

Kuno - The Asiatic Lion's Second Home?

In the Wildlife Week issue of October 2006, Green Hope carried a cover story by Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh, the then Dean, Faculty of Wildlife Sciences, Wildlife Institute of India (WII) on Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, which was being readied as the second home for the Asiatic lion. As early as in 1994, a survey team headed by the Institute's (Dr.) Ravi Chellam, who studied Gir Lions using radio-telemetry, had undertaken a survey and found Kuno to be a suitable habitat for the relocation of the Asiatic lion. Today, while Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary is ready to receive a lion population, it's unlikely to be from Gir because of the Gujarat Govt.'s refusal to part with the 'pride' of the State. Madhya Pradesh, under the circumstances, in order to conserve the last of this highly endangered species, with some 300 odd animals left in the world (in Gir), has other plans in the offing, which if successful, will mean a success story in wildlife conservation.

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Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary (KWS), one of the 'shikargahs' of the Maharajas of Gwalior, the Scindias, declared as a Wildlife Sanctuary on 16th January 1981, is situated in the Sheopur district of Madhya Pradesh in the northern Vindhya Range. In around 1993-1994, the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, after a thorough

study, found this forest to be a suitable habitat for the relocation of the Asiatic lion, now con-



finied to the range of about 1800 sq kms of the Gir forest, its only current habitat in the world.

An entry into KWS's velvety, monsoon terrain is a 'green carpet welcome' indeed! What with the soil supporting numerous types of grasses, the park boasts of various species like the lapusa, lampa, the non-edible variety, and the kushal, gunher and the very conspicuous



burro, the tall elephant grass, all being the edible type. In this tropical, dry, deciduous forest, the flora comprises mainly the palash, khair, kardhai and salai patches of forests, the dhawda, gunja, tendu and various medicinal trees. While the kardhai forests outside the forest are much degraded because of biotic pressure, they are in prime condition inside it and make excellent fodder, especially for goats. The salai tree gum is extracted annually and given to the villagers. The khair tree of which 'kattha' is a product is auctioned for commercial use.

As for fauna, the largest carnivore here is the leopard, while tigers have been known to visit, in transit, possibly on their migration route between the Ranthambhore area in adjacent Rajasthan and the Sheopur forest division in north Madhya Pradesh. The rest of the fauna comprise the usual herbivores like the chital, sambar, chowsingha, chinkara, neelgai and others like the wild boar, fox, jackal, wild dog, hyenas, the

sloth bear, various reptiles like the marsh crocodile in River Kuno and the monitor lizard etc. To boot, a strange and unwelcome phenomenon exists in this park - its mixed cattle (common to most Protected Areas), but also feral ones.

In spite of relocation, cattle-grazing continues in the peripheries and there are still about 2500 feral cattle inside the park. According to reports, since the cattle lived here before the relocation, they appear to be used to this area, and all of them congregate here every night, stay together in herds of 250 - 300 and then return to their respective villages in the daytime. Rather surprisingly, calves are conspicuous by their absence among the herds, which is an indication that they are predated upon by carnivore like the leopards and hyenas. This means that in due course, hopefully, the mixed as well as the feral population of cattle will die out of old age. Till then, they continue to remain as some sort of minor tourist attraction, especially the feral ones (because



of their ferocious appearance), but very importantly, as a menace to the ecosystem.

The good food and water security in the park supports a large variety of fauna and avifauna. Birds occurring here are the grey and painted francolin (partridges), jungle and peafowl, orioles, kingfishers, woodpeckers, cuckoos, hornbills, bee-eaters, sunbirds, parakeets, swifts, swallows, pigeons, drongos, robins, king vulture, falcon, eagles, shikras, buzzards, babblers, warblers, tree-pies, egrets, herons, nightjars, owls and a host of others. In fact, bird life is very rich, making this a bird-watcher's paradise, especially since it is still relatively undisturbed by biotic pressures.

The Kuno River with its catchments in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, running 35 kms inside the Park and dividing it into two halves, is a contributory to the Chambal River which joins the Jamuna. While in monsoon it's a full-fledged river in spate, in summer its flow halts, except in places where the



depth is greater. Across the river, from the Forest Rest House in Palpur, the forest core and interior, is the breathtaking view of a meandering, serpentine wide Kuno down below in the gorge, and beyond the river on the other side dense forests at the foothills of the Tongra hill, the highest peak (480 mts above msl.) in Sheopur district.

