



UMRED-KARHANDLA

An evolving success story... an unknown destiny

By Roheet Karoo

Chandi, Jai, T6, T4... are tigers that are presently on every tiger enthusiast's wish list. Their home, the Umred-Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary (UKWLS) in central Maharashtra, has almost magically proven that all tigers need is protection, space and isolation and they bounce back.

How different things were just eight to nine years ago, when this

patch of about 200 sq. km. was unknown, unprotected and exploited almost beyond belief. The credit for this resurrection must go to the sheer grit and resilience of a small group of people who persistently brought to the attention of the powers that be that the area had the potential to turn into one of the finest natal areas and also a home for dispersing tigers from Tadoba.

What a long way we have come from those early days! Just a few months ago, Umred-Karhandla was notified as a satellite core of the Bor Tiger Reserve. More importantly, today, it is adding measurably to the water, food and economic security of the people of the region.

Umred lies only about 50 km. from the tiger capital of India, Nagpur. Here,



Umred-Karhandla's legendary tigers Chandi and Jai's four cubs are now ready to disperse in search of newer territories. The sanctuary is now one of the major tiger source populations for the greater Tadoba landscape.

there are leopards, wild dogs and rarely-seen mammals such as honey badgers and pangolins that I have had the privilege of sighting on multiple occasions. Elusive wolves and hyenas too patrol these forest precincts. Presently, three adult tigresses – Chandi, T6 (Fairy), T4 (Rai) from Pauni Range along with Chandi's cubs, and Fairy's cubs Srinivas and Bittu, sired by Jai, the sole alpha male, have

made Umred a second major tiger source population site, after the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, for the greater Tadoba landscape. The above list just proves that there is an even healthier prey-base density of chital, sambar, nilgai, gaur and wild pigs that thrive in the healthy, tropical, dry deciduous vegetation of this hilly terrain. The forest is well-watered by multiple lakes – Karhandla, Tarna, Wahi,

Shegaon, Ranai, Bhiwapur, Indira Sagar, Marupaar, Khapri, and Bhansara along with several seasonal nullahs, streams, and rivulets that sustain wildlife throughout the year.

A JOB WELL DONE

Managing and safeguarding this forest, in the face of unrelenting anthropogenic pressures, has been, and is, an incredibly

delicate and complex task as it is with most wildernesses across India. Prior to Umred-Karhandla being notified as a sanctuary, it took much perseverance to initiate and have constructive dialogues with politicians, forest officials, and villagers, asking them to take cognisance of the existence of tigers and recognise that it needed urgent intervention in the form of protection and restoration through efficient management. For that, the forestland had to be handed over to the Forest Department, and the villagers would have to cooperate.

It took us six long years to establish that resident and breeding tigers called Umred-Karhandla home. In 2012, Umred-Karhandla, with the help from the ever-supportive Praveen Pardeshi, then Principal Secretary of Forests, and now the Principal Secretary, Chief Minister's office and Rajendra Mulak, MLA and former Minister of State for Finance and so many others, was notified as a sanctuary. Understandably, locals in and around Umred, who were dependent on forest resources, mainly for fuelwood and grazing of their cattle, were not excited about the notification. They, after all, were paying the steepest price for flourishing wildlife through crop raids and losing livestock as cattle kills. They now faced impending loss of livelihoods and access to resources. Well aware that confrontation with locals can severely impede conservation and management efforts of any Protected

Area, Srinivasa Reddy, Field Director and Chief Conservator of Forests, Pench Tiger Reserve and his staff worked to involve locals in conservation. They consulted every family to understand their needs, and Ecological Development Committees were deployed to work with local villagers. About 3,000 LPG cylinders were distributed at subsidised costs, thus resolving the huge issue of fuelwood collection from the forest. At this point the Hemendra Kothari Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Trust, stepped in and offered hospitality training to around 300 local youth, with many finding placement in the scores of new lodges that have come up in the region. As many as 70 young men and women were trained and helped to find employment as nature guides. And now, several small-scale homestays and lodges are in the process of being established.

