



Final Project Report

Community engagement for mitigation of Human- Wildlife conflict,
Bandhavgarh and Sanjay Tiger Reserve

Reporting Period

1st April 2021-30th September 2021

Submitted to



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Project Team

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Project Details

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Introduction

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (BTR) and Sanjay Tiger Reserve (STR) are highly important and biodiverse landscapes in Madhya Pradesh. Home to several species of animals, birds, insects and plants, they are also home to healthy populations of Royal Bengal Tigers. Connecting the two reserves is the Panpatha buffer belt located within the Beohari Range. This stretch of forest serves as a significant wildlife corridor, providing a larger territory that can house higher populations of key endangered species such as tigers and leopards, as well as maintaining high genetic diversity by facilitating animal movement between the two reserves. Additionally, in addition to Bandhavgarh's distinctive biodiversity, its characteristic Sal and Bamboo forests make it a popular tourist destination, attracted thousands of national and international visitors every year.

Last Wilderness Foundation (LWF) has been working in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve since 2010, with the first formal conflict mitigation programme being initiated in 2012 that focused on increasing awareness amongst schoolchildren residing in villages located in the buffer areas around the park. The programme involved taking children on safari into the forest and using that opportunity to educate them about the importance of the tiger in maintaining a healthy ecosystem and preserving natural resources of the forest that they are reliant on, in the hopes that these teachings not only change their attitude towards animals of the forest, but also influences their parents and elders. Over the past 8 years that this programme was run, a total of 96 villages were covered, where roughly an 80% decrease in conflict cases was reported as a result of these mitigation efforts. However, during the onset of the pandemic, the Beohari belt

connecting the Bandhavgarh and Sanjay Tiger Reserve, experienced a spike in the cases of Human- Wildlife conflict wherein the region lost 10 community members to attacks by wild animals and 6 tigers were killed owing to retaliatory killing. Sensing the urgency of the situation, LWF in association with the Bandhavgarh Forest Department, and KCT Group decided to replicate the previously successful model of conservation outreach sessions, which would not only address children, but community members from varied age groups as well. The idea was to initiate a dialogue with the community members, to address the challenges faced by them and find potential solutions, which in turn would help safeguard the human and wildlife population equally.



Pic 1: Addressing challenges with the villagers of Palaha

Impact

- Over the course of the project, a total of 16 villages have been covered (3 from the Madmas buffer in the Sanjay Tiger Reserve, and 9 from the Panpatha buffer area and 4 from within the Beohari buffer in the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve). Details provided in the table below:

Month	Village	Range/area	Number of people reached	Comments
Apr-21	Paudi	Madmas buffer, STR	>300	
	Khairi			
	Haiki			
May-21	NA	NA	NA	<i>Covid lockdown restrictions prevented running of awareness programs</i>
Jun-21	Chattva	Panpatha buffer, BTR	50	
	Bada tola		54	
	Kharibadi		40	
	Mahadeva		35	
	Gorighat		100	
	Khusariya		60	
Jul-21	Koilari	Beohari Buffer	70	<i>Special event held on World Tiger Day, where children were also invited</i>
	Patharatha	Beohari Territorial Division	30	<i>Additional Covid safety measures also shared during awareness programs</i>
	Balundi		25	
	Palaha		28	
Aug-21	Majholi	Panpatha buffer, BTR	100	
	Chitraw		165	
	Hardi			
Sep-21	<i>Ice-breaking workshop conducted with 70+ Forest Department officers from Bandhavgarh & Sanjay Tiger Reserve</i>			
TOTAL	16		1057	

- More than **1000 people** have been reached through the awareness programs run via this project, where they were shown presentations and videos explaining the importance of co-existing with wild animals and the do's and don'ts of avoiding conflict with specific-animal related wildlife issues in their respective areas; covering tigers, elephants, leopards and wild boars. Furthermore, to help villagers retain the information shared, posters were also put up at villages visited. This has resulted in significant behavioural changes observed in these people over the course of the project.

- One of the biggest impacts of this project has been the attitude change amongst the villagers involved in the awareness program, exemplified by the fact that since that start of this project, not a single case of man-conflict or tiger death has been reported from the project area. Villagers are also much more aware of the balance of living in harmony with wild animals, where they now refrain from setting traps and electrical fences in retaliation or to protect their crops.



