

TO: VALMIK THAPAR
FAX: NEW DELHI 301 9457
FROM: CHARLES MCDUGAL

STATUS OF THE TIGER IN NEPAL AT THE CLOSE OF 1993

A. THREE TIGER POPULATIONS

1. The largest is the Chitwan/Parsa/(Valmiki) population, encompassed by Royal Chitwan National Park, Parsa Wildlife Reserve, and India's Valmiki Tiger Reserve in Bihar, a total of 1875 sq km of protected habitat, four fifths of it in Nepal and one fifth in India. The population continues eastward in Nepal into the reserved forests of Bara District. It is estimated that the number of breeding adults in the Nepal portion of the population is 40 - 45, down from an estimated 55 in the late 80s.
2. Next in size is the Bardia/Banke population with an estimated 30 - 35 breeding adults, most of them found in the 968 sq km Royal Bardia National Park and the rest in the reserved forests of Banke District up to the edge of Bang-Deukhni District. Up until 1989, the Bardia/Banke tigers were connected with those in Kailali, which formed part of the same population, then estimated at 50 breeders. Now the Kailali tigers are isolated by a migration barrier and I have written them off for the purpose of this discussion; the days of these scattered tigers in ever fragmenting habitat are limited.
3. Smallest of the three populations is the Sukla Phanta population, with an estimated 12 - 15 breeding adults confined to the Royal Sukla Phanta Wildlife Reserve with an area of 155 sq km in the process of being extended to 310 sq km. It is possible that this population is connected with the U.P forests but the corridor, if it still exists, is extremely tenuous.
4. The three tiger populations in Nepal, excluding the isolated remnant tigers in Kailali and elsewhere, are represented by 82 - 95 adult, resident breeding tigers, yielding a total of 224-258 tigers of all ages.

0-122
TOTAL

80-95
TOTAL

34-41
TOTAL

B. DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IMPACT ON TIGER HABITAT

1. Royal Chitwan National Park was established in 1973. During two decades the population of Chitwan rose from 250,000 (1971) to 355,000 (1991), an increase of 92 per cent. The pressure on the Park and surrounding areas from human activity has almost doubled since the Park's inception. The East Rapti Irrigation Project, (Asian Development Bank), would have had a disastrous effect on the riverine floodplain habitat downstream, where highest tiger density and most reproduction occurs. Fortunately, the project has been shelved as the result of a reassessment of its environmental impact.
2. Royal Bardia National Park has been bisected by the Mahendra Rajmarg (East West Highway). A bridge across the Karnali River completed in 1993, combined with the demographic changes has made the area to the west of the river a migration barrier to tigers, limiting the population to Bardia and Banke Districts of the river and isolating a remnant handful of tigers to the west. For over 30 years a proposed dam on the Karnali River upstream from the park has been on the drawing board. If the project eventually goes ahead, it would adversely affect the best habitat on the western edge of the park where the highest concentration of tigers is found.
3. Demographic changes in the Kanchanpur District of Nepal and the resettlement of Bengali refugees across the border in India have isolated the Sukla Phanta population. The excellent habitat of the reserve is now an island surrounded by human activity.

C. THE IMPACT OF COMMERCIAL POACHING

Direct evidence of tiger poaching normally occurs only when poachers are caught red-handed, or tiger bones are seized. So far there is no such evidence of tiger poaching from either Bardia/Banke or Sukla Phanta. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that these areas are immune. The proximity of Royal Bardia National Park to the trade route up the Karnali gorge and across the border to the Tibetan market town of Taklakot makes it seem likely that the threat, even if it has not yet materialised, may be imminent. It is known that bones coming up from India are smuggled through western Nepal to Tibet.

Evidence of poaching in Chitwan is indirect. Since 1980 I have been monitoring the tigers in the western half of Royal Chitwan National Park. There was a slow increase in the number of females of breeding age until 1987-88, when saturation seems to have been reached. There was a sudden decline during the next three years when losses exceeded replacements resulting in a net loss of 33 per cent of the breeding tigresses. Worst was 1990 when five out of eleven were lost and only three replaced. During the past two years, 1992 and 1993, there were two losses, but three new tigresses recruited. The net loss for the past five years is 25 per cent.

Judging from this limited sample, as well as encouraging reports from the eastern Chitwan, tiger poaching seems to have stabilised, at least temporarily. This, combined with good reproduction in 1992-1993 has given the population a chance to recover.

During the past two years there has been a dramatic increase in rhino poaching. The concentration of the poaching community on the more lucrative rhino horn may have relaxed pressure on the tiger population. At Bardia also, although there is no evidence of tiger poaching, several rhinos have been killed.

A network of paid informers, who sometimes pose as dealers, combined with a system of paying rewards of upto Rs 50,000

and traffickers, have been effective. Thirty-five people, 17 of them rhino, tiger and leopard poachers and 18 middle level dealers have been arrested this year and are in jail, or in a few cases out on bail awaiting trial. There have been two recent amendments to the 1973 National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act; these provide stiffer penalties. Formerly the maximum penalty for killing a tiger was three years in jail and/or Rs 15,000 fine; now there is a minimum sentence of five years in jail and fine of Rs 50,000, and a maximum of 15 years in prison and Rs 100,000 fine.

Two special anti-poaching teams reporting directly to the Park Warden of Royal Chitwan National Park have been created to supplement the protection afforded by the Royal Nepal Army.

In conclusion, the situation at the close of 1993 does not seem as dire as it did in November 1992 at the time of the Cat Special Group meeting in New Delhi, but there is no reason for complacency.

Tiger MOUNTAIN

THE PIONEERS OF HIMALAYAN TREKS, JUNGLE LODGES AND WILDLIFE CAMPS

16 December, 1993

Peter Jackson
Chairman
Cat Specialist Group
1172 Bougy
Switzerland

Dear Peter,

I was unable to attend the regional Cat Specialist Group meeting convened by Valmik Thapar in Delhi 11-12 December. Nevertheless, I enclose a copy of a brief report (somewhat hastily written) on the status of the tiger in Nepal at the close of 1993.

The total number of tigers in Nepal given in the original report to him was 200-230. I have since revised that to 224-258, since the original calculation used the wrong formula to interpolate the total number of tigers from the number of breeding adults.

All the best.

Yours sincerely,

Chuck

Charles McDougal

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