HUMAN-ANIMAL CONFLICT

But let me not leave *Sanctuary Asia* readers with the impression that all this was easy, or that our problems are over. I have been personally caught in the eye of several angry storms involving human-animal conflict and crop depredation that threatened to end the holy grail of peace between people and the park. Fortunately, Umred-Karhandla is blessed with proactive forest officials and guards who work around the clock to keep the balance.

Low cost, artificial waterholes were constructed to encourage wild animals not to wander out into farms to quench their thirst. A series of proven soil and water conservation measures were taken that saw the regeneration of nullahs and streams that turned perennial while in the past they had run dry by January each year. Locals were employed to create firelines to fight forest fires. We are currently involved in an exercise to enhance the productivity of grasslands so that herbivores find suitable pastures inside the park. Walking and mobile patrols inside and around the periphery of the Protected Area were enhanced and we found local youth pitching in towards this end. Fifteen crack teams now patrol the forests 24x7.

All India needs is to place the right officials at the right place and tigers could spring back wherever land and isolation is possible. A dedicated team comprising Divisional Forest Officer S. B. Bhalavi, Assistant Conservator of Forests Uttam Sawant and Range Officers G. F. Luche, Laxman Aware and Vishnu Gaikwad worked in unison to replicate the earliest-documented successes in now-famous reserves such as Ranthambhore and Tadoba.

With help and encouragement from Deutsche Bank Ltd. we are also now working to expand tiger habitats outwards, through a Community-owned Nature Conservancy (CNC) model. In

Years of relentless degradation of Umred-Karhandla's forests by cattle grazing, felling of trees for fuelwood and hunting had resulted in dwindling prey-base density until strict protection measures were implemented.



the words of Ravneet Gill, CEO, "At the Bank, we believe that CNCs are destined to improve the lives of people, while physically adding productive habitat for expanding wildlife numbers." The location is Gothangaon, where farmers are worried that their land cannot support their families due to failing crop yields. As many as 39 families pooled in their landholdings to create India's first forest cooperative, exclusively dedicated to rewilding the land, in essence restoring farmlands to biodiverse forest status. In return, they have an assurance of dignified, long-term livelihoods from both government and private benefactors. Policies have been framed to ensure that they become the filter through which tourism revenues flow and that they are offered first preference for job and entrepreneurial opportunities around the park.

This mission has had support from some of the most unlikely sources. The Khadhi Gram Udyog, Nagpur division, threw in their lot with us to create livelihoods that helped enhance the biodiversity of the region. They have trained approximately 300 individuals from different families living in seven villages around the park, who are now on the way to becoming successful beekeepers. With help from visionary officials such as Srinivasa Reddy, we hope to train another 1,000 men and women in beekeeping. This will serve not only to sustain their families, but will additionally help boost agriculture in the region by putting a brake on falling bee *Apis dorsata* populations, so crucial in pollinating our crops and plants.

The CNC pilot hopes to demonstrate that a win-win scenario for wildlife and communities is not just possible, but inevitable, given the vagaries of climate and the stress that failing farm yields place on people. As of now, 105 acres have already been added to the existing forest area in Gothangaon and several wild herbivore kills have been recorded on the site.

Clearly, the tigers seem to have endorsed the idea.

Significantly, apart from being spared the vagaries of climate, the pioneering farmers who formed the very first CNC smartly sidestepped one of the most intractable wildlife management problems – human-animal conflict. In the process, the initiative



Solar-powered freshwater borewells have been installed at strategic points by the Forest Department to replenish small waterbodies, streams and artificially-created waterholes.

holds out the promise of renewed ecological benefits including carbon sequestration, groundwater recharge of hundreds of wells and improved soil health. All this spells good news for the food and economic security of future generations.

A 'GRAND CENTRAL STATION' FOR TIGERS

Umred-Karhandla's forests provide a series of corridors that link the Bor, Tadoba-Andhari and Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserves. Through these pathways, further linkages to tiger populations down in Kawal, Telangana seem extremely likely. The reality of such connectivity was dramatically demonstrated when Jai, Umred's legendary male tiger, travelled over 100 km. to reach Umred from his natal home in Nagzira. A second tiger, the radio-collared Kala's movement proved that Umred was acting as a connecting corridor with Tadoba.

