

CONSERVATION ACTION SERIES 20250917

Guardians of the Wild

SUPPORTING INDIA'S FRONTLINE FOREST STAFF





Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) is a non-profit conservation organisation committed to help conserve nature, especially endangered species and threatened habitats, in partnership with communities and governments.



The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) works to improve the welfare of wild and domestic animals throughout the world by reducing commercial exploitation of animals, protecting wildlife habitats, and assisting animals in distress. IFAW seeks to motivate the public to prevent cruelty to animals and to promote animal welfare and conservation policies that advance the well-being of both animals and people.

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On the Cover: Range Forest Officer Shilpa SL in Chikmagaluru, Karnataka (Photo: Pranav Capila)

Title Page: Frontline staff patrolling Kaziranga Tiger Reserve (Photo: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee)

Back Cover: Forest guards during a Van Rakshak Project training event in Assam (Photo: WTI)

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Edited by

Vivek Menon, Amrit Menon, Paromita Ray,
Milind Pariwakam and Pranav Capila



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एक कदम स्वच्छता की ओर



सत्यमेव जयते

राज्य मंत्री
पर्यावरण, वन एवं जलवायु परिवर्तन
विदेश मंत्रालय
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ENVIRONMENT, FOREST AND CLIMATE CHANGE
EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

कीर्तवर्धन सिंह
KIRTI VARDHAN SINGH

MESSAGE



India is one of the world's 17 megadiverse countries, hosting four recognized biodiversity hotspots. This rich natural heritage makes it a critical region for conservation, presenting both significant challenges and opportunities for innovative solutions.

The Government of India is committed to protecting this heritage, as enshrined in Article 51A(g) in Constitution of India. Through the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, it has established a comprehensive framework of policies, legislative measures,

and initiatives aimed at wildlife conservation. While these policies and legislations provide an important framework for protection and management of the country's forests and wildlife, there is not an ounce of doubt about the inalienable role of the frontline forest staff in implementing them on ground.

The primary duty of the frontline forest staff is to protect the country's precious and scarce natural heritage, including threatened wildlife, forests and other natural ecosystems. Consequently, they often face dangerous situations while addressing poaching and other unscrupulous activities in the forests and Protected Areas. They also encounter conflicts between wildlife and humans, such as animals raiding crops or attacking people. This inherently risky role always raises great concerns for their protection and safety while on duty.

In order to make this workforce more effective and secure, it is essential to provide them specialized training at regular intervals, helping them carry out their duties to their full potential. They should be well equipped both in terms of resources and infrastructure. While Government of India and our State Governments are steadfast

in ensuring their well-being, additional support targeting their specific needs, is invaluable.

The 'Van Rakshak' Project initiative of the Wildlife Trust of India is a milestone in this regard. For over two decades, this project has equipped and trained a large number of frontline forest staff, helping them carry out their duties more effectively. The supplementary accident assurance is a commendable initiative that has boosted the morale of the frontline staff, both permanent and temporary, and their families by manifold.

This report speaks for the organization's commitment to safeguarding the interests of the forest frontline staff, and testifies that wildlife conservation, especially in a diverse country as India, is best executed grounds up.

(Kirti Vardhan Singh)

*Hon'ble Minister of State for Environment,
Forest & Climate Change
Government of India*

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A member of the frontline forest staff, Department of Wildlife Protection, Jammu & Kashmir patrolling the Hokersar wetland.

Photograph: Debobroto Sircar

FOREWORD



Our planet is facing enormous challenges: climate change, biodiversity loss, poverty and pandemics, these challenges are closely linked to a deteriorating natural environment. Meanwhile, one of our most important assets, rangers working in protected and conserved areas responsible for managing large tracts of the planet's lands and waters, are fundamental to environmental security and human well-being, yet remain insufficiently recognised for their contributions.

IUCN WCPA reaffirms its support for the world's rangers; women, men, government employees, private sector workers, community members, Indigenous guardians and volunteers. The work of these women and men work is skilled and diverse: they are protectors, educators, community facilitators and wildlife monitors, working in protected areas, private reserves, Indigenous territories and community conservancies.

The ranger workforce is vital for ensuring we achieve our global goals for protected and conserved areas; Yet many endure poor terms of employment and inadequate and hazardous working conditions. They risk and lose their lives, live under difficult conditions and spend long, arduous hours in the field- to protect wildlife and secure protected areas. We need to quite urgently, recognize and formalize their contributions, support the professionalization of the ranger workforce and increase their numbers five-fold from current numbers if we want to turn the tide on biodiversity declines.

The Van Rakshak Project has been instrumental in supporting government agencies to develop a strong, well-equipped and motivated force of front-line field staff in PAs. This report is a strong testament to project contributions in the delivery of training, education and necessary equipment in addition to the provision of supplementary accident assurance coverage, to facilitate the work of rangers. The effective management of India's PAs, especially through a strong and well-equipped frontline workforce is central to maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of these biologically and culturally significant areas for current and future generations.

Madhu Rao, PhD

*Chair, IUCN World Commission
on Protected Areas*

Strengthening one of the principal pillars of Indian conservation



For more than two decades, IFAW has had the privilege of standing alongside the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and the frontline staff of Indian State Forest Departments in one of the most enduring and impactful conservation partnerships to date. Through the Van Rakshak Project—Guardians of the Wild—we have sought to strengthen together one of the principal pillars of conservation in India, namely, the men and women who patrol, protect, and safeguard wildlife in some of the most challenging conditions imaginable.

Since its inception, the Van Rakshak Project has trained over 21,000 frontline staff, equipping them with the critical tools needed to do their work more safely and effectively. Our role at IFAW has been to support financially and technically,

helping build training modules that successfully ‘train the trainers’ (ToT), and ensure knowledge is progressively passed forward in a sustainable way. We have also stood by rangers and their families through the Supplementary Accident Assurance program, extending support in over 540 cases where staff have been injured or sadly lost their lives in the line of duty protecting animals and the natural environment. Though such support can never come close to matching their loss, it is our way of honoring their immense bravery, helping to extend a degree of security to their families and recognizing the immense sacrifice made by so many in the arena of conservation.

It is clear that the challenges faced by frontline forest staff are relentless. Rangers are often the first—and sometimes the only—line of defense, putting themselves directly in harm’s way to protect both people and wildlife, when elephants, tigers, leopards, or rhinos wander into villages. These brave individuals also confront the constant threat of poaching and illegal wildlife trade, facing armed poachers deep in remote forests, often without backup. On top of this, the forests themselves are unforgiving: monsoon floods, raging fires, scorching heat, and diseases like malaria and dengue are a daily reality. Yet, despite these dangers, rangers continue to patrol, protect, and persevere—driven by courage, commitment, and the knowledge that wildlife depends on them.

Beyond the physical challenges, there is a deeper and potentially even more simple truth. We must protect and care for the rangers as well--We cannot ask them to protect wildlife if they are hungry, exhausted, or isolated from their families. True conservation is inseparable from social justice. For example, providing them with bicycles or vehicles is not solely about covering larger patrol areas--it is also about giving rangers the freedom to visit their loved ones, to stay connected, and to maintain the mental and emotional resilience they need for the demanding work they do each and every day.

While this line of work is immensely challenging, often dangerous, and emotionally demanding, India's frontline staff rise to the challenge time and again without hesitation. They are the true guardians of the wild, and it is our duty--and our honor--to ensure they are never asked to stand alone.



