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How a corporate honcho jumped the corporate cubicle to save the last of our nature and wilderness



PRIYANSHU MANI SEPTEMBER 7, 2016

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“Save the Tiger” is a phrase that has been heard, read and written by many in the past few years. Surprisingly, it has been seen, that the support for saving the majestic predator has aroused mostly from the digital pockets of our society; namely the SOCIAL MEDIA. But as soon that virtual thumb goes up, our concern for saving the species automatically vanishes and stays limited to the digital purview. What is the habitat of the tiger? How does it feel to stay in a tribal village near a protected wildlife area? Have we ever wondered what does it really take to SAVE THE TIGER?

Understanding the need to provide solutions, a non-governmental organization based out of Madhya Pradesh called “Last Wilderness Foundation” has been quietly doing its bit to save our nature.

It was started by Nikhil Nagle, former Head of India Equities at Citigroup Global Markets, in 2010 after he quit his corporate existence and decided to devote his resources to his passion. “The moment my eyes met the eyes of the tiger, it was love at first sight”, says Nikhil while describing his first encounter with a tiger at the Kanha National Park in 1997. Love is usually held responsible for the most drastic and life changing decisions. Nikhil broke out of his lifestyle for the love of Tiger. He devoted his time to capture the wildlife in his camera and travelled to various sanctuaries around the world, including Peru, Alaska and South Africa, and eventually started Last Wilderness foundation after leaving his job in 2010.

Early on, the organization understood that conservation and protection of nature and wildlife is not a one-way linear process. Instead, it is a holistic process of active participation and reinvigorated awareness on the part of all the stakeholders, like government, forest officials

and the local tribal people living in the vicinity of forest areas, which can conserve our nature and its inhabitants.



Students and volunteers interacting with the forest officials

Last Wilderness Foundation does this with the help of a dedicated team which is led on the ground by wildlife enthusiasts, Vidya Venkatesh and Bhavna Menon. Organizing Capacity Building programmed for the forest officials and awareness camps for the tribals, they try to achieve a balance for everyone and prepare them for situations like man-animal conflicts, individual efforts for wildlife conservation, and regular Safari trips for locals, etc. Also, their online platform acts as a repository of images, videos, experiences, methods, and blogs to give a better understanding of the problems of everyone involved, from the animals to the forest officials to the tribal population. In their attempt, the government and the bureaucracy too have given all the help. "Our experience with the forest department in MP has been singularly outstanding", says Nikhil.

With initiatives focussing on Forest guard training, avoiding human-animal conflicts, safaris, interactions with locals, the foundation has indeed created a buzz in the spectrum of wildlife conservation. "There has been a lot of awareness in the metropolitan areas over the last few years about the need to save tigers and our forests. That has been the good part. The flip side, however, has been that most of that awareness has often come in the form of Social media activism by people who do not understand or do not want to understand) the real on-ground issues", says Nikhil. "Similarly, it is difficult to explain to the villager who recently lost his cattle, was attacked, or lost a family member due to a wild animal, to not kill it. These are real people who face real issues – and unfortunately, we have millions of such people who live in close proximity to parks with wild animals. What we need is to provide them with the right mix of understanding and awareness," he reaffirms.



Interactive session with tribals at a forest camp

But amongst all such difficulties and misunderstanding, Last Wilderness Foundation and its work firmly cements that there is hope. There is hope in the form of forest guards who live in dreaded conditions to protect the wildlife. There is hope in the veil of the tribals, who even after ascertaining heavy losses, give immense importance to nature. And there is hope in people like Vidya and Bhavna who sacrifice amenities to work hard for their passion: nature. And it is this hope that has helped Last Wilderness Foundation to work endlessly to bring an understanding with innumerable stakeholders and has given that sliver of hope that maybe we can SAVE THE TIGER after all.

Priyanshu Mani | TOC

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