

PERSPECTIVE

Tillari Must Not Die

Large carnivores intrinsically require large habitats and large populations of prey species for their survival. These habitats are fragmenting rapidly today, owing to immense demand for land in addressing human needs and development. Protected areas thus underpin conservation of many large carnivores, providing habitat and preferred prey species. In highly populated countries, such protected areas need to be connected in some way by corridors - necks which allow some permeability for large carnivore movement and dispersal and for large carnivore persistence in the future. In parts of the Sahyadris, where I work, three protected areas in Maharashtra (Koyna WLS, Chandoli NP, and Radhanagari WLS) are connected by Reserved forest, privately-owned forest, and in large parts horticultural plantations (such as cashew) interspersed among these forests. One important region in this corridor is the area around Tillari dam, which is the southernmost region bordering Karnataka and Goa, connecting habitats in these states to those in Maharashtra.

Camera-trapping by the Maharashtra Forest Department has revealed that the area is used by elephants, tigers, leopards, dholes, sambar, and gaur among other mammals. A number of bird species such as the Great hornbill, Malabar pied hornbill, Malayan night-heron, Malabar Trogon, Stork-billed kingfisher, Osprey, and the White-bellied sea eagle are also recurrently seen in the forest and around the dam. Both the areas around the Upper Tillari dam, which is located in Kolhapur district and the lower Tillari dam, in Sindhudurg district are sited in dense forest areas, the value of which for biodiversity cannot be overstated.

The construction of these dams and the hydro-power plant has created a number of linear intrusions in the area, such as canals, roads, and power lines. But now larger threats

loom. There is a proposal to construct an additional three dams in the area to provide more water to the hydro-power plant. These new dams will cause a massive loss of forest, with an estimated three lakh trees being cut in their submergence zones. In nearby Mogalgad, which is a lateritic plateau, there is a long-standing proposal for a bauxite mine, which has got an environmental clearance. Other plateau areas and adjoining forests near the ridge-line have been earmarked for a wind farm, with a large network of new access roads demarcated. Lower down in Sindhudurg, monocultures of rubber plantations have already overtaken large areas of privately-owned forests, with hundreds of acres clear-felled. In my view, if all these projects transpire, then Maharashtra should give up any hope of saving tigers in the Sahyadris. The only way forward to save Tillari from further damage is declaring it as protected, through support from the local populace. I do hope better sense will prevail.

- **Girish Arjun Punjabi** is a wildlife biologist associated with the Wildlife Research & Conservation Society.
Email: girisharjunpunjabi@gmail.com

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From
Kalpavriksh
Apt. 5, Sri Dutta Krupa
908 Deccan Gymkhana
Pune 411004

To