



Village Awareness Programme

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

April-May 2016

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Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	3
PROGRAMME DETAILS	4
HOW DOES THE PROGRAMME WORK?	4
MOVIE BONUS: HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT.....	9
SAFARI SPECIAL.....	9
PARTICIPANT DETAILS	13
BLAST FROM THE PAST	13
OTHER INTERACTIONS.....	14
HOW DOES THE VILLAGE AWARENESS PROGRAMME HELP? / BENEFITS OF THIS PROGRAMME	17
PROTECTIVE MEASURES/ ACTIONS TO AVOID MAN-ANIMAL CONFLICTS	17
ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS GIVEN TO AID CONSERVATION	18
CHALLENGES FACED	18
CONCLUSION	19

Village Awareness Programme April- May 2016



Pic 1: Our stalwarts and the future of conservation

Introduction

If you go by the books, conservation is defined as- 'the act of conserving something in particular.' But on field, the word conservation holds different for different people. For the Village Awareness Programme conducted by the Last Wilderness Foundation (LWF) for the past 4 years, it has meant one thing – Communities.

Thus, in order to further aid conservation with the help of communities, Last Wilderness Foundation embarked on the 11th leg of its journey to the forests of Central India to undertake the cause of awareness, understanding, sensitisation, among those who share their space with the tiger.

Programme details

The Village Awareness Programme, which was conducted between 23rd April and 5th May 2016, saw participation of 497 people (students and elders from the village included) from the villages of Dulhera, Bansa, Badkhera, Dewri, Gata, Ghaghud, Madhau, Machkheta and Damna.

How does the programme work?

The students were taken for a safari by the LWF 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. This were advised to do, by following a few simple methods like- planting of trees, not setting fire to the forest patches during *Mahua* and *Tendu* collection season and instead, using of more 'eco – friendly' methods like putting a dark cloth under the tree, cementing 'gobar' under the tree so when the flowers fall, they will be easy to collect, due to the contrast against the mentioned surfaces. This way, the villagers need not spend more time than required in the forest, thereby also minimising contact with wild animals and reducing human- wildlife conflict.



Pic 2: Happy faces on the safari



Pic 3: Waiting for the tiger at Devkarni



Pic 4: The wait for the tiger needs to be a patient one



Pic 5: Enjoying the forest and good weather!

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 6: Screening of the movie - 'Bagh'



Pic 7: Our dedicated drivers double up as servers during lunch



Pic 8: Our volunteer Roshni D'souza takes a session with the students



Pic 9: Movie screening and session at Center point, Hardia

Movie bonus: Human-Wildlife conflict

This time, in addition to the conservation movie, the team screened a short movie about how to best avoid Human – Wildlife conflict in areas that are in close proximity of the reserve. The pointers showcased, as a song is special as the protagonists of the movie are the children of Dhamokhar village, which makes it relatable and of course there was much excitement in the audience on recognising familiar faces.



Pic 10: Students enjoying seeing familiar faces in the movie

Safari special

Apart from the students, we were joined in the safari by village elders who not only acted as the guardians to the students present, but were also perhaps, the most enthusiastic audience to visit the forest.

Our most senior and enthusiastic of the elders to participate were Gullu Singh a 65 year old resident of Damna village who said that it had been his life long dream to visit the forest sitting in a gypsy. “*Meri manokamna aaj poori ho gayi*” he said with a big smile while 85 year old Hira Lal Gupta another resident of Damna, claimed that this was indeed a special day as he was

privileged enough to see 6 tigers from a vehicle. “*Bahut sundar hai baghwa*” he said, standing up to take a better look at the retreating form of a tiger.

This apart, we had another special visitor in form of Kalavati Baiga, a resident of Gata and the wife of Chote Lal Baiga who was killed by a tiger on the first day of the year this year. When asked whether she would like to visit the park along with her children, this incredibly strong lady, without a moment of hesitation agreed to be part of the programme, participating just as enthusiastically as the rest of them. There were hits and misses with regard to tiger sightings, who they affectionately refer to as ‘*Badkur Lal*’ or elder brother but nothing deterred the spirits of our audience as they were just as enthused on seeing other animals and visiting different places in the park.



