife conflict.

### **Conclusion / what the future holds**

Although, we see a change in the mindset of the people, with them willing to accept solutions to live in tandem with the tiger, there is much to do, with the most important being an open dialogue between forest authorities and the villagers. Constant interaction with villagers not only leads to valuable information on the going on's in the reserve, but will also bring in trust and faith among the villagers towards the authorities. Without this belief system and constant touch points, very little can or will be achieved with regard to conservation.

## Glimpses from the programme



Pic 7: Lunch!



Pic 8: Ravi Tiwari, our phenomenal canter driver addresses the students voluntarily



Pic 9: Nothing can rival the happiness on seeing a tiger



Pic 10: Our base, place of stay and our excellent transport system!



Pic 11: Our volunteer Sejal Mehta and Range Officer, Khitauli, Shri R.K. Markam interacting with the students



Pic 12: Deputy Ranger, Khitauli, Shri. Sharma interacting with the students of Pathrehi at the Damdama camp



Pic 13: Chief Administrative Officer, Last Wilderness Foundation, Vidya Venkatesh interacting with the students



Pic 14: Range Officer, Dhamokhar, Shri. I.B. Singh distributing badges to the students post an interactive session



Pic 14: The future!



Pic 15: Protectors of the tiger's realm