Azzedine Downes
CEO & President, IFAW

Patrolling boats provided by IFAW-WTI to forest staff in Kazirange National Park, Assam (Photograph: WTI)



In Praise of the Vanrakshaks: India's Frontline Forest Guardians

Let us not forget, there are unsung trench warriors among us who risk their lives through fires, rain and storms and with their unbroken vigilance and courage, protect our forests and their endangered beings. These forest rangers or Vanrakshaks are the custodians of our ecological wealth and I have had the privilege of meeting many of them during my visits to various National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries.

Interacting with the dedicated staff at Wildlife Trust of India's Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC), and forest staff at the nearby Kaziranga National Park in Assam, was an unforgettable experience. It was absolutely awe-inspiring to see the Vanrakshaks, many of whom were daily wage workers; tirelessly patrolling and monitoring multiple dangers to ensure the well-being of our forests and wildlife.

The highlight of these visits was meeting many fearless female forest rangers; girls and women who now command great respect in their communities. With bright eyes and wide smiles, they shared with me, their experiences of working in the green army. And one of them, a young forest officer seated next to me during a safari said, "Shuru mein darr lagta tha par ab nahin lagta! Ab achha lagta hain, garv hota hai!" ("I used to feel afraid but now I feel proud of the work I do!") Needless to say, I felt immensely proud of her too!

Every single day, she along with countless Vanrakshaks brave attacks by animals, confrontations with poachers and on-duty accidents that could injure them or cost them their lives. According to the

International Ranger Federation (IRF), India loses more forest rangers each year than any other country in the world and this is why Wildlife Trust of India's 'Van Rakshak Project' is a much-needed, potentially life-saving support system.

Launched in 2000 to strengthen India's frontline forest staff, the project provides field kits and crucial training in field craft, wildlife law, monitoring, wildlife-crime investigation, evidence collection, and more. Most importantly, it extends a supplementary accidental assurance scheme to all the frontline forest employees in Protected Areas across the country, including temporary staff and daily wage workers. The scheme aims to settle claims within 15 days of receiving the necessary documents and bank details of the beneficiary.

During the pandemic, many Vanrakshaks lost their lives, and it deeply pains me that so few of us are aware of their sacrifices or the importance of the work they do every single day. What I ardently hope for is that more people acknowledge the contribution of these frontline warriors and support the work that WTI has been doing for the last 25 years to secure our natural heritage and conserve India's wildlife, its habitats and their guardians.



Dia Mirza, WTI Ambassador

Actor & Producer // Advocate, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals // Goodwill Ambassador, United Nations Environment Programme



WTI Trustee & Ambassador Dīa Mirza with 'Van Durgas', female frontline forest staff, during a visit to Kaziranga National Park in 2015.



Alemba Yimchunger, head of the anti-poaching squad at Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary, Nagaland.

Photograph: Pranav Capila

PREFACE



The Wildlife Trust of India was formed with a few founding principles and projects. The very second one was the Van Rakshak Project to serve and honour the frontline forest staff of India, foot soldiers of the natural world, guardians of the wild, frontline defence of India's natural heritage.

The project has now completed 25 years training, equipping, morale boosting and standing shoulder to shoulder with Vanrakshaks in almost all Indian states. We have trained over 21,000 people in protection, in enforcement and law, in conflict mitigation, and in basic rescue and rehabilitation. The ex-gratia supplementary support or assurance scheme for those conservation heroes who die or are injured in the line of duty bolsters state support and is given instantly. This has become something that WTI has become known for, which gives me great pride. Through

our Rapid Action Projects we have also provided quick aid to an enormous number of Vanrakshaks upon request from various departments, ranging from equipment to snake handling kits, water filters to solar support for their guard huts. In some places we have constructed anti-poaching sheds as well.

This report is a documentation of those 25 years in a short volume that encapsulates the trainings and support we have provided, along with a whole section on the conservation heroes who laid down their lives or were injured in the field. There are also poignant portraits of frontline staff and some pieces by forest officers from different parts of the country.

In writing this report, we at WTI pay homage to the warriors in uniform who guard what is central to the organisation's mission: our threatened species and wild habitats.

Vivek Menon, FLS

*Founder and Executive Director
Wildlife Trust of India*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

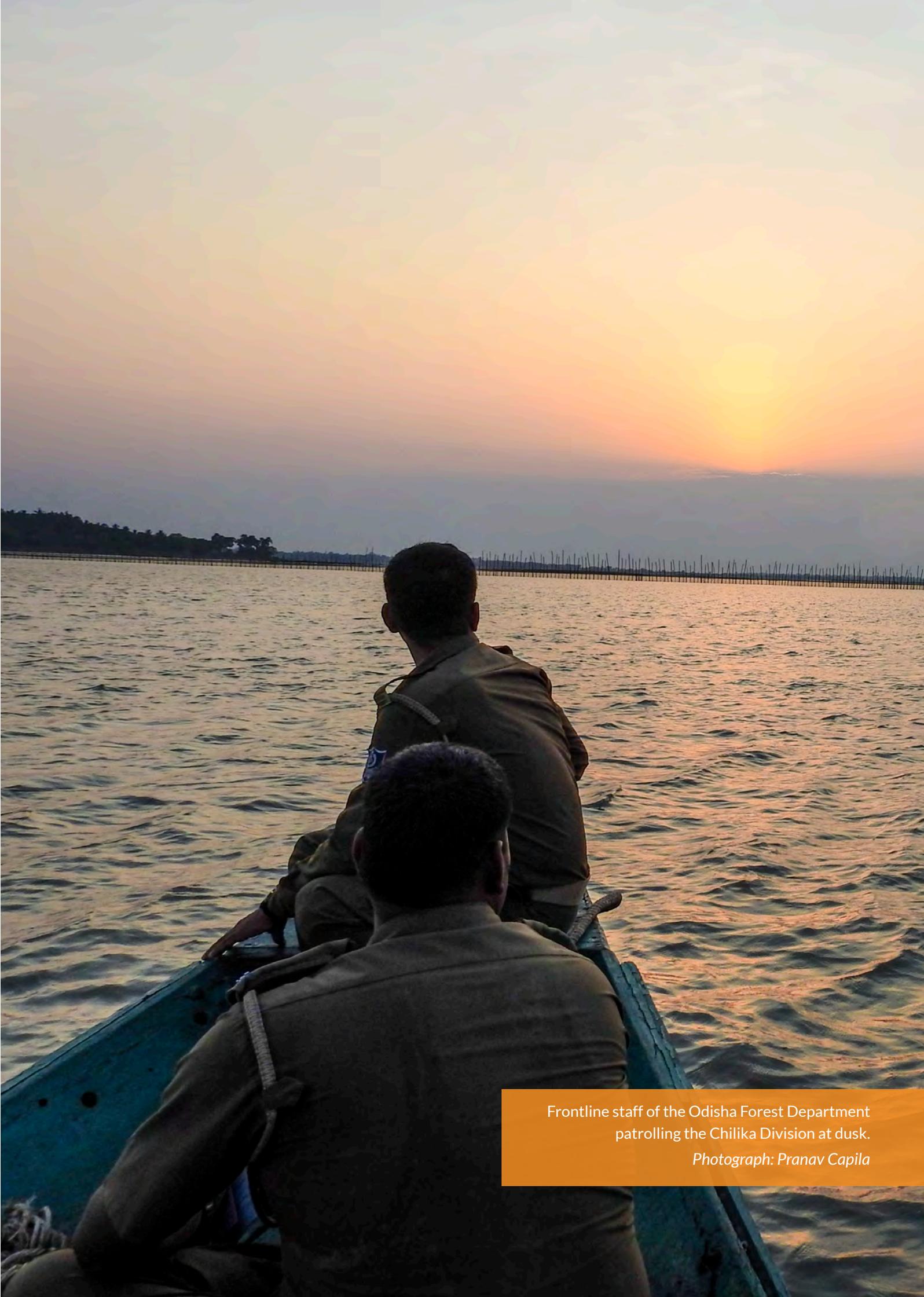
We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who have contributed to the success of the Wildlife Trust of India's (WTI) Van Rakshak Project (VRP), ensuring its continued support for India's frontline forest staff and conservation heroes. Our foremost thanks go to our institutional partner, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) for their unwavering belief in our vision and for their crucial support of VRP, both technical and financial, for over two decades. We also sincerely appreciate the invaluable contributions of our other dedicated supporters, including the Japan Tiger Elephant Fund (JTEF), David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation (DSWF), Thin Green Line Foundation, US Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), Serenity Trust, Pangolin Crisis Fund, Global Giving Foundation, Fondation Segre, who along with other charities, trusts, corporates, and State Governments have helped us implement VRP trainings and provide supplementary assurance to frontline staff or their families when in need. We also thank our individual donors including our Chairman Mr. G.V. Prasad and Ms. Anushka Singh for supporting the Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund, which provided ex-gratia to the families of deceased Van Rakshaks during the dreaded COVID 19 pandemic.