The leonine story

Africa 1994. A bad year it was as an epidemic of canine distemper in the Serengeti National Park wiped out 30 % of its 2500 lions in one fell sweep. For India, that was a wake-up call, a rude awakening to the fact that one such epidemic could wipe out the entire Asiatic lion population of 300 odd cats in the world, whose only habitat was the Gir National Park in Gujarat, in India. Something radical was required to be done to avert such a calamity if it should ever happen in India. The WII found Kuno to be the most suitable for the translocation of the Asiatic lion from Gir for which a translocation programme of 20 years'

duration with an outlay of 64 crores was drawn up by H. S. Pabla, Addl. PCCF (WL), M.P., which the Govt. of India received favourably. It would be done in three Phases - Phase I of the project from 1995 - 2000 would be the

pre-reintroduction, Phase II from 2001 - 2005 would be the introduction and Phase III from 2006 - 2015 would be the consolidation period.

This is not the first time that such an experiment was to be made. Travelling back in history, way back in 1910, Jiwaji Rao Scindia of Gwalior, requested the Nawab of Junagad to part with some of his lions which he refused, so Scindia got in six pairs of African lions from Africa and released them in the Sironi forest of Sheopur district, but these disappeared, an experiment that got replicated in Chandraprabha Wildlife Sanctuary in 1957.

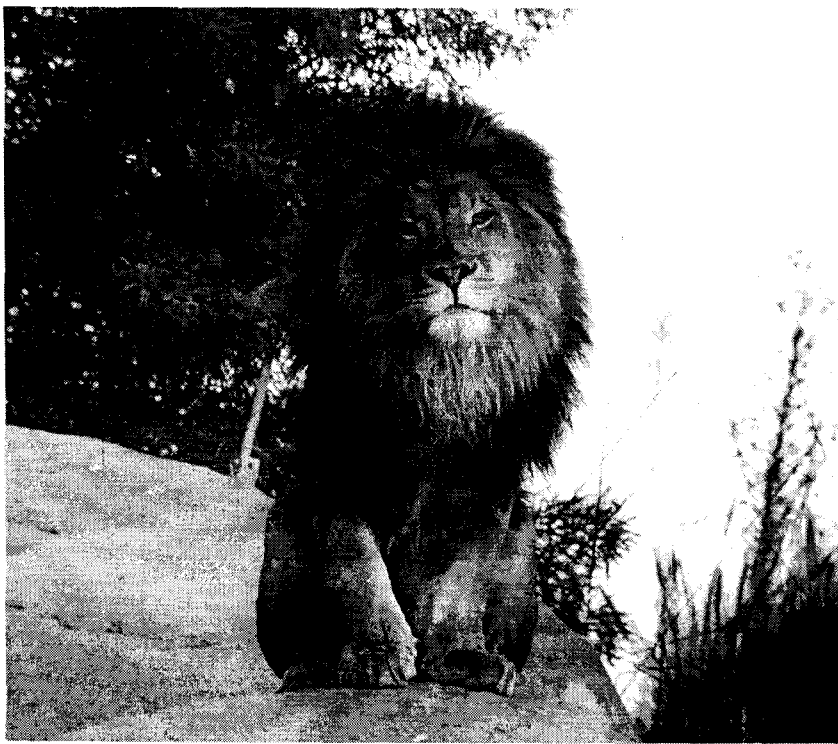
In this latter experiment, one lion and two lionesses from Gir were caught and released in the sanctuary in 1957; they bred and increased to 11 in 1965, but, thereaf-

ter, all of them simply disappeared... mysteriously.

The current relocation programme began with the preparation of the sanctuary with the relocation of 24 villages from inside the forest to near Agra in Madhya Pradesh (not to be confused with the Agra of the Taj Mahal in U.P.) and a pre-release centre created in the west Palpur area with a chain-link fence. Relocation was necessary as a lack of anthropogenic pressure would be conducive for carnivore breeding and conservation. By the year 2007, Kuno was ready to receive a pride of 5-8 animals, but the Gujarat Govt. had other ideas, foiling the lion relocation programme of M.P.

The only place in the world with the Asiatic lion, the cat is Gujarat's pride and a major tourist attraction. As far as their thinking went, why would they part with what was the USP of the State? Today, however, Gujarat probably no longer feels the need to buy the theory of epidemics wiping out the entire population as, it is said, the Gir lion is already migrating from Gir to other appropriate habitats in Gujarat itself, and creating





niche populations of its own elsewhere, so an epidemic was unlikely to wipe them out in one fell stroke as the entire population was now getting divided and separated spatially from the main population which was confined to the Gir.

