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WONDERS OF THE WESTERN GHATS - Wildlife corridors need protection

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Pune

Researcher Girish Punjabi was conducting a field survey of wild carnivores near Tillari dam when his companion pointed at a patch of the forest floor that had been cleared by the hindpaw of a large tiger. A little ahead they found scat of tiger unmistakable signs that the big cat was moving around in the area.

It was springtime in 2013. Tigers were believed to have been moving around in the area and Punjabi finally had the evidence. But for how long? Tillari may be a vital wildlife corridor, but it is faced with several threats from development projects. "A proposal to declare 57 square km of land under forest cover in Tillari the status of a protected area has been moved by the state forest department. Let us hope that it is implemented and we are able to save this stretch," said Punjabi, a wildlife biologist.

The importance of protecting wildlife corridors to prevent national parks and wildlife sanctuaries from becoming "islands of conservation" is well known and has emerged as a key conservation issue.

The Unesco World Heritage Site tag has been given to 39 discreet sites in the region. The corridors are the links between them. Punjabi and his colleagues with support from CEPF-ATREE and Maharashtra Forest Department have conducted studies on the movement of large carnivores, including tigers, between four protected areas the Koyna Wildlife Sanctuary, Chandoli National Park and Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra and the Mhadei Wildlife Sanctuary in Goa.

Using statistical models, they have calculated the "resistance to movement" that various parts of the landscape offers to the region's four large carnivores tigers, leopards, sloth-bears and dholes (the Asiatic wild dog). This has allowed them to measure how difficult the wild animal would find moving from one protected area to the next.

Their findings have thrown up some surprising findings. For instance, although the protected areas in Koyna and Chandoli are much closer to one another as compared to Chandoli and Radhanagari, tigers find it harder to crossover the smaller stretch.

Another comparison is the distance between Chandoli and Radhanagari and that between Radhanagari and Mhadei. The two distances are



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comparable to one another, but for a tiger crossing from Chandoli to Radhanagari seems to be more difficult as it is four times harder than making the journey from Radhanagari to Mhadei, the model has shown.

"The forest habitat in the small stretch between Koyna and Chandoli has degraded tremendously and is reduced in places to a two-km wide stretch of suitable forest habitat. However, the corridor further south, in places like Tillari, is more conducive to large carnivore movement between protected areas. This is why conserving wildlife corridors like Tillari is so vital," Punjabi said.

The comparative studies between different carnivorous species also have interesting insights to offer. For instance, the "resistance to movement" for tigers and sloth-bears is much higher than that for the comparatively smaller leopards or dholes.

"A tiger weighs about four to five times more as compared to a dhole. This means its requirement for prey is also much higher. In addition to that, tigers are much more sensitive to disturbances in their habitat. All of these factors likely to contribute to this difference," Punjabi explained. The purpose of undertaking the project was to identify the places that are most vulnerable or significant for the movement of tigers and large carnivores. The entire region would comprise about 7,000 square km of area and innovative approaches are required to private forests which form part of the landscape, Punjabi said.

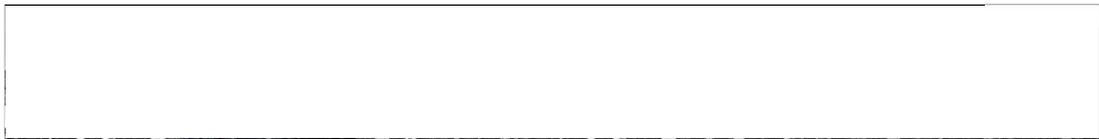
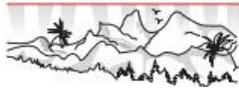
However, changes in the land-use pattern in the region is posing problems. For instance the growth of large scale rubber-plantations that often have electric fencing is surely affecting the areas available for movement of wildlife.

Map & photo courtesy: Maharashtra Forest Department



Threats to Tillari

- Proposed bauxite mine at Mogalgad
- Proposed windfarms in the region
- Conversion of private-forest lands into fenced plantations
- Proposed hydel-power projects



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