The authors take this opportunity to acknowledge the support provided by the various State Forest Departments for providing us with necessary permissions and logistical support and funding for organising the VRP training workshops on wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation. We are equally indebted to the forest officers within these Departments who have been pivotal in facilitating aid through the VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme and the Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund. Their swift responsiveness in

sharing essential documents for injured or deceased frontline staff facilitated timely aid for affected Van Rakshaks or their families during a crisis.

We also want to extend our deepest gratitude to our present and former colleagues at WTI whose collective efforts have ensured the seamless continuation of this initiative since 2000. We specifically acknowledge the contributions of Dr. Rakesh Kumar Singh, Aniruddha Mookherjee, Jose Louies, Samir Kr Singh, Dr NVK Ashraf, Jeetendra Kumar, Debobroto Sircar, Mayukh Chatterjee, Abhishek Ghoshal, Sameeha Zele, Sukanya David, and Sneha Sundaram among others. All the WTI trainers, state/regional facilitators, project heads, officers, and every other WTI staff who have helped the VRP team implement the training on ground. Without their dedication, this project would not have been able to sustain its longevity, nor would this report have been completed. Furthermore, we thank our other WTI colleagues, who continue to support us by following up with the state forest departments for the required documentation, during requests for emergency aid for frontline forest staff, and assisting with the delivery of aid to the families of our deceased frontline forest staff. The continual support and commitment of our Ambassador and Trustee Ms. Dia Mirza as well as other trustees for the Van Rakshak Project are also deeply appreciated.

Finally, we express our sincerest thanks to the frontline forest staff of India. Their tireless work across the country's forests and Protected Areas in safeguarding our wildlife and natural heritage is truly commendable. In many ways, this report is a dedication to their invaluable contributions and a recognition of the immense threats they confront daily.



Frontline staff of the Odisha Forest Department
patrolling the Chilika Division at dusk.

Photograph: Pranav Capila

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India's frontline forest staff, also referred to as Vanrakshaks in this report, are the cornerstone of India's wildlife conservation efforts. They are responsible for safeguarding over 1,100 Protected Areas and other forests across the country, performing a wide range of critical duties from daily patrolling and wildlife monitoring to managing human-wildlife conflict, mitigating climate change impacts, and preventing zoonotic diseases.

Vanrakshaks include the uniformed cadre of staff with a permanent tenure (Range Officers, Foresters, and Forest Guards) and temporarily employed or daily-wage staff. These ranks interact with the field realities on a daily basis and are on duty 24*7 as they are required to respond to emergencies, which can occur anytime. Despite being essential workers who tirelessly protect the world's natural heritage, Vanrakshaks face formidable and unaddressed challenges, including chronic understaffing, insufficient training, and a severe lack of proper equipment and other resources. Their work is inherently perilous, with daily risks from wild animal attacks, armed poachers and hostile communities, and on-duty accidents. As per the data with International Ranger Federation, India reports the highest number of forest staff fatalities globally. Furthermore, a significant portion of these personnel, particularly the temporary staff may often require additional social safety net and adequate logistical support.

Wildlife Trust of India's Van Rakshak Project (Guardians of the Wild) or VRP has been working since 2000 with a goal to assist the state forest departments across the country in developing a

strong, well-equipped, and motivated workforce in the PAs. This initiative was meant not only to supplement, but also to work in conjunction with the necessary professional training and support provided by the state governments. It is perhaps the largest such program in the country by any non-government agency, having supported over 21,000 frontline forest staff until March, 2025.

The major objectives of VRP are:

- *To create a strong and well-equipped field staff.*
- *To boost field staff morale.*
- *To curb poaching and check forest degradation.*

WTI employs three approaches under this program: i) training workshops focusing on preventing wildlife crime, mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, and wildlife rescue, (ii) providing essential equipment support to the Vanrakshaks, and (iii) Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme through which swift aid is given to the Vanrakshaks or their families in case of injuries or death.

The VRP trainings are designed to enhance the skills and knowledge of forest frontline staff on key aspects in a structured and comprehensive manner. These specialized trainings focus primarily on wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation along with wildlife rescue, and focus on practical, on-site learning tailored to the specific needs of each forest division (PA and fringes) or the staff requirements. Each training is rigorously evaluated using pre- and post-workshop tests to ensure increase in the capacities of the participants. Alongside these trainings,

the participating Vanrakshaks are also provided essential equipment in form of a kit carefully designed to support their work in the field.

The effectiveness of the VRP trainings is demonstrated through various case studies, such as the one at Valmiki Tiger Reserve in Bihar, where a structured training cycle (one fresher training followed by two refresher trainings) on wildlife crime prevention resulted in a significant increase in the knowledge base of the frontline personnel. Likewise, case studies from Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala highlight the VRP trainings on human-wildlife conflict mitigation. This holistic approach, including pre-training needs assessments, training evaluations, and refresher trainings, has shown to

effectively enhance the skills of the frontline workforce. Until March, 2025, WTI's VRP has conducted more than 300 Wildlife Crime Prevention workshops, training over 19,000 Vanrakshaks from more than 120 protected areas across India. Likewise, 20 VRP human-wildlife mitigation trainings workshops have been conducted, training over 1100 in 7 states.

In addition to training Vanrakshaks, WTI also empowers trainers through its "Training of Trainers" (ToT) program, creating a diverse group of trainers who can effectively deliver VRP trainings for the frontline personnel. Over the years, four Training of Trainer workshops have been organized, creating a key group of 35 ToT-qualified trainers, of which 23 trainers are experts on human-wildlife conflict

Joint anti-snare walk conducted by WTI in Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar (Photograph: Madhumay Mallik)



mitigation while 12 are experts on wildlife crime prevention. These qualified trainers include domain experts, officers from forest department, lawyers, university professors, and researchers, allowing for creation of a diverse and robust group of trainers who can touch upon various conservation challenges and regional contexts.