Pic 2: Village conflict mitigation workshop in Beohari buffer

- There has been a **marked increase** in the level of awareness amongst the villagers, especially with regards to understanding the processes involved in claiming compensation. Before the project, most villagers were not aware of changed procedures, relying on the old system of applying and expecting compensation for cattle kills and crop destruction from the Forest Department (FD). Though this was initially handled by the FD, over the decades these rules have changed. Not cognizant of this fact, villagers would often spend precious time and money applying to the wrong offices, resulting in unsuccessful claims that furthered their aggressive behaviour and attitudes towards the FD and wild animals. After attending awareness programs, the villagers have now been able to **successfully apply for and receive compensation**. At

the time of submitting this report, the process for cattle kill compensation had been completely streamlined with most villagers being able to make successful claims, though there are still obstacles with regards to claiming for crop damage, which follows different bureaucratic channels.

- From initially being very hesitant to engage in a dialogue with outsiders and the FD, villagers are now **much more comfortable in engaging with the project team**, often calling on the field coordinator's personal shared number to ask for guidance and assistance on claiming compensation for cattle kills and crop damage.
- There has also been a **significant attitude change amongst the FD and the villagers towards each other**. Since a dialogue was opened between the two parties via the awareness programs, the FD have much more confidence in being able to help villagers, while the local communities are no longer aggressive towards FD staff and even turn to them in the case of reporting animals' sightings or asking for help in making their surroundings safer to live alongside wild animals. Seeing the regular attendance of FD staff at each awareness meeting has further increased the villagers' confidence in the department and their commitment to working towards safeguarding the people as well as local biodiversity.



Pic 3: Awareness posters have been put up in the villages



Pic 4: Sessions have always been conducted in the presence of Forest Department staff

Major Highlights

- Despite some villagers experiencing injuries, and even after the unfortunate passing of a young girl in the village of Dadar in December via a tiger attack, as a result of ongoing conversations with these villagers, they were **disinterested in retaliatory attacks against tigers**, instead seeking more information and guidance on how to avoid such conflicts in the future and on how to apply for compensation. This has really gone on to show how the attitudes of villagers have changed, where previously they would have attempted to capture and kill tigers in an act of retaliation.
- The Director Vidya Venkatesh and Program Manager Bhavna Menon were able to engage in a **major ice-breaking workshop in September 2021**, involving the CCF as well several beat guards, totalling 70 personnel from the FD. The purpose of this workshop was to open a dialogue with the officers and identify issues they face during patrols and knowledge/skills gaps they wish to address via targeted training programs, so that they can carry out their duties, engage with local communities, track illegal activities, and address conflict issues better.



Pic 5: Director, LWF, Vidya Venkatesh addressing the Forest Department staff

- A special event was held on Global Tiger Day (29 July), where children were invited to take part in a joint event with the FD.

- Despite a short hiatus at the onset of the second COVID-19 wave around April–June 2021, the team were able to get back on ground and **conduct sessions with extreme care, strictly following covid protocols**. The on-ground team was also able to utilize the platform provided by these awareness sessions to discuss social distancing and hygiene protocols to prevent the spread of covid amongst the villagers. Without this platform, it would have been very difficult to disseminate this information across these villages.



Pic 6: Providing community members with masks and sanitisers

- Along with engaging with villagers through awareness programs, Pushendra also had the opportunity to engage with school children. **This was an important step in introducing ideas about conflict mitigation and peaceful co-existence with nature to younger generations**, who can not only grow up with changed attitudes towards the forest and wildlife but can also play a part in influencing the behaviours of their peers and elders in their families/social circles.

- Through this project, the field-coordinator Pushpendra was also able to **restart several chapters of the Eco Development Committee**, a special committee of village representatives, FD on-ground staff and officers, and other relevant stakeholders to create an on-ground network of communication that can distribute salient information and discuss pressing issues on a regular basis. Pushpendra aims to open EDCs in several major villages that experience the highest cases of conflict and has the full support of the Deputy Director. In fact, he has already had a meeting with the Deputy Director regarding the plan on opening EDCs and the associated agenda (informing villagers about preventing forest fires while collecting mahua flowers during the mahua season, avoid setting up electric fences to protect crops, streamlining compensation process from crop damage, setting up of a toll-free number to inquire about compensation procedures and other queries, and conducting specialized elephant conflict mitigation programs).

Future Plans

- Field coordinator Pushpendra and the Deputy Director plan to **conduct range by range workshops**, which will be attended by rangers and other on-ground staff, to either set up or re-establish EDCs in key problem areas. An agenda aimed towards reducing conflict, addressing common issues faced by villagers, and establishing modes of communication for more efficient information sharing for these EDCs have already been discussed and finalized (as mentioned above).
- Following the successful ice-breaking workshop run by the Director Vidya Venkatesh and Program Manager Bhavna Menon with several officers of the FD, they now plan **to introduce and schedule of tailored training programs** addressing the specific needs and requests of the officers so that they may be able to conduct their duties better in safeguarding wildlife and co-existing communities, reducing conflict, tracking illegal activities, and engaging with communities.