



FINAL REPORT

Project

Gram Rakshak Programme, Panna Tiger Reserve

Reporting Period

1st January 2021–28th April 2022

Submitted to



Submitted by



Project Team

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Project Details

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| Reporting period: | 1 January 2021 – 28 April 2022 | Project title: | Gram Rakshak Programme, Panna Tiger Reserve |
| Date of report: | 28 April 2022 | Project Manager: | Bhavna Menon |
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Executive Summary

Conservation of India's unique fauna has historically always been more species focused, often disregarding the needs and invaluable knowledge of communities living within the country's diverse biomes. The aim of this project has always been to strengthen the relationship between the community members and the Forest Department by engaging members of the local community in safeguarding Panna Tiger Reserve's landscape. To this effect, a total of 15 Gram Rakshaks (GRs) were identified from the most sensitive villages situated in the buffer zone of the reserve, who were then trained and deployed on field to act as the 'protectors' of the village and the forest alike on the ground. In the span of the programme, the GRs have managed to **significantly strengthen the dialogue and trust between the Forest Department and the local community members**, successfully reported tiger and other wild animal movement and **alerted community members and authorities of the same**, reported **unusual incidents in and around the villages**, helped in the **rescue of wild denizens**, helped **reduce incidents of human- wildlife conflict and forest fires**, have help **spread awareness** among a large populace on the importance of protecting forests, **streamlined processes** thereby positively

impacting lives of the community members and **strengthened community participation and ownership** among people which will play a pivotal role in the safeguarding of the landscape.

Deliverables:

- A 1-day training workshop conducted at the start of the project where attendees were educated about the **importance of the programme, role of the community members in safeguarding India's threatened wildlife, and the necessity for strengthening the relationship between community members and the forest department to implement more effective and sustainable conservation practices.**



Pic 1: Selected Gram Rakshaks engaging in a dialogue with the Forest Department during training programme



Pic 2: Gram Rakshaks with the Field Director Panna TR, Shri. Uttam Kumar Sharma

- Attendees were then trained on the monitoring and vigilance activities to be undertaken. Both the Field Director and Deputy Director of Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) attended the training as well, inspiring villagers to engage.
- **Refresher training conducted by LWF field-coordinator Indrabhan Singh Bundela** in June 2021, attended by all Gram Rakshaks (GRs) and Forest Department staff.
- **Follow-up meeting held by LWF Director, Vidya Venkatesh** with the GRs in February 2022, where an agenda was collected (Appendix 1 in February 2022 report), any issues so far were discussed, and aims and objectives were shared with the GRs moving ahead.



Pic 3: Director, Vidya Venkatesh engaging with GRs to establish objectives moving forward

- **A Whatsapp group established** between all GRs, Last Wilderness Foundation, Forest Department officials and staff to have a more open dialogue, share updates and reports, ask for advice, create a positive feedback loop of learning, tracking tiger movement, mitigating wildlife conflict, prevent forest fires, report illegal activities like poaching unsanctioned cattle vaccination camps, and share information on how victims of cattle kills may claim compensation from the relevant authorities.
- A special introductory session on **snake-bite mitigation was conducted for all GRs** by the herpetologist Kedar Bhide in June 2021. It was planned for GRs to then conduct similar sessions in their respective villages on the occasion of 'Nag Panchami' to reduce snake-bite related incidents.
- **15 GRs from a total of 15 villages** (Janwar, Jhalai Dhangarh, Akola, Jardobha, Dobha, Itwankala, Tara, Koni, Bilhata and Majhauli, Vikrampur, Simariya, Panari, and Katheri) were involved in the program.
- **Active patrolling conducted by all GRs after initial training sessions** across all selected villages, where they covered approximately 10 km on a weekly basis. Additionally, the GRs also accompanied Forest Beat Guards during their patrols and during any conflict mitigation operations.



Pic 4: GRs accompanying the Forest Department staff during patrolling

- GRs equipped with resources such as rechargeable torches, walking shoes, caps, and printed t-shirts with the programs logo to not only assist them during their patrols, but also as **incentives to encourage continued participation in the programme.**
- **10 various types of workshops conducted**, where over **2000 villagers were made aware of various issues related to conflict reduction and co-habitation with indigenous wildlife**, such as conflict mitigation safety measures, forest fire awareness programs on how to prevent/best avoid forest fires, removing electrical wires and snares, electrical safety for installing pumps while planting crops, how to claim compensation in the event of loss/injury of life/cattle/crops, COVID-19 safety protocols.
- **Reduction in forest fires**, with no major forest fires being reported at the peak of the season in April 2021.