WTI also provides support to frontline forest staff through its Rapid Action Projects, which is the second of its flagship initiatives launched in 1999. Through RAPs, which are one-off, short term, and low cost conservation-action oriented aid, with a goal to swiftly nip an emergent conservation threat in the bud before it escalates, over 1100 Vanrakshaks have been trained on specific issues, including wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation, and over 7700 have been equipped with specific gear and equipment to aid in anti-poaching, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, or forest patrolling responsibilities. RAPs have also helped provide rapid aid to Vanrakshaks and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic including providing medical insurance in Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, ration, safety gears, and sanitizer dispensers across multiple PAs and forest divisions.

Therefore, collectively, WTI has trained over 22,000 Vanrakshaks, equipped

over 28,000 Vanrakshaks, and provided essential support during the COVID-19 pandemic to 2629 Vanrakshaks across India through its VRP and RAP programs in the past 25 years.

The VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme is the other approach through which WTI provides immediate succour to Vanrakshaks or their families in the event of injury or death on duty. This scheme complements government support

The VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme is another approach through which WTI provides immediate succour to Vanrakshaks or their families in the event of injury or death on duty.

and is crucial since any injury or fatality may push the family into a financial distress especially because Vanrakshaks are often the sole earners in their families. Under this VRP scheme provides INR 1,00,000 for death or permanent disability and up to INR 25,000 for injuries, with claims typically settled within 30 days.

Since 2001, WTI has supported 367 Vanrakshaks or their dependents,

of which ~74% were for fatalities, ~25% for injuries, and 1% were for permanent disability. Additionally, 173 families of Vanrakshaks, who lost their lives to COVID-19 between 2020 and 2022, were supported through a specially created one-off scheme, the Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund.

WTI recorded an average of 15.3 incidents (non-COVID) annually between 2001 and 2025, constituting an average of 11.3 Vanrakshak on-duty non-COVID deaths



Forest staff on patrol in Manas National Park, Assam (Photograph: WTI)

each year. The number of these aid peaked in the years of COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. from 2020 to 2022, with 37 non-COVID claims addressed in 2020-2021 and 39 non-COVID claims in 2021-2022. An examination of the various causes of the overall instances supported by WTI, show that apart from COVID-19 (~31%), attacks by animals (25%), and accidents (vehicular crashes, fall from heights in treacherous terrain, accidental gunshots, and cracker burst) (~22%), account for the largest share of incidents.

In this Conservation Action Report, WTI pays its respect towards the country's dedicated forest workforce, who toil each day to protect its PAs, forests, and wildlife, despite innumerable challenges and impediments. This report includes a gallery of all the 540 Vanrakshaks,

who were injured or lost their lives on the line of duty and were aided by WTI. This valuable evidence underscores the severe occupational hazards faced by these frontline personnel. It also includes a tribute to three of WTI's own staff members who lost their lives on duty or from COVID-19.

Going beyond the statistics, this report also includes personal narratives on the daily lives and struggles of the Vanrakshaks from different parts of the country. These personal stories provide a profound, human perspective on their occupational challenges described in this report. The document also features heartfelt messages from senior forest officers, underscoring the critical role their frontline staff plays in conservation and giving an invaluable dimension to their contributions. 🙏

Views from the Field

“The work that frontline staff do is poorly understood and rarely acknowledged”

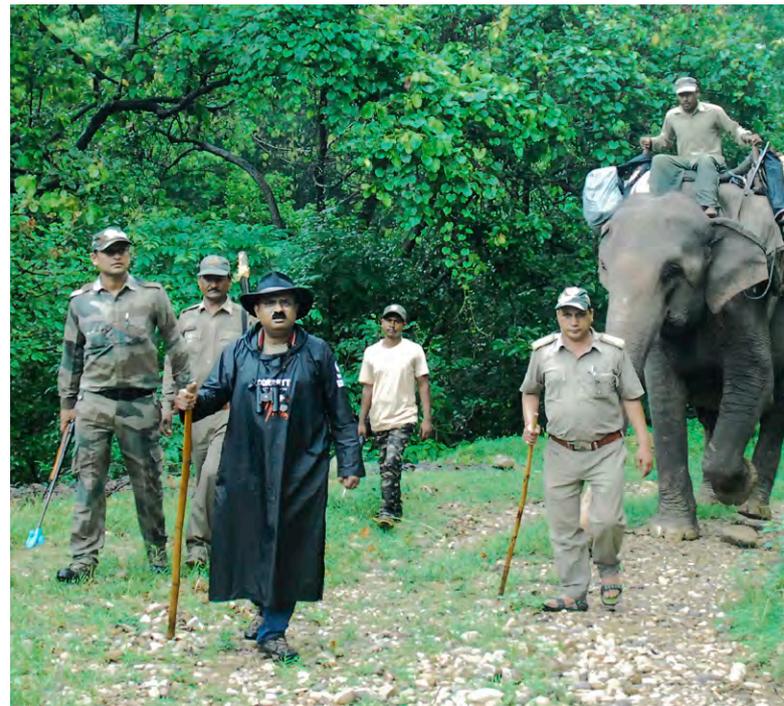
Samir Sinha

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests & Head of Forest Force,
Uttarakhand

Frontline field staff are the foot soldiers in the conservation of our natural resources. They brave the elements each day, facing rain, sun, lightning, thunder or snow, all the while confronting threats from forces like poachers, timber and sand mining mafia and sudden encounters with wild animals. No conservation strategy can succeed without their sweat and toil. As such, they hold the key to the protection of our wildlife and their habitats.

Working in the forests has its own challenges. Staying for long durations away from families, in isolated camps, and enduring tough conditions with limited amenities can take a toll on the mental and physical well-being of our frontline staff. Moreover, their work is often poorly understood and rarely acknowledged by the outside world.

Our department is committed to ensuring the welfare of our frontline staff, with continuous efforts made to enhance the facilities at our Anti-Poaching Camps and other outposts. We are focusing on



providing essential amenities such as solar lights, potable water, toilets, first aid kits, wireless stations, and solar-powered fences for our staff. Additionally, accommodations for their families in the nearest urban centres are arranged to facilitate access to educational and medical facilities. Provision of rations and regular medical

camps are also made. However, this is a constant work in progress as there is a lot that needs to be done.

Personally, while addressing these issues at an institutional level, I make an effort to spend as much time as possible in the field with my foot soldiers, to better understand their motivation and requirements. Additionally, I also reach out to NGOs and other well-meaning people and institutions to enhance medical care for our staff in need or to provide succour to the family of a fallen colleague. This hands-on and approachable style is important for me, so I recognise their dedication to their work and the fact that they refrain from complaining, even in challenging conditions.

The provision of Forest Lines where families could be stationed will give a lot more stability for our staff. Similarly, considering their round-the-clock duty, offering rations, allowances, and ex-gratia benefits equivalent to those provided to police and paramilitary forces in case of loss of life or injury would significantly boost their motivation. Additionally, introducing a formal acknowledgement system by way of awards could be a transformative factor in recognising their contributions.

As a senior forest officer, I have always cherished the privilege of walking in the forests with our field staff. In the higher mountains, we try and leave at the crack of dawn so as to try and reach camp by early afternoon. Carrying our lunch, typically enjoyed by a natural stream, we remain vigilant as weather conditions can change rapidly. The key to navigating these environments lies in maintaining fitness and staying attuned to local conditions. Nights are spent in tents or, when available,

Rations, allowances, and ex-gratia benefits equivalent to those provided to police and paramilitary forces would significantly boost staff motivation.

in a camp. During dinner, everyone gathers, sharing stories and engaging in lighthearted banter. I recall an incident where I had to coordinate the evacuation of a team member suffering from pulmonary oedema from a camp situated at about 15,000 feet above MSL. Collaborating with the local paramilitary unit, we transported him on a stretcher to a lower altitude, where a helicopter facilitated his evacuation. After a brief stay in the hospital, he was back to his fighting self.