According to Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh, "The Asiatic lion once had an extensive distribution, ranging from Syria through Iraq, Iran, Pakistan and most of northern and Central India. The lion has possibly attained its most extensive distribution in India, having ranged over the present day States of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh with stray reports from Bihar. Around Gwalior and Goona (Guna), lions did occur around the year 1765, but were becoming scarcer as sportsmen were hunting them down. The lion being found in fairly open areas, vocal (roaring often) and

found in groups, became a much easier target than the shy, solitary cover-seeking tiger. With the invention of modern firearms, its decline was very rapid and by 1888 India's last lions lingered only in Gir. The river, Narmada, seems to have been the southern limit of its distribution in India."

Added to the above reasons for the initial extermination of the lion from the belt north of the

Narmada, was also "anthropogenic pressure and interference in the lion's habitat or rather the habitat of its prey, the antelope. Due to the grassland habitats of the antelope having been extensively acquired for agriculture, the antelope's habitat was wiped out and with it the antelope. With the prey species exterminated, the lion followed suit," adds J.J. Dutta, Ex & first PCCE, M.P.

Murlikrishna is relieved that the project is not being disbanded, after all, and that M.P. is going ahead, regardless of the Gujarat Govt's refusal. He informs, "Whatever the reservations by the Gujarat Govt., and their intractability on the issue, the final call has been made by the M.P. Govt. The plan now is to get a pair from the Delhi zoo and another pair from the Hyderabad zoo for an off-display conservation breeding programme at the centre being created inside Kuno. Once the undergrowth is cleared, parts of Kuno's scrub-like habitat would be most appropriate for the lion, supported by a good water supply. In another 2-3 months, the housing



should be ready and by the year-end the animals airlifted/transported would be making Kuno their home.

"This first generation would be artificially fed while the second generation would be part artificially fed and be encouraged to predate as well as they will be exposed to herbivores. The third generation should be made free-ranging jungle cats. From the second generation onwards an attempt would be made to keep the animal away from the human touch so as to obviate familiarity. With herbivores released in their habitats, the third generation, in a time frame of a few years, would hopefully be able to hunt and live as free-ranging animals. Trainers and experts would be taking care to get them to hunt and revive in them their predatory instinct."

Lion Safari - pros and con

The introduction of the lion will eventually put the Park on the tourism map. But, once the lions have come to stay, which hopefully they will in a decade or so, what will the status of the Park be with a very likely heavy tour-

ist flow? A 20-year, 40-crore project proposal has been made by H. S. Pabla, which still awaits the MP Govt's nod and the Centre's guidelines to prescribe eco-tourism in Kuno. Ideally, no tourism should

start until 30-40 lions have comfortably settled down here and made Kuno their home, hearth and breeding ground, and then too the tourist should be a true nature-lover, which is hard to distinguish at face value most of the time from a picnicking tourist once they are already inside. One of the major problems tourism would create would be human pressure which would have an adverse impact eventually and which would have to be dealt with by a heavy hand with strict controls and regulations. Three gates are soon to open up

one, the existing one at Tiktoli (named after the Tiktoli village nearby) from the Sesaipura side, the other would be at Ahera from the Pohri side and the



third would be Peepalbabdi from the Agra side. There's a move on to also get this 350 sq km sanctuary an increased area of a total of 700 sq kms and declaring it as a national park. Indeed, a national park, as per its definition, would very likely create disturbance unless the tourism is kept very light-footed, limited and controlled.

In this day and age, however, despite the hazards of tourism, some amount of tourism has to be allowed. Says J. J. Dutta, "Tourism is a double-edged weapon but it has to be used as it helps to create sympathy for wildlife and awareness of ecological values and conservation needs, and keeps the Forest Department on their toes, making them answerable, but the tourist traffic must at all costs be limited and controlled."

All the land in the Sesaipura area, 37 kms away from the KWS, has been sold, and the day may not be far that an unwanted number of resorts would crowd this place. While it's likely to augment local employment, will



a fragile forest ecosystem be able to withstand the biotic pressure? Will Kuno then go the way of some of the Tiger Reserves in M.P. where excessive tourism could soon (or is already) be taking a toll of the forests? According to the Forest Department officials, at least in one of the tiger reserves, the carrying capacity of the forest for letting in vehicles was reached two years ago, but at the rate at which private resorts are being allowed to mushroom, one wonders what happened to restricting tourist flow to the carrying capacity of the region? Could it or could it not be implemented? Trouble is, once tourism starts, it's very difficult, if not impossible, to stem the tide, and the highly commercial tourism lobby, from whom the pressure is overpowering, has little concern for ecological values of forests and forest tourism. Quick returns on their investments are all that matter to them. If they ever came to regard the forest as a destination that needs to last for long-term returns, that would be the day the tourism lobby would itself be out to protect the forest, not

merely as a destination but also as an ecosystem.