Pic 11: A visit to Badi Gufa



Pic 12: Our volunteer, Vikrant Pardhi de-briefs the students at Shesh Shaiya



Pic 13: Students and a tigress



Pic 14: Kalavati Baiga (wearing a white cloth over her head) with her daughter next to her, was as enthusiastic about seeing a tiger as the rest of them



Pic 15: Hiralal Gupta (sitting in front) was our oldest participant



Pic 16: First view of the Bandhavgarh Fort and an excited audience

Participant details

Session date	School location	Villages covered	Number of students	Number of villagers
23 April 2016- 5 May 2016	Damna	Damna,Gata	102	11
	Dulhera	Dulhera,Bansa	95	8
	Madhau	Madhau, Machkheta	172	13
	Ghaghud	Ghaghud	23	1
	Badkhera	Badkhera,Deori	69	3
Total number of participants			461	36

Blast from the past

As Damna and Gata have been villages where Last Wilderness Foundation had worked in the past, working there this time, was akin to revisiting people and places after nearly 4 years. We came across past participants who remembered us, and what we had spoken to them about. “*Apne tiger dikhaya tha aur jungle bachane ke liye bhi bataya tha*” quipped one such village boy

shyly. This not only shows the impact the programme has on impressionable minds but also reiterates the need to revisit and constantly touch base with villages in order to maintain the rapport and understanding which can play a pivotal role in aiding conservation.

Other interactions

This batch of our programme saw quite a few tourists and Forest Department staff interacting with the students to understand where they were from, what they do, what they had seen and whether they liked the tiger or not. “This is their forest first, if we hope to protect the forest, we need their help.” said a lady, while another tourist expressed how such programmes should continue in the future as well. Enthusiastic park drivers, who wanted to volunteer for a day and spend time with the students, also joined us. Two such drivers were Ravi Pathak and Sonu Barman who not only indulged the students in information about the forest, but also took a session on conservation after the ride.



Pic 17: R.A. Tala interacts with the students at Hardia



Pic 18: A tourist interacts with the students at the Bagh Nakha camp



Pic 19: Enrolling students for the programme



Pic 20: R.O. Tala interacting with the students



Pic 21: Students celebrating a tiger sighting

How does the Village Awareness Programme help? / 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 mankind
- 3) Involves the locals in conservation, creating contacts for information on poaching, forest fire and any other illegal activities
- 4) Bridges the gap between the Forest Dept. and 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/ 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 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, 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' under the tree for easier and faster collection
- 6) Do not set snares or traps for wild animals

Alternative solutions given to aid conservation

- 1) Plant one 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
- 2) Be aware and spread the message

Challenges faced

The biggest challenge we faced during this programme was initial refusal and hesitation by some people in the villages of Dulhera and Badkhera to join the programme as they had never been exposed to any programme of this nature before and were rightly concerned about the safety of their children.

However, on visiting the houses personally and briefing the villagers on the programme, they seemed more convinced and ultimately allowed the students to be part of the programme. After the initial glitch, once the villagers had more trust towards the programme, they ensured a smooth running of it by co-operating fully. The team also invited the village elders to be part of the programme, to not only act as guardians to the students present, but to also gain an insight into the working of the programme.



Pic 22: Victory for the tiger

Conclusion

Although we see a positive change in attitude among the villagers towards the forest, after they have been participatory to the programme, there is a dire need to maintain constant touch points with the villages (to have a long term/long lasting effect).

This apart, there is information to be sought on the challenges the villagers face, in order to help address them, along with development of a vocational model to provide alternative sources of livelihood. The vocation needn't be a new skill but one that already exists which needs to be fine-tuned in order to make it an economically viable option.