In the tiger and elephant-bearing forest of the Terai landscape, foot patrols require a different level of jungle awareness and discipline, as chance encounters with poachers or wild animals can lead to dangerous consequences. Moreover, adverse weather conditions, whether harsh summer heat, cold and misty days and nights or beating rain can make every step a challenge.

Working in the forests is more than just a job; it demands a unique level of passion. It is inspiring to see the frontline staffers consistently display a positive approach to life, finding joy in small things and exhibiting large-heartedness. Their humility and generosity never cease to amaze me, and each time I am in their company, they impart valuable lessons. 



Forest Guard Gulab Singh patrols a Great Indian Bustard enclosure in the Sudasari Range, Desert National Park, Rajasthan.
(Photograph: Pranav Capila)

Desert National Park

June 2019

THE LANDSCAPE AROUND NAGANDADIYA CHOWKI is sand-bleached and stark. A hot wind howls incessantly, strumming on binocular straps, whistling between rocks and scrub, issuing a percussive beat on every loose bit of clothing. It is 4.30pm on the longest day of the year: June 21, 2019. The temperature has edged downwards from a peak of 49°C a few hours ago, to a relatively balmy 47°C.

Nagandadiya is near the well-known Sudasari area of Desert National Park, Rajasthan. You drive 18km south-west of Jaisalmer past the ghost village of Kuldhara, abandoned overnight in the 19th century when, as local legend says, a lecherous minister of the princely state set his sights on a local lass. Past the windmills and their web of elevated power lines, bane of the Great Indian Bustard. Through flatlands arid and abandoned, past Pithala and Khaba, off the map at Jamda and then a juddering 4km ride through the desert.

The chowki has three circular, thatch-roofed huts: a store, a cooking and living area for the junior staff, and a room for the forester who holds charge here. An underground tank out front holds the precious water supply, delivered by tanker once a month from the nearest canal.

Inside the huts, the frontline staff are getting ready to venture out again. They returned from their morning patrol at 11.00am and have stayed out of the sun since. (Going out in the afternoons, in this season, would be foolhardy.) Lunch, at noon, was a serving of local kair berries (*Capparis decidua*), a paste of garlic and chillies, and rotis cooked on an earthen fuelwood stove. Vegetables are a luxury out here – frontline staff have to buy their rations out of pocket; no *ahar bhatta*, food allowance, is issued to them.

Three female members of staff were posted at Nagandadiya earlier. Then one wrangled a transfer elsewhere and the other two had to be shifted out as well, since mixing male and female staff in a remote outpost is not considered acceptable. The two women are stationed at Sam now, where the forest department has better facilities.

“*Unke liye theek nahi thha idhar...* it wasn’t a good posting for them out here; one has to patrol at night and there is chronic conflict with local villagers that sometimes spills over into violence”, says 25-year-old Forester Kanwar Singh. Kanwar has worn his dress uniform in preparation for a visit to Sudasari, where senior park officers have gathered for a meeting. He joined the department in 2016 and has been stationed at field outposts within the national park ever since. He is the eldest of four brothers; his family lives on the outskirts of Jaisalmer city, farming and raising cattle. Their recent focus, he says, has been to get him hitched. His ‘arranged marriage’ is scheduled for the end of the year and while he claims to be indifferent, the presence in his room of a skin brightening cream and vitamin E tablets belies his nonchalance vis-à-vis the upcoming nuptials.

* * *

AS KANWAR LEAVES in the Thar 4x4, Forest Guard Gulab Singh and Chowkidaar Ishwar Singh begin their evening patrol of one of the GIB enclosures near the chowki. Desert National Park (DNP) has several of these ‘enclosures’, which are boma-like areas for *in situ* conservation of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard (GIB; *Ardeotis nigriceps*). These fenced-off zones keep predators such as wild boar, foxes and feral dogs away from the GIB, besides helping to protect native grasses and other vegetation from local livestock. In the drought-like conditions prevailing in the district, farmers are wont to breach these fences and let their livestock in to graze and browse. Hence, the 12km perimeter patrol that Gulab and Ishwar are undertaking this evening.

There are no *godawan* (the local name for GIB) in the enclosure at present. In this season, prior to the onset of the monsoon, they can be more easily seen at the DNP’s satellite enclosures in Ramdevra, about 180km as the crow flies. As they walk the fence line the men make frequent detours towards the heart of the enclosure, scanning the area with their binoculars, visiting the waterholes, examining the camera traps. They walk under a blazing sun that glows angrier, redder, as it begins to wane. The spiny-tailed lizards make a game of scuttling into their path, burying under, and poking their heads up to laugh behind them.

*

Gulab joined the service in 2017 in lieu of his father, a Forest Guard who passed away in 2014. He has been posted at Nagandadiya chowki throughout his tenure. He is all of 20 years old. His mother and four siblings (two brothers and two sisters) are at Bhaniyana village near Pokhran, about

A male Great Indian Bustard
at Ramdevra, in a satellite
enclosure of Desert National Park.
(Photograph: Pranav Capila)



130km away. He admits that he misses them, he gets lonely sometimes. “It is hard out here”, he says quietly. “Living in the desert, the constant conflict with local villagers... But then, that is the job; one has to do it.”

A few months ago, in April, Gulab was on night patrol with two other guards near Jamda village. At 11pm they discovered a breach in one of the perimeter fences and found about 200 goats inside an enclosure. “We were confiscating the livestock when we were attacked by eight men armed with *lathis* and stones”, he says. “I got a few blows from a *lathi* as we ran for our lives. The department has filed a case but I don’t think anything has come of it so far.”

Ishwar tells of another incident when 15 forest staff were attacked by over a hundred villagers at Ganga gaon two years ago. They had gone to the village to stop unauthorised agriculture on forest land. “Everyone got a thrashing”, he recalls. “The forest department’s camper van was damaged; even the village women got involved and beat up the driver.”

As a ‘daily wager’ or contract worker, 24-year-old Ishwar earns just Rs 201 per day and works 26 days a month. He hails from Adbala village, about 40km away, so he can visit his family for a few days every month. He has been stationed at Nagandadiya for the last two years. “*Bharti aae gi toh job mil jaega...* I may get a permanent job once recruitment is opened up”, he says wistfully. “It happened in 2013 and 2016 but hasn’t happened this year. Perhaps next year?” He doesn’t seem to resent his younger companion who already has a permanent post, rather, he is hopeful that he too will make it. Someday.

There are three chowkis covering about

“We were confiscating livestock when we were attacked by eight men armed with *lathis* and stones”, says Gulab Singh.

1700 hectares of GIB enclosures in this area. (There is also an outpost with ex-Army servicemen who have been hired by the department to protect the forest staff, given the conflict with locals.) At 8.30pm, as night falls and Gulab and Ishwar return to Nagandadiya, you can see the lights of one of the other chowkis twinkle on in the distance.

*

Here are two young men living in a desolation, lonely but not quite desolate. They get a strong 4G cell signal out here, so the world can reach them. After dinner, they dive into Facebook. They chat with family and friends on WhatsApp. They listen to the heavily autotuned music of the day (*‘Nakhrali Bhabhi: Thara padosi kare badmashiyaan’* seems to be a particular favourite). It quietens, temporarily, the howling of the wind.

