



## BUST TO BOOM

**Julian Matthews, TOFTigers, says good things are happening in the magical wild kingdom of Ranthambhore.**

A decade ago in 2005, the Rajasthan state government declared an emergency; a red alert on the state of tigers within its borders. The state's most famous wildlife attraction seemed doomed to extinction, with only two male adults, 11 females and five youngsters remaining in a small 392 sq. km. reserve nestled in the ancient Aravalli fold hills, south of the state capital, Jaipur. All seemed lost.

The increasing demand for tiger products had driven a skilled poaching tribe, the *Mogiya*, on a killing spree, enabled by poor protection efforts, gaping staff shortages and the low

morale of foresters employed to guard increasingly porous borders. The *Mogiyas* proved adept, in small-skilled groups, at tracking and killing tigers on the fringes of the park and had even brazenly been lifting them from core areas. With new alarm bells ringing, the police were galvanised into action, and protection staff strengthened with new powers and equipment. In this they were ably supported by a new non-governmental organisation called Tiger Watch set up in the home of Dr. Goverdhan Rathore, son of the charismatic Fateh Singh Rathore, admired world-wide for being one of

the architects of Project Tiger and the one who brought the Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve to life.

Village tip-offs began to pour in and before long, several *Mogiya* poachers were apprehended. Over the next three years, some 70 poachers were picked up red-handed. Furthermore, a huge effort was initiated to integrate and educate this predominantly nomadic tribe, who historically lived by hunting alongside the largely pastoral communities dwelling on the park boundaries. Alternative livelihoods were sought, including incorporation into protection staff and education

programmes, and the efforts soon began to pay dividends. Poaching largely stopped – even if Rajasthan's only other tiger reserve, Sariska, 128 km. away, was now suffering the consequences of the better monitoring here. It was dramatically declared devoid of all tigers in early 2007.

Today Ranthambhore is booming. Under the leadership of Field Director Y. K. Sahu and his team, support from many of its tourism enterprises, pro-active community outreach programmes and long-term partnerships with external agencies, a once doomed park is again flourishing. As Dr. Khandal of Tiger Watch says "Our tiger population is now up to 60 individuals, 25 per cent above its last historic high and already set to bursting point, so much so that young male tigers are pouring out of our borders to find new territories in which to settle. Currently two tigers are being tracked as they head south and east."

The 'tiger squash' has forced a number of young males out of the safety of the reserve and across inhospitable, densely packed agricultural landscapes, propelled purely by feline instinct to find their own territory and survive through their own territorial occupation or conquest.

Nonetheless, the most exciting part of this success is the rewilding that has happened so rapidly in the southern part of the park. The ongoing demand from a never-ending stream of park visitors can take some of the credit for this. Here, in the unvisited and overgrazed Sawai Mansingh Sanctuary, which had since 1991 been a neglected part of the reserve, a few large herders agreed to give up cattle and take to guiding visitors instead. The change in the landscape with decreased cattle grazing was astounding. What in 2009 had been the habitat of a lone tiger with a poor diet, has, within five years, again turned into a green haven bursting with biodiversity, including chital and sambar, the staple prey for tigers, of which 15 are now able

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### NOT YET OUT OF THE WOODS

Though Ranthambhore's underlying tiger numbers are up, long term protection is a 24x7 job, 365 days of the year – with no let up. It's a thankless task. Often one in which every weakness is exploited... so one day you're winning, the next you're losing.

The Field Director and his team have to worry about 'active management' of these tigers – relocation of young adult males if necessary, as well as a skewed male/female gender problem in the park, and potential inbreeding, specifically from the famous Machali tigress' gene pool. Worryingly on the increase is the deliberate poisoning of prey species outside the park, to save ongoing crop damage. This is seriously affecting the prey base for large carnivores and occasionally poisoning the tigers themselves. Prey species often have little choice but to seek grazing in these landscapes because of invasive species like the thorny and unpalatable *Prosopis juliflora*, which has replaced large parcels of the park by edging out palatable species of plants.

Tourism development along the western boundary north of Sawai Madhopur continues at break-neck speed, and without recourse to the park's carrying capacity. Clearly there is little thought given to long-term sustainability. Only a few visionaries act and interact beyond the benefit of their own wallets, and they are deeply concerned at the damaging effects of overdevelopment. Furthermore, for years the booking of park tickets has been undermined by a 'mafia' of operators, ensuring an unjust system that favours the wealthy and a burgeoning of very demanding 'VIP guests' on a finite resource.

Intensive care is still required.

to sustain themselves. In the process as many as 60 locals have found employment as park guides for the many visitors who only a few years ago refused to go near the area.

Though many cattle and sheep herds still graze on the park fringes, well-administered and generous cattle-compensation schemes, supplemented by park entry fee revenues, have induced herders to accept the odd livestock death as part of everyday life, not the family disaster it once was. Furthermore some three village relocations in the northern area have helped extend Ranthambhore's boundaries and add over 50 sq. km. for wildlife.

Not only has Ranthambhore's success been good for its own tigers, but it has helped re-establish a new

breeding population in the nearby Sariska Tiger Reserve, which today has 13 individuals, up from the original eight that were relocated there. What is more, little known forests like Mukandara Hills long-devoid of tigers, have begun to offer tigers sustenance. Ditto for Kuno-Palpur, across the border in Madhya Pradesh which now offers shelter to some of the cats that moved out from Ranthambhore and survived.

Could this be the future? Maybe now there is a real belief, and a viable success story that can be emulated to ensure these large carnivores will remain in their historic homes long into the future. 🐅

*Julian Matthews is Director of the nature tourism action charity TOFTigers. [www.toftigers.org](http://www.toftigers.org).*

**FACING PAGE** *Ranthambhore's T-19 and her three adolescent cubs cross the Rajbagh lake over a 'tree-bridge'. With sights like this, it's little wonder that this park is so popular with tourists.*