Editorial: 2006 Down to Earth: The tiger re-appears

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2005 was definitely the year of the Indian tiger. The year began with the tragic news of this magnificent animal's disappearance from the Sariska tiger reserve, a protected space. This news became, appropriately, the nation's obsession. I was asked to chair a Task Force, and in three months we put out a report in the public domain. The report drew attention.

When I introspect on what has happened in the name of the tiger this year, I feel bereft. Not only because we continue to lose tigers, but also because we continue to lose extremely precious time in holding on to such entrenched positions regarding the tiger - and conservation in general - that the statement "something has to be done about the tiger and conservation" holds no meaning at all. We are losing ground because we care: we care too much about our own stated positions that we simply cannot agree to move on what needs to be done. The plight of the tiger has become the country's biggest soap opera. It has drowned, again, in its own cacophony.

Saving the tiger in 2006 will need us to change the terms of debate.

Let me explain. When I was asked to chair the Task Force - to examine not only why tigers had disappeared in Sariska but also what needed to be done in the future to safeguard the tiger - I returned with renewed interest to an issue I was once deeply involved in. I had learnt after years of seeing and listening, that conservation in a poor and populated country like India could not afford to discount its greatest asset, its people. Here, then, was an opportunity to test my belief against reality, the situation on the ground.

What a test it turned out to be. I still do not know how to thank the many people - wildlife researchers, conservation scientists, forest bureaucrats (retired and in the field), activists - who told me what needed to be done, in the short term and in the long term, to protect the tiger and other wild creatures. We can never do justice to all the voices of this complicated country. But the dots that exist must be joined.

After 30 years of 'practical' conservation, people continue to live in tiger reserves. India's track record of relocation is pathetic - barely 80 of 1,500 villages in protected areas have been relocated. Worse, this relocation has been done mindlessly in many cases, leading

to greater hostility between people and animals. This is definitely not good for conservation, or the tiger.

So, can relocation remain a strong plank in the policy of the future? It is clear we must work towards inviolate spaces - areas for the tiger only - by identifying the villages that need to be relocated as quickly as possible. Two caveats need to kept in mind here: one, such relocation must be mindful of people's needs; and two, if all villages cannot be relocated, we must work towards reducing the obviously destructive hostility between people and tigers by learning to practice better coexistence. Since pressure from neighbouring (fringe) villages can often be great, so - even as we begin to relocate the ones within - we must also repair the relationship with the people outside.

The issue clearly now is to move the boundaries of 'debate' into action. Can we identify habitations with maximum impacts on core tiger habitats? Most importantly, how do we begin to do something we haven't done in the last 30 years - relocate many more families, with speed and sensitivity, in the next few years? Can we finally ensure benefits of conservation to poor people, who will then agree to coexist with the tiger?

Tough issues. Tough, because they have to be engaged with, and resolved. And this is where I begin to feel bereft: instead of engaging with these realities, the effort is still to keep the positions polarised in the simplistic manner of a schoolboy debate: those 'for the tiger only' against those who believe 'people and tigers will coexist'. I can understand that a few conservationists need to keep positions entrenched as they derive negative strength from it. They need the 'enemy camp' to constantly deride and condemn. But I cannot understand why the rest of the community of tiger lovers - and there is a large but silent group out there - prefers to keep the dogma, not the debate, alive.

It is equally clear that poaching is a real and deadly threat to the tiger. The question is what needs to be done to contain (and eliminate) this criminal activity. Here, the answer lies in re-writing the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, amendments and all. It is today so weak that even if a poacher is caught, he cannot be convicted. We need to pressurise global institutions to take cognisance of evidence that international trade in tiger parts is alive and kicking - under their concerned noses. We need domestic institutions to investigate, and stymie, poaching. We definitely need strengthened efforts to protect the tiger by implementing carefully designed protection strategies and by working not against, but with local people.

Here again, the agenda for reform is in danger of being lost to emotion and destructive intent: I speak of the renewed cry for guns and guards. The 'send-in-the-commandos' approach has been seriously tried and has seriously failed. It is no surprise that Sariska had the highest number of guards per square kilometre, Ranthambhore has armed police to guard its beleaguered tigers and Panna tiger reserve (where it is feared tigers are threatened) is one of the top spenders on conservation. Clearly, the answers will lie in doing more, but differently.

Epitaph: If 2005 was the year of the disappearing tiger, it was because we allowed the tiger to become less important than the personalities that desire its survival. In 2006, this must change. Only then can the survival of the tiger be secured.

- Sunita Narain