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The big picture on tigers

While the number of wild cats has increased, infrastructure expansion plans have totally discounted their presence

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The tiger, which once sat crouching, is now roaring in India. Results of a once-in-four-years estimation of tiger numbers show us that India has about 3,000 of them. This is relevant not only nationally, but also globally — this is a majority of the world's wild tiger population, of around 4,000 tigers.

Each year, the tiger estimation increases its scope. Camera trap images, findings of foot surveys and other evidence on tigers and their prey species are collected. The latest estimate says that we have approximately 2,967 tigers in India, up from 2,226 as per the 2014 count. The scope of the effort was different this time: while the 2014 count included tigers that were over 1.5 years of age, this one included tigers as young as one-year old.

Yet, we must look at numbers, especially that on young tigers and cubs, as just one indicator in the tiger story. A couple of days before World Tiger Day (when the tiger report was released), a tigress was beaten to death in fields near the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve. Two days after the report's release, a tigress and her cub were found dead near Bandhavgarh in Madhya Pradesh. Shortly after, another cub was found dead in Umaria in the same State. Earlier in July, there were the poisoning-caused deaths of a tigress and her two cubs in Chandrapur, near the Tadoba Tiger Reserve in Maharashtra.

Widening of rail, road networks

It may seem that these are stray cases with no real pattern. But while tigers are reproducing in India, new state policies are working directly against them. Relaxations in norms to allow for a widening of highway and railway networks are the new threats, adding to the old ones of retaliatory poisoning and poaching.

A report on management effectiveness of tiger reserves was also released on World Tiger Day. The report rated Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh as the best in terms of good management practices. This is fairly commensurate with its tiger numbers. Central India is one of the best tiger nurseries in India. Of all States, Madhya Pradesh has the highest number of tigers, over 500 of them.

Yet, tiger reserves cannot control what is around them; and the Pench tiger faces a new threat. The National Highway 7 (NH7), which connects Pench and Kanha tiger reserves, has just been widened. Tigers, as well the animals they prey on, find it hard to cross roads; for instance, a tiger died near Dehradun in 2016 after being hit by a speeding vehicle. It may have been from Rajaji Tiger Reserve, an area that needs more male tigers. After sustained pressure from citizens and protests from the Madhya Pradesh forest department, authorities built underpasses meant for wildlife through NH7. But go down the spanking new highway in Maharashtra, and it has barriers on the road. It isn't much of a surprise then that a tiger was recently seen climbing the barrier to cross the road.

To put this incident into perspective, most National Highways are slated for widening and upgradation, and most tiger reserves have State or National Highways around them. Each year, thousands of animals die on the road. Apart from highways, railway and irrigation projects are coming up in tiger reserves, and the Ken-Betwa river interlinking project will submerge 100 sq. km of Panna Tiger Reserve.

So, while the numbers are reason to cheer, they can hardly be the whole story. The story is beyond and around the reserve boundaries that tigers have to cross. The numbers should also give pause to the plans being made discounting the presence of tigers. This is a time for thoughtful growth. Highways and railways should not be expanded to encroach into tiger areas; irrigation projects should also avoid the areas. Cost-benefit analyses need to take into account the needs of wild animals. At the moment, highways are not even able to do away with barriers, and it is assumed that tigers can swim through dam-submerged areas. So, to live, tigers are being made to swim across dams, cross highways, dash across railway lines, not eat livestock, and avoid people.

Currently, a group of tigers stand not too far from Bhopal. They may have come from the Ratapani Tiger Reserve, but the question is: what fate awaits them — roadkill, electrocution or poisoning? The question is bleak, but the answer need not be. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that development and environment do not need to come at each other's cost. This is true. And while tigers do not vote, our mandate to save them has never been greater.