Recently, in September 2015, Jai too was radio-collared, for he was wandering out into bordering villages and making cattle kills. Tracking him has helped reduce tensions and talks are now on to explore the feasibility of radio-tracking his progeny to find out where they might choose to disperse. Who knows, one or more of them might shed light on more such 'hidden' corridors!

The Chief Wildlife Warden of Maharashtra, Shree Bhagwan, has taken

up the safe dispersal of young tigers as a personal challenge and is working closely with his crack team of officers and foot-soldiers to protect these wandering tigers in search of territories.

It's an exciting (and worrying) time for tigers as every success brings with it the possibility of retaliation against animals that must leave their mothers' protection to fend for themselves.

It's high time that young India accepted that protecting their natural heritage is not a spectator sport. The Forest Department is currently pushing to incorporate an additional 1,000 sq. km. of Territorial forest ranges of the Bhandara and Brahmapuri divisions into the buffer zone of the Umred-Karhandla landscape. This will greatly help dispersing tigers.

But even here, particularly here, the threat of human-animal conflict looms large. After all, tigers do not recognise man-made boundaries and while the landscape is being nurtured back to health, it is vital that existing budgets for compensation to individual farmers who lose their livestock to predators or crops to herbivores be increased. This will help decrease the resentment of villagers towards wildlife and the Forest Department. These are the kind of policy decisions that can be spurred on by public opinion driven by young India with support from both social and mainstream media.

Protecting tigers and landscapes like Umred-Karhandla is a far more

complicated and difficult task than running a multi-crore business. Forest officials and conservationists also have to deal with factors over which they have virtually no control, such as the fact that the ill-fated Ghosikurd dam has already submerged a frighteningly large parcel of 34,86,200 ha of land from farmers in Bhandara and Nagpur in the Vidarbha region. Such farmers are bound to place pressure on precisely the lands that our dispersing tigers need to secure their future. What is more, no one actually sat down to plan where precisely this dam's canals would be laid. And no adequate budgets were set aside to create effective overpasses that would allow wild animals to physically cross from one side of a canal to the other. And we have hundreds of kilometres of canal systems planned, or should we say 'unplanned'. As might be imagined, this will involve displacing still more farmers whose lands will be claimed by the canals and these farmers will, in a domino display of desperation, claim still more forests on which to grow crops that are destined to fail.

At one level, therefore, we celebrate the good work done in places such as Tadoba, Umred, Navegaon, Pench, Koka and Bor... and on the other we make it impossible for such successes to be viable into the future. Can we really be so short-sighted? Are we writing a regressive failure into our future wildlife conservation destiny?

I hope not. I have personally witnessed how adequate protection can



Umred-Karhandla, a relatively small green patch in the greater Tadoba landscape, is a crucial corridor linking the Tadoba-Andhari and the Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserves. Studying tiger movement helps unveil such vital corridors.

regenerate landscapes, save tigers and even huge animals such as gaur. This, in turn, has improved water regimes and lifted farmers out of penury in Umred-Karhandla.

Sitting by the side of the Satighat and Bhansara lake, once a site of utter degradation thanks to overgrazing and hunting, I watched a small herd of gaur and I sent up a small prayer of thanks to all those who helped make a dream come true. Gaur do not like human-dominated landscapes. That their numbers are on the rise in Umred-Karhandla is as clear a sign of ratification of both our purpose and our strategies

that we could possibly ask for. All we need do now is to find within ourselves the courage, strength and foresight to leave this Intensive Conservation Unit (ICU) alone, secure in the knowledge that the rest of our job will be taken care of by nature. 🐾



Sanctuary Asia's Young Naturalist of the Year in 2012, Roheet is the Honorary Wildlife Warden of Nagpur district and the founding secretary of the Wildlife Conservation and Development Centre.

The water and soil conservation efforts of the Forest Department are paying off in the form of water streams, nullahs, ponds and lakes brimming with water all year round thus allowing wildlife to thrive.