At 9.00pm, Ishwar pulls *charpais* (string cots) from the huts on to the desert floor in front of the huts. Scorpions and dung beetles carpet the ground. A monitor lizard stirs, sloshes out of the toilet and disappears into the desert. The wind picks up, cooler and cooler. The two cots, lined up, look like shrouds under the light of the Milky Way. Gulab and Ishwar draw their heavy white blankets over their heads and sleep. 



*Clockwise from top: Nagandadiya chowki, Desert National Park // Chowkidaar Ishwar Singh surveys a GIB enclosure // Forest Guard Gulab Singh checks a camera trap
(Photographs: Pranav Capila)*



Views from the Field

“Isolation is a significant challenge in this line of work”

Jayoti Banerjee

Chief Conservator of Forests (Territorial)

& Field Director, Melghat Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra

Frontline staff are the cornerstone of any conservation effort. They are the first responders who traverse the landscape extensively, mostly on foot, while fostering amicable relations with forest-dependent communities surrounding these Protected areas. This engagement results in crucial intelligence gathering and the safeguarding of wildlife.

Isolation is a significant challenge in this line of work, as the foresters operate in remote and secluded areas, often far from their families and lacking substantial social support. The nature of this job is such that it often contributes to feelings of loneliness, depression and alcohol dependency.

Moreover, the daily risks our foresters face, whether they are encounters with wildlife such as bears, conflicts with local villagers (e.g., over the Forest Rights Act), or threats from poachers, smugglers, and the sand mining mafia, add a layer of stress and danger to our already demanding responsibilities.

The Melghat Tiger Reserve has insured all personnel, ranging from forest guards to forest department staff under a tailor-made personal accident or injuries scheme. Our team has ensured that even our remotest Forest Protection Camps are fenced, have solar lights, attached washrooms and water filtration systems for safe drinking water. Essential amenities like beds, mosquito nets, blankets, and first aid boxes are mandatory.

To ensure the safety of female personnel, camp duties are only assigned if two Lady Guards are available; single lady guards are not posted in Forest Protection Camps. Additionally, non-lethal self-protection tools, including stun batons and noise pistols, are provided to all patrolling teams.



Every year, all foresters undergo a one-week intensive weapons training program which is conducted by the local State Reserve Police Force (SRPF), funded by the Melghat Tiger Foundation.

Foresters play a crucial role in upholding laws as enacted by Acts of Parliament.

Despite the numerous sacrifices foresters make, there is a persistent lack of recognition, and they are often not treated on par with other law enforcement bodies like the police. Addressing this disparity and enhancing respect for their work is vital for the well-being and motivation of foresters. 🦶

Photograph: Pranav Capila





A member of Kaziranga National Park's
frontline forest staff with a camp elephant
Photograph: Sreenath K / WTI

Introduction





Photograph: Sashanka Barbaruah / WTI

1.1 Introduction

The frontline forest staff of India, hereafter called “Vanrakshaks”, play a crucial role in safeguarding India’s forests and wildlife, often going unnoticed without any recognition for their efforts in defending and conserving the Protected Areas (PAs) in the country. As of February, 2025 there were a total of 1134 Protected Areas (PAs) spread across 28 states and 8 union territories (Anon., 2025). While these PAs serve as the geographical blueprint for conservation in India, it is the

Vanrakshaks working tirelessly to ensure their effectiveness every single day. They are, therefore, the backbone of India’s biodiversity conservation efforts. As per the International Ranger Federation (IRF), a Vanrakshak, referred to as a “ranger” globally, is someone who is directly involved in the conservation of wild sites and natural heritage, as representatives of authorities, organizations, or communities, and often work in PAs, conserved areas, forests,

Vanrakshaks engage with a diverse array of stakeholders and work at the complex interface of local communities and government agencies, whose interests may not always align.

rivers, and seascapes, prescribed under legal and institutional frameworks (IRF, 2021). Stationed in every forest and PA of India, these individuals hold various designations, headed by a range officer, that include foresters, forest guards, casual laborers or van mazdoors. They are responsible for a range of tasks including daily patrolling, preventing or regulating forest fires, monitoring wildlife populations, habitat management, as well as managing the administrative and financial operations of a specific forest administrative unit. However, their role extends beyond the core functions of protection and law enforcement in the forests.

Vanrakshaks engage with a diverse array of stakeholders and work at the complex interface of local communities and government agencies, whose interests in many instances may not align with each other. They are also key players in mitigating impacts of climate

change, preservation of natural capital, strengthening the flow of ecosystem services to local communities, and facilitating community development (Stolton *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, Vanrakshaks, by virtue of their responsibilities in protecting PAs and preventing wildlife poaching and hunting-factors that are also linked to emergence of zoonotic diseases (Ferreira *et al.*, 2021), play an important role in preventing disease outbreaks. Indeed, even during the Covid-19 pandemic, these “essential workers” continued active patrolling to ensure the PAs and forests remained secured against any threat, simultaneously supporting the local communities when required.

Unfortunately, the invaluable contributions of these frontline personnel are seldom integrated into policy frameworks or celebrated in conservation success, often at the expense of their professional development and overall well-being. The very nature of their work protecting India’s forests and biodiversity from pervasive and ever-evolving threats such

Frontline staff patrolling during the Covid-19 pandemic (Photograph: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee / WTI)



as illegal wildlife trade, human-wildlife conflict, and habitat destruction, is inherently perilous. While majority of the PAs and tiger reserves are alarmingly understaffed, a significant proportion of India's frontline forest workforce is under-trained and underequipped (*National Tiger Conservation Authority, 2024*), often exposing them to a range of threats with insufficient safety provisions. Their duties are further complicated by constant dangers such as wild animal attacks, on-duty accidents, direct confrontations with poachers or irate communities, difficult terrains, and extended periods of isolation. Tragically, India reports the highest annual number of ranger fatalities globally (*IRF, 2019*), underscoring the severe and unaddressed risks faced by these dedicated foot-soldiers.

In India, the Vanrakshaks comprise both permanent and non-permanent members. As per a State Government's norms, certain benefits and perks are provided to a Vanrakshak, be it permanent or non-permanent, but these vary on a case-to-case basis and across the states. A proper accident insurance cover is an important social security for these frontline personnel to mitigate impacts of the hazards this profession entails. However, the majority, particularly the non-permanent ones, are not adequately covered under such schemes. In certain instances, despite the policies prescribing benefits to the frontline staff, lack of sufficient finances and resources acts as an impediment, preventing positive impacts on their wellbeing and safety.

Yet, even in the face of these formidable challenges and grave risks, the dedication and hard work of the Vanrakshaks remain unparalleled. It is unequivocally their

Even in the face of formidable challenges and grave risks, the dedication of the Vanrakshaks remains unparalleled.

efforts that ensure the protection of the country's forests, enabling them to continue providing vital ecosystem services in the face of relentless anthropogenic pressures. Therefore, it is imperative to not only recognize their invaluable contributions but also to provide them with essential resources and robust social security to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of their efforts. There is a pressing need to significantly boost their morale and foster a holistic professional development, empowering them to perform at their absolute best.

This conservation action report (CAR) delves into the professional trainings Vanrakshaks receive in India, presents compelling narrative accounts of them in action from different parts of the country, and incorporates insights on their role from senior forest officers who have worked on the frontline alongside the Vanrakshaks. Furthermore, this document details the extensive efforts of 25 years by WTI to enhance the efficacy of Vanrakshaks through specialized trainings, equipment support, and supplementary accident assurance scheme. 

