Roar-ing success: Tigers back in Vidarbha’s forest corridor as poachers turn protectors

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Kisan Meshram (42), a landless Kolam tribal from Vidarbha’s Zari Zamni forest region, was till a couple of years ago a teak smuggler, with offences registered against him for felling trees and smuggling them across to Telangana. With felling rampant, the forest department had said there were hardly any tigers in this belt.

For the past one year, along with at least four other villagers, all earlier poachers like him, Meshram has not only been protecting the forest by not allowing anyone to enter it to cut trees but also a tigress, who was spotted last year, and who has given birth to four cubs.

This transformation from teak smugglers to tiger protectors has been the result of forest department officials roping in locals of four villages in the Zari-Zamni tehsil in the 350-hectare corridor of the Tipeshwar wildlife sanctuary in Pandharkawda and Tadoba-Andhari (Chandrapur) & Kawal tiger reserves (Telangana). Deputy conservator of forests KM Abharna appointed four village strongmen last year as forest chowkidars on a fixed remuneration. “Poachers can be the biggest source of information. I had (earlier) successfully experimented with such a thing during my posting in Kaziranga in Assam,” Abharna said. “In 2018, the tigress, now chronicled as T3, not only made the 300-hectare forest its home but also delivered cubs. The forest has turned dense after illicit felling stopped,” Abharna added.

Involving the communities in saving tigers was not easy. Until 2013, menfolk from at least 20-25 villages illegally felled standing trees and later smuggling the ‘finished’ teak poles, carrying them on their shoulders during the night to neighbouring Telangana by walking 20-25km across the Painganga river.
One of the four cubs of the tigress Banni, who came to Pandharkawda last year

**Ex-poachers tell locals not to ensnare animals**

After a day’s labour, we used to get Rs500 for one finished teak pole from carpenters in Telangana. On an average, at least 40 poles were smuggled every day from my village. Those in other villages were also involved. Poaching of herbivores for bushmeat and extraction of forest resources was rampant,” admitted Meshram.

In 2013, forest officials registered 28 preliminary offences for illicit felling; in 2014, the recording of offences went up to 72. “It was only after our aggressive push and providing of alternative livelihood options that illicit felling was stopped,” said Yashwant Nagulwar, who was at that time the Zamni regional forest officer.

Forest guard Ashwin Rathod said, “I first saw the tigress and her four five-month-old cubs in April 2018. I panicked as water sources were drying up, and the tigress could have left the area. I informed deputy conservator K M Abharna, who at once allocated Rs3.72 lakh for a solar water hole. A cement saucer was built, and the next day, the tigress started using it. A machan adjacent to the saucer has been built to monitor movement as the cubs frequently chewed camera traps.”

Other ex-poachers, that is, villagers like Pothiram Dadange, Vilas Kumre and Raju Meshram, now go around appealing to locals not to lay snares or to electrocute animals.