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'One cannot teach leopards, but one can teach people how to behave'

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Written by **Sanjana Bhalerao** | Mumbai |
October 18, 2021 2:39:24 am



Sunil Limaye (File)

Sunil Limaye, the newly appointed Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), speaks about the challenges the state faces in removing encroachments from forest areas, man-animal conflict and wildlife protection and conservation in an interview with **Sanjana Bhalerao**. Limaye, who has been the director of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP) in 2012, is the only forest officer in the state who has two creatures — a spider and a lizard — named after him.

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but they came back and now they are being treated as encroachers according to HC order and we have to give them alternate accommodation. As per the order, settlements before 1995 have to be removed and given alternate accommodation. There are around 25,000 citizens, who fall into this category. So, first, we have to settle them, then only we can remove the encroachers.

When I was the director in 2012, we removed around 5,000 encroachers, but the spaces were immediately occupied by new encroachers.

At present, out of the 25,000 people— 12,000 have been shifted to flats in Chandivali. The remaining 13,000 are yet to be shifted. For that, we will need so much land. Earlier, the proposal was to shift them to Aarey where the 47 acres of land was supposed to be used for rehabilitation and 43 acres was earmarked for rehabilitation of tribals. In a meeting chaired by the CM, it has been decided not to shift these people to Aarey, instead find out new land near to the highways. A committee has been formed under the chairmanship of Environment Minister Aaditya Thackeray to identify a new area.

In the past few years, there has been increased conflict between humans and leopards in civilian areas. What action have you taken to prevent this?

The leopard population is increasing following our conservation methods. Leopard gives birth to a litter of two to three cubs. And in natural conditions, they have to fight for survival and generally 50 per cent of cubs survive. But near the urban settlements, all cubs are surviving. The animal is aware that all the food — dogs, pigs, rodents — it wants is available near human settlements. One cannot teach

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What is 'conservation translocation' that the forest department will attempt from the Vidarbha region, which has been witnessing high human-tiger conflict?

With the permission of the state government and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), we can undertake conservation translocation of tigers. There is a difference between translocation and conservation translocation. A translocation means that when we shift the problem tiger/tigress, i.e., those involved in a conflict responsible for attacks on humans. We catch such a tiger, tranquilise it, take it to a zoo or a rescue centre and it is a life in imprisonment.

In the case of 'conservation translocation,' we usually catch a sub-adult (at a stage where they are weaning away from their mothers) tiger/tigress. Normally, a tiger stays with its mother for up to 1.5-2 years. The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) is already monitoring the tigers in the Vidarbha region, so we can identify such sub-adults. We can catch three to four tigresses from the same litter and we can shift them to areas where they are required, for example, in Nawegaon, Nagzira of Gondia district. Nagzira has got good prey base, but the male to female ratio of tigers is skewed. These animals will be radio-collared and monitored.

A year-long occupancy study in the Sahyadri-Konkan Corridor, a 4,500-km human-dominated forest landscape, by the Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT) has found that the tiger population distribution is largely found in the southern end of the region, closer to the Goa and Karnataka border. Sahyadri Tiger reserve has a low population of tigers. Are there plans to relocate tigers in Sahyadri under conservation translocation?

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in Sahyadri and once it is done only then we will think about where we should place tigers in this region.

What is the function and powers of the newly launched crime cell?

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The crime cell, which began functioning last month is not an investigation cell. Its main aim, for at least the first six months, will be to gather information related to wildlife crime in the state. Many times, it has happened that after a wildlife crime has taken place the information comes to us through local newspapers... The cell will be fully functional by June 2022. It will provide real-time data to officials on past and present cases in the entire state. It will work with the Melghat Tiger Reserve (MTR) crime cell, which operates as a cyber cell on the lines of the police department and is providing leads on wildlife criminals.



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