A photograph of a forest guard, Ghulam Ahmad Bhat, on patrol in Dachigam National Park, Jammu and Kashmir. The guard is wearing a camouflage jacket and a dark cap, and is carrying a large black backpack. He is walking through a dense forest of tall, thin trees, with some trees having yellow autumn leaves. The ground is covered in tall, dry grass. The scene is captured in a natural, outdoor setting with soft lighting.

Forest Guard Ghulam Ahmad Bhat on patrol in
Dachigam National Park, Jammu and Kashmir.

Photograph: Pranav Capila

1.2 India's Protected Areas

Protected Areas are key tools in global efforts for biodiversity conservation and their essential role in mitigation of climate change impacts and ensuring overall human well-being is also being increasingly recognized (Naidoo *et al.*, 2019; Smith & Young, 2023). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a Protected Area (PA) as “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values”. Expansion of terrestrial and marine PAs has been a prominent conservation target agreed upon by countries party to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). In the post-2020 scenario, countries by adopting the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework have committed to an updated target of covering at least 30% of Earth's terrestrial and aquatic habitats under the PA network by 2030 (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, 2022).

India's Protected Areas (PAs) are natural habitats that are recognized and managed for long-term protection of nature, biodiversity, and associated ecosystem services (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2017). These areas are legally recognized under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and have

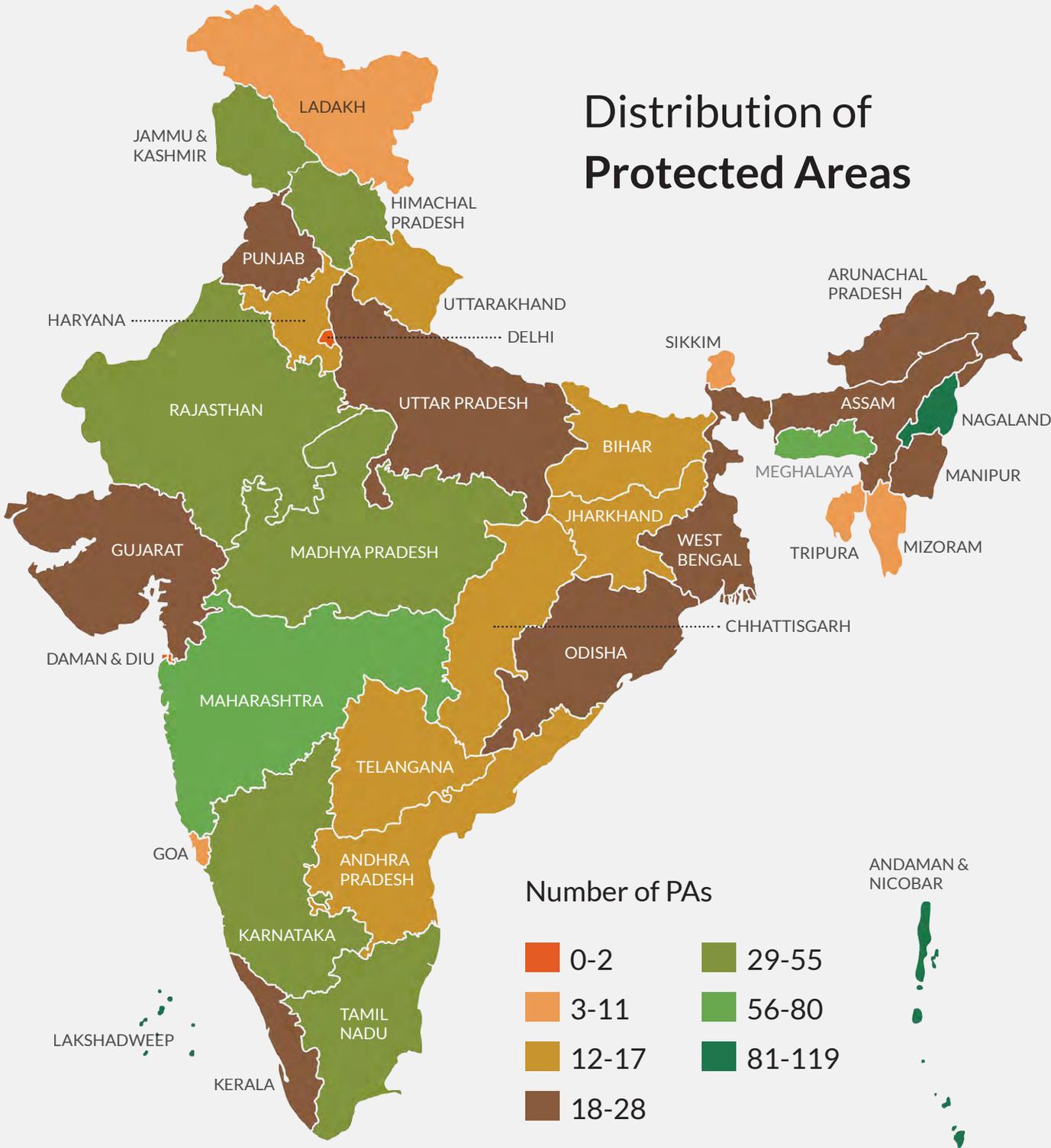
well-defined boundaries with restrictions on anthropogenic activities to minimize impacts on forests and biodiversity. The 1134 protected areas in India, include 106 national parks, 574 wildlife sanctuaries, 145 conservation reserves, and 309 community reserves, protecting 5.7% of the country's geographical area (Wildlife Institute of India, 2025). Further built into this PA network are 58 Tiger Reserves (TRs), which comprise a core area (typically a National Park and/or Wildlife Sanctuary) and a buffer zone of surrounding forest or non-forest lands. TRs provide an additional level of protection to tiger habitats in India through strategic management and continual monitoring by governments.

While these efforts are significant, a recent assessment suggests that nearly 35% of the Tiger Reserves still need enhanced protection measures and species augmentation efforts (Qureshi *et al.*, 2023).

Achieving conservation goals while simultaneously balancing rapid economic development presents multifaceted challenges, particularly true for a country like India. As the world's most populous nation, a large proportion of its population relies heavily on forests and natural ecosystems (Pandey, Tripathi & Kumar, 2015). This is compounded by a rapidly growing economy, extensive infrastructure development, and the pervasive threats of climate change, illegal wildlife trade,

**India has a network
of 1134 protected
areas, covering
187,374.09 sq
km or 5.7% of its
geographical area.**

Distribution of Protected Areas



Source: Wildlife Institute of India (June 2023)

and human-wildlife conflict. Being a vast and diverse country further necessitates development of policies that are adaptive and contextual to effectively manage its PAs amidst these complex issues.

At the forefront of this crusade are India's Vanrakshaks, serving as the primary enforcers and protectors of India's forests and PAs on the ground. They are the government's "eyes and ears" within PAs and the direct interfaces with local forest-dependent communities and other stakeholders. Their role is fundamental

to an effective management of PAs in India and consequently important for ensuring realization of the enforcement and conservation goals for which they were established.

A successfully managed PA, thus, involves more than just defining the legal frameworks; it also entails a sufficient number of active, well-trained, and well-equipped frontline forest personnel. As subsequent sections of this report will show, the role of a frontline forest staff or a Vanrakshak is exceptionally challenging. 

