

SAVE THE TIGER AND ITS PREY

9/4/73

By R. K. RAJU

"NOW we have a date with the tiger!" said an elated wildlife warden inside Corbett National Park, ushering us into a mini bus and himself taking to the wheel. This was immediately after "Project Tiger" had been launched on April 1. While some of us were taken

agree that they are less than 2,000. The estimate of tigers has always been a wild guess. In 1966 Mr E. P. Gee estimated the existence of 40,000 tigers at the end of the 19th Century and about 4,000 tigers in 1965. According to Jim Corbett the number of tigers was not more than 2,000 in 1955. A systematic State-wise estimate was made in 1969 and the number

of cattle and to some extent over-hunting.

Tiger-land in India suffered a heavy loss during the last two decades. Some of the finest homes of tiger in the Terai region in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were lost to sugarcane and rice cultivation. Elsewhere, extension of cultivation, growing industries, multi-purpose River Valley Projects took a



on to a hill-top overlooking Ramganga and the Siwalik mountain ranges beyond, the Forest Minister of U.P. was perched atop a *machan* for him to have a good look at the tiger!

Five tame elephants were sent on the beat to flush out the tiger from inside the bush. It was a hot day and as our watches ticked away, the whispers turned to murmur, and murmur to loud talk. Finally, the five Jumbos were again sighted in the open, and it was a signal for all of us to return to the ancient Dikala forest rest house.

This sort of an experience can happen anywhere in India these days where tigers once abounded. About a decade ago one could hear the growls at night near Dikala and labourers were known to keep the fire all night to ward off the tigers from their camp.

There are conflicting reports about the number of tigers in the country but all seem to

of tigers existing then was considered to be about 2,500.

However, early in 1972 a more scientific method was adopted by taking a census of the tiger through pug marks and they were found to be 1,827 in the various States. The largest number is to be found in Madhya Pradesh with 457 and the second largest in Uttar Pradesh with 262. While Goa and Haryana have none, Manipur and Tripura have one and seven, respectively. No counting was done in Mizoram. The number of tigers in other States is as follows: Andhra Pradesh 35, Arunachal Pradesh 69, Assam 147, Bihar 85, Gujarat 8, Kerala 60, Meghalaya 32, Maharashtra 160, Mysore 102, Nagaland 80, Orissa 142, Rajasthan 74, Tamil Nadu 33 and West Bengal 73.

Depletion of tiger population in the country has been mainly due to shrinkage of tiger-land, excessive disturbance in its habitat, destruction of its prey animals, poaching for skins, poisoning for protection

substantial toll of the tiger habitat. Heavy drain on forests for timber and pulpwood brought about change in forestry practices.

Meanwhile, the prey population dwindled all over the forests due to over-hunting by tribals and large-scale massacre in the name of grow more campaign. Poaching game animals for sale of meat in cities further accelerated the loss of prey population, and it is a well known fact that the predator disappears much before the prey.

Who are the predators? While an ignorant tribal may out of desperation poison a tiger or a Gir lion because it has become a threat to the cattle, there are others who do poaching by either out-smarting forest guards or through other means.

Are the tigers in one part of India different from those in the other? Naturalists say it is just a figment of imagination. The Britishers who saw

(Continued on page 14 col 3)

SAVE THE TIGER

(Continued from page 13 col 3)

the tiger first in Bengal mistook it to be the largest of the Indian species. They say there is absolutely no difference between a Bengal tiger and a Tamil Nadu tiger nor is there any difference between a U.P. tiger and a Mysore tiger. However, persons like Mr K. S. Sankhala, Director, Project Tiger, are opposed to any "adulteration" among tigers. He believes that any "crossing" between a lioness and a tiger is detrimental to the larger interest of Indian tigers.

The tiger was distributed over a much wider geographical region in the 19th century, ranging from eastern Turkey and the Caspian Sea to Russian Manchuria in the eastern parts the tiger occurred in northern Afghanistan, Iran and into the USSR. In the northern region the tiger was found throughout Korea and in eastern parts of China and the entire South-East Asia including the islands of Hongkong, Singapore, Java, Sumatra but excluding Borneo. The tiger was found almost all over the Indian subcontinent except in the snowclad mountains of the Himalayas, extreme Western Desert of the Thar and in Ceylon. The swamps of Sunderbans were considered an inexhaustive source of tigers. The evergreen and semi-evergreen forests of the eastern region were supposed to be the real home of tigers. The entire tract of the Indo-Gangetic Plains, foothills and sub-mountain region of the Himalayas from east to west were the famous tiger-lands of India.

All over the world the range of the tiger has shrunk in area and in population. According to Indian Board for Wild Life, there are not more than 100-120 Siberian tigers in USSR and Korea. Caspian tigers number between 65 and 100. The existing number of Chinese tigers is not known, while the Javan tiger does not number more than 17. There are hardly 3 or 4 tigers in Bali. The status of the Sumatran tiger is unknown. This brings the total number of six races of the tiger to between 182 and 220.

The Indian tiger is now confined to the sub-continent of India. The total number of tigers of this race are about 2,000 of which 90 per cent are in India. Again according to the Indian Board for Wild Life, the ecological conditions do not seem to be congenial for the survival of the tiger in the eastern region due to constant biotic interference. If the tiger has any chance of survival, it is only in Bangladesh, Nepal, India and Bhutan.

The tiger is an individualistic animal which lives all by itself for most of the years. Male and female come together for courtship for a short time of seven to ten days only if they are undisturbed. Soon after the courtship and mating they again separate as strangers, unlike lions and lionesses which live in "prides" or family groups. During the gestation period, the tigress looks for a quiet and safe place where she can deliver her litter and lodge the cubs undisturbed. The cubs at birth have membrane on their eyes and are helpless. They need their mother's intensive care during the infant stage. For this infant care the tigress needs quiet and undisturbed lair at least for a month. Unfortunately there are hardly such quiet corners left in our intensively worked forests. Consequently, due to these human disturbances the newly born cubs are either abandoned by the tigress or part of the

litter is neglected to die of starvation.

But sad to say Indian game reserves are themselves the enemies of the animal world. Driving into Corbett National Park, one was shocked to see labourers lighting roadside fires to broaden the road, little realizing that a few stray sparks could engulf almost the entire park, destroying not only the forest but the animals. Even officials and so-called enlightened people who claim to speak pontifically about protection to wildlife smoked inside the forest area.

Cars, buses and trucks blew the horn indiscriminately inside the Park (elsewhere in the world it is taboo) as if they were in Connaught Circus. They played transistor radio, threw out eaten food and littered the area. And what is even worse, the visitors even walked inside the Park. Little realizing the fact that Parks are zoos in reverse. It is man who is caged, not the animal.

It is easy to blame the Britishers and the Maharajas for the depredation of Indian tigers. It was a British Governor who first conceived of a wild life preservation act and set up the first national park in U.P. Again it were the Maharajas who were the first to set up zoos in their States and encouraged their subjects to love and admire wild life and even today the zoos in Mysore, Trivandrum and Gwalior are some of the best. But for the Maharaja of Rewa, could we have had the invaluable white tiger as part of our wild life heritage?