Pic 5: COVID-19 vaccination drive being conducted in the village of Jhalai

- COVID-19 supplies such as grocery staples and PPE items (masks, sanitizers) were supplied to over **1200 villagers during the March-May lockdown in 2021.**
- Twelve school children and the **GR from the village of Janwaar invited to take part in National Wildlife Week celebrations at the PTR office in the main city.**
- Jungle Eco-Camp run by the Forest Department **where 240 children** (120 children per day over a two-day camp) were taken into the forest and educated about the biodiversity and conservation. **GRs were also invited to take part and assist in the programme.**



Pic 6: Left: GRs distributing COVID-19 relief supplies. Right: GR with shoes bought to aid patrolling activities

- **Approximately 3500 people vaccinated across all selected villages**, primarily because of GRs making the conscious effort to educate villagers on the need for vaccination and assisting in facilitating the same.
- **Approximately more than 1000 cattle vaccinated** through sanctioned cattle vaccination camps supervised by GRs.
- **Over 6 illegal cattle vaccination camps reported** and disbanded in the project area
- **25-30 dogs vaccinated against canine-distemper** to prevent spread of such diseases to wild animals
- Educational resources such as **snake mitigation posters were developed and erected across all 15 villages.**

Impact of the programme:

- Compared to initial projections, the team were delighted to see an increased interest of villagers to join the GR program, **where we ended up engaging more than the initial 11 GRs that were proposed.**
- **Awareness programmes showed great efficacy**, exemplified by the fact that **no major forest fires were reported in the month of April 2021 (peak forest fire season), due to the efforts of GRs in educating villagers.** Even more commendable was that this was conducted during strict COVID-19 lockdown and quarantine measures, where the LWF coordinator was unable to visit any project sites or engage with many people.
- **GRs and villagers alike have become increasingly cognizant** of the need to report illegal activities to eventually benefit their own quality of life and balance with co-habituating with nature.
- There is **increased positive dialogue between villagers and the forest department**, exemplified by the FD requesting villagers to not pick fruits such as Amla outside the ripening season (around December) to encourage the growth of biodiversity. Based on the trust built via the communication of the GRs, villagers have agreed and refrained from entering the forest or taking more than necessary thereby reducing chances of conflict and promoting biodiversity.
- Increased trust between villagers and the FD has been strengthened wherein 12 school children from the village of Janwaar were invited by the FD to the PTR office to take part in a special program held on National Wildlife Week (in the first week of October). **The respective GR from this village not only escorted the children but was also presented with a Wildlife Celebration Award by the FD.**



Pic 7: GR receiving Wildlife Celebration Award at National Wildlife Week event held by PTR.

- Though cases of cattle kills, and man-animal conflicts are still occurring, **the frequency of instances have generally reduced.** The bigger change has been the **lack of an angry response from villagers** in the light of these interactions due to the work of GRs in helping them receive timely compensation. With nearly all cases, GRs were able to mobilize claims within the span of a week after an attack.
- Indrabhan also reports heart-warming anecdotes that displays the commitment of GRs, where they have **helped to rescue a Chital (spotted deer) being chased by wild dogs** and another instance where they **prevented the illegal fishing and poisoning of watering holes** so that tigers can safely drink water and use it during the dry season.
- **Villagers are now actively partaking in taking steps to improve co-habitation with wildlife.** One example of this is, that in the month of November, a tiger unfortunately got killed by electrocution with open wires being set up for irrigation of fields. Through the work of the GRs, villagers were convinced to take measures to raise wires on

electrical poles to safeguard moving animals in the area. Since the initiation of the practice of raised wires, **no death of animals via electrocution has been reported.**

- During the running of the Gram Rakshak initiative, after being suggested by the Last Wilderness Foundation team, **a helpline number was initiated by the Panna Tiger Reserve Management which could be contacted on by the community members in case of incidents of Human- Wildlife conflict or cases of cattle loss**



Pic 8: Villagers inserting the electric wires on poles to avoid wild animals from getting electrocuted

Future plans:

- **Restart discussions with the Forest Department** on their ideas of the most pressing issues that need to be addressed by the GRs in the villages
- **Continue refresher training** to strengthen learning and discuss scope of improvement
- **Initiation of alternative livelihood projects** in the selected villages with the GRs in charge of monitoring progress
- **Further trainings for GRs so that they can address non -wildlife issues** faced by villagers (Education, scholarships, loans, gov schemes etc.)
- **Further training for the GRs with regard to habitat management, patrolling, checking of water bodies, any illicit activities**
- **Continued conservation outreach programmes** by the GRs in their respective villages with special emphasis on precautionary measures to be taken while living around a tiger reserve and forest fires
- **Introduction of community grazing ground** to prevent cattle straying into the forest so as to reduce cattle kill instances

- **Building of cowsheds** through govt. schemes
- Continuation of cattle and dog **vaccination camps**