To restrict such pressures, perhaps online bookings for tourist would have to be done and they let in by appointment which too would have its inconveniences and limitations, and how far this method would be worked out and prove to be successful only time would tell. Tourism fetches in the required fund flow which can be pushed into core management and the employment of an effective protection force. Every temple has a sanctum sanctorum where rules apply. The pristine forest core should similarly be regarded as a sanctum sanctorum, which it actually is; it should be kept inviolate, and the rules strictly followed.

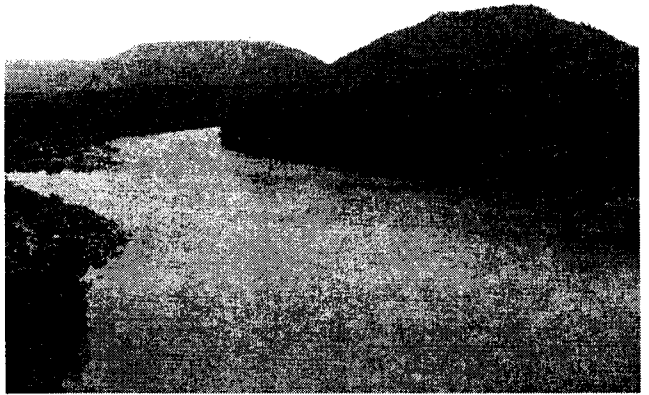
Relocation Reality

Incidentally, the relocation story of Kuno's 24 forest villages stands out as a shining example of rehabilitation, an exemplary road-map for others to follow. A population of

1543 families, over 5-6000 cattle and so many 'chulhas' (always a potential risk of fire hazards in forests) were shifted lock, stock and barrel with their village names retained and relocated as it was with village plan, structure, neighbourhood, adivasi para all intact just as in the original villages. It was like simply lifting a village whole and transporting it elsewhere. These families were all relocated near Agra in Vijaypur Tehsil in Sheopur district.

Each family was given 2 hectares of land for agriculture, 502 sq meters for housing and a Rs.1 lakh financial package per family to provide infrastructure like electrification, drinking water, roads, schools, causeways, stop-dams, irrigation wells/ lift irrigation etc. While earlier, the 24 villages all had to come together from distant parts to one school, now ten schools - nine primary and one middle - have been established in Agra area.

Ration cards have been issued to the villagers. While earlier they lived spread out honeycomb



fashion in 35000 hectares of forest lands, now they are all in one area - close units separated by their farms. Here they have the facility of buses plying, weekly markets, primary health centres, very beautiful roads (thanks to the PM's Sadak Yojana) while earlier they would be cut off from all the facilities that they now enjoy, due to the Kuno River.

Around 5200 hectares of degraded forest land have been notified for rehabilitation and land given to them cleared of stones, leveled and with bunds created in the farms to retain water. Because of this, they are able to take agricultural crops like bajra, til, wheat, mustard, and very importantly, white gourd which is sold in Agra (in UP) for the famous Agra ka Petha, this being a very lucrative cash crop just as much as are the til and mustard.

One well has been sunk per three farmers and one diesel engine supplied among 6 farmers. All this has been done by the Forest Department, while NGOs like Sanrakshan and agencies like the

Tribal Welfare and Panchayat Departments also take care. The NGO looks into areas like education and health and has provided a good school and hospital. It also contributes in the agricultural area by educating farmers to adopt modern and the latest agricultural practices and construction of crop-protection (from cattle) walls. With this kind of rehabilitation, wildlife is happy and so is the villager as for him it's a win-win situation. Besides, the MP Govt. has recently taken a decision to compensate for crop damage giving a maximum of Rs. 7,000 per ha and if for example 5 hectares of farmland have been damaged, a maximum of Rs. 35,000.

The compensation package has been divided into two categories. - A Category to people who lived inside the forests and had to be rehabilitated and B Category to people who lived elsewhere but had landholdings inside the forest. Unfortunately, only recently, the people belonging to

the A category rose in arms, having apparently been 'instigated' to revolt against the Forest Department with demands forWith the Tribal Act having come into being, instigators are many who would provoke them to make demands or threaten to be let inside the forests once again, defeating the whole purpose of the relocation and in the process also digging their own graves.

The Joint Forest management (JFM) also works pretty well in Kuno and the Sahariya tribes, the man tribes of this region, too are associated with it. They are given money for protecting the forests which is in their own interest as well as in the interest of the Forest Dept. and wildlife. The villagers are the Office-Bearers, but of course, the JFM is established only with the consent of the villagers and only where they have understood the values of forest protection and have readily agreed to associate. While protests are being instigated, it's high time the villagers realized what is good in their own interest. ■

