

No conflict between tiger conservation and development: Rajesh Gopal

The head of National Tiger Conservation Authority has been talking to states and the environment ministry about more tiger reserves for increasing the number of the wild cats



Editor's picks



Rajesh Gopal has been heading Project Tiger since 2001 and has been head of NTCA since it was created. Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

Rajesh Gopal likens his tenure as head of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) to a day in the life of a tiger that he said was full of ups and downs.

In 2006, when he took over, the number of tigers had dwindled to a low 1,411. Now that they are up to 2,226, he wants more tiger reserves to be created and tiger corridors to be safeguarded.

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Edited excerpts from an interview:

What are the efforts that have gone behind the increase in tiger numbers today, compared with 2010 and 2006?

Efforts are basically more refinements, like in sampling strength; the camera density has increased. Then if you take analysis, modern state-of-the-art-analysis has been done, which came much later. It was not there in 2006.

The third thing is that because of more camera density and more protection in some areas, tigers have increased around some reserves. Now you have them getting photo captured, leading to something like 1,545 individual photos. That is the biggest refinement—in the sense that 70% you already have in photos.

Will we see more tiger reserves as the number of tigers is increasing and some are reaching their carrying capacity?

We will. We need to, in fact, have more tiger reserves. We have advised states to create some and, certainly, we will continue advising; and the environment minister has also talked about increasing the numbers. We need to do that. Within the tiger landscapes, the promising chunks need to be stepped up with protection so that they can harbour tigers.

What more steps are needed to be taken for conservation?

The numbers have gone up, but the biggest challenge is how to protect the ones which are going out; and that brings us to the question of tiger corridors. You have to safeguard the corridors—I am not saying they should be made into protected areas, but I am saying that they need to be streamlined.

Secondly, we certainly need to have a re-look at the intensively used infrastructure in such areas which have a corridor value. Plus mitigation measures are needed.

A lot has been said on the conservation versus development factor coming in the way of tiger or wildlife conservation. What are your views on that?

I see no such conflict if the master plan is ready and if you have your delineations, which we have in the context of the tiger.

The macro-level delineation of tiger corridors using remote sensing and technology... We have mapped the entire country—we know where it is and now the only thing is somewhere along either side of the delineated points, we have to safeguard them.

The strategy has to be build in this fashion. There is a challenge but there is no conflict. Conservation can happen and development can happen but certain trade-offs are there.

NTCA is increasingly using technology for tiger conservation? Will we see more of it in the years ahead?

Yes. We have electronic-eye (high definition camera-based surveillance) in Corbett tiger reserve and we have already started in Kaziranga now and in some sensitive border reserves.

They will also be used in areas where there are human-tiger interface problems, like Tadoba and Brahmapuri forest areas. It is a good tool but that doesn't mean one can forego legwork as that is very, very important.

How do you look at your tenure in NTCA for tiger conservation?

It was very challenging and there was never a dull moment. It can be compared with a day in the life of a tiger—full of ups and downs.

Source:http://www.livemint.com/Politics/pbuFLJTRozDjQvFBHLmAuO/No-conflict-between-tiger-conservation-and-development-Raje.html?utm_source=copy