Frontline staff reinforcing firelines in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, through controlled burns prior to the dry season (Photograph: Pranav Capila)





Rangers in Bhutan during an IFAW-WTI training event (Photograph: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee / WTI)

1.3 A Global Overview of Rangers

The efficacy of global biodiversity conservation goals, particularly for the recovery of threatened species such as tigers and rhinoceros, hinges on robust protected and conservation area networks. While expansion of such areas is a crucial policy prerogative globally, their success is contingent upon an optimally sized, competent, well-trained, and well-equipped ranger or frontline workforce (Appleton *et al.*, 2022). Unfortunately, studies suggest a significant global gap;

over 46% of the PAs worldwide are not effectively managed- one of the main reasons being staff shortages (Coad *et al.*, 2019). Appleton *et al.* 2022 estimated that most PAs in the world are seriously understaffed and need to increase personnel strength by at least 2.8 times than present. Another study estimated the requirement of an additional 12,500 rangers in protected tiger areas across ten range countries, for adequate conservation of these iconic cats, amounting to an

additional USD 45 million each year (Gray et al., 2024).

The remote locations and difficult terrain in most protected areas and conservation areas make it tough for the frontline staff to manage and monitor them, compounded by isolation from families for extended periods. Additionally, the growing scale and sophistication of wildlife crimes add to the existing burden on the frontline staff, further exposing them to serious injuries and/or death. Over a period of 16 years (2006-2021), an average of 146 rangers and frontline staff fatalities have been recorded annually in the line of duty, making it one of the deadliest professions (Galliers et al., 2022).

Of the recorded ranger deaths worldwide during this period, 41.9% were reported from Asia followed by Africa with 38.5% reported deaths. Among the various reasons for these fatalities, homicide, which include killings by poachers, militants, and other belligerents, has been recorded as the most common cause. It is understandable, therefore, that approximately 85% of rangers cite armed poachers as one of their great fears on duty (Belecky et al., 2019). Regardless of this, nearly 30% of them lack access to firearms for protection and 31% lack communication devices while patrolling. Alarming, India reports the highest number of ranger deaths annually. Between 2012 and 2017,

31% of global ranger deaths occurred in India.

In many regions, rangers are poorly equipped, increasing their vulnerability in life-threatening situations. While dangerous situations are inherent risks of the profession, poor wages, extra working hours, disease exposure, and lack of access to basic necessities—including adequate accommodation, uniforms, boots, and communication devices—are deeply concerning, especially in an era of

rapid technological advancement and automation (Belecky et al. 2019). Such issues leave rangers extremely vulnerable, particularly in the events of serious injury, where they must rely on their own resources to seek emergency support.

The global ranger survey by Belecky et al. (2019) suggests that the situation in South Asia is worse with longer working hours (average 76 hours), poorer employment

benefits, and poorer access to medical facilities than other regions of the world. Nearly three in four rangers from South Asia reported receiving insufficient medical treatment when the need arose. The International Ranger Federation's recent 'State of the Ranger' report (2024) further highlights critical issues facing these professionals across the world. In addition to the inherent risks to life and hazardous working conditions, insurance coverage

Globally, between 2006 and 2021, an average of 146 frontline staff fatalities were recorded annually in the line of duty, making it one of the deadliest professions.

and safety trainings remain poorly available (*IRF, 2024*), especially in Asia and Africa. In fact, a survey found that 40% of countries in Africa and 20% in Asia do not have access to any kind of health insurance (*Long et al., 2016*). Likewise, access to life insurance and long-term disability insurance are abysmal, particularly for the temporary staff, who are often given the most dangerous tasks.

Increasing challenges of combating transnational illegal wildlife trade (IWT) further emphasize the need for an effective frontline staff. IWT requires well-coordinated local, national, and international resources, including secure communication platforms, databases, effective evidence gathering, undercover

operations, and identification tools. However, IWT has evolved dramatically, now involving sophisticated transnational organized crime syndicates, against which rangers and frontline staff in many countries are poorly equipped, both in skills and resources. Similarly, rangers often serve as first responders to human-wildlife conflict incidents, yet they frequently lack the necessary skills and resources to effectively manage both animal and human dimensions of these conflicts. South Asia, in particular, lags behind other regions in job-related training- nearly half of its rangers feel unprepared upon joining the profession, and training in crucial specialized skills, such as crime-scene investigation and human-wildlife conflict management, is

Members of Team Lioness, an all-woman community wildlife ranger unit formed with IFAW support in Amboseli, Kenya (*Photograph: Paolo Torchio / IFAW*)



equally inadequate. The survey by Belecky et al. (2019) alarmingly found that only 10% of rangers in South Asia received navigation training and a mere 11% received first-aid and emergency training in the one-year period- both fundamental requirements for a profession fraught with dangers and health risks.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by the rangers and frontline staff. Several findings suggest a spike in wildlife poaching, logging, forest encroachments, etc. during the pandemic period, making it tougher for them to ensure effective protection and enforcement. Many rangers also reported being assigned additional duties during

the pandemic period, overburdening them much more and thus reducing their efficiency. Several frontline staff also faced salary reductions and delayed payments but some even faced job losses due to the pandemic. All this on top of them and their families themselves facing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 and associated health risks. Despite all this, the pandemic has only strengthened the indispensable role played by rangers and frontline staff in wildlife conservation and preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases. Not only did they work extra hours, they also played crucial roles in alleviating the risks of the pandemic and providing relief to local communities, especially in remote locations. Rangers, thus play a wide variety

Frontline law enforcement officers at the border between Uganda-DRC and Uganda-South Sudan participate in a workshop on illegal wildlife trade. (Photograph: Samuel Mutua / IFAW)



The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by frontline staff, with spikes in poaching, logging, forest encroachment etc.

of roles in a community with far reaching and long-term impacts, beyond wildlife conservation and law enforcement.

Despite their disproportionately large impact on wildlife conservation and their expanded role—which includes wildlife monitoring and research, preserving ecosystem services, engaging with key stakeholders, and empowering communities, in addition to traditional protection and enforcement duties (IRF, 2021)—rangers are often overlooked and under-resourced. Such diverse roles and specialized work require professionalism of the highest standards but the current state of and challenges faced by rangers often go undocumented and unrecognized, leading to neglect of their welfare. Only recently have organizations and global initiatives begun to prioritize their well-being and advocate better working conditions for rangers and frontline staff, in accordance with global standards and conventions. Complementing these efforts are growing body of studies and data trying to better understand the complexities of this profession, including the associated risks

and potential ways to address them.

The ‘Life on the Frontline’ report by Belecky et al., 2019 has been a landmark report, documenting the world’s largest study involving over 7000 rangers from 28 countries on the status of rangers and frontline staff. Subsequently, the International Ranger Federation (IRF) published the first ‘State of the Ranger’ in 2024, building on the call for recognition of this profession and the challenges faced in the ‘Chitwan Declaration’. Further, the ‘Roll of Honour’, released by IRF every year on the World Ranger Day, which is celebrated on 31st July, not just serves as a somber and an important database of global on-duty ranger deaths but also brings much-needed spotlight on the perils of this profession.

While this database records hundreds of ranger deaths globally, the actual number of on-duty deaths is likely much higher, as many go unreported or unrecorded for various reasons. Despite the numerous challenges, poor employment benefits, and dangerous working conditions, rangers or “essential planet workers” continue to demonstrate remarkable dedication and resilience towards their responsibilities. 



Photograph: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee / WTI

1.4 Frontline Forest Staff in India: An Overview

The Vanrakshaks or the frontline of India's defense to protect the nation's ecosystems are the uniformed cadre of staff (Range Forest Officers, Foresters and Forest Guards) with a permanent tenure and the temporarily employed staff/daily wage staff who can be broadly classified as forest watchers. These ranks interact with the field realities on a daily basis and are on

duty 24*7 as they are required to respond to emergencies which can occur anytime and are therefore categorized as the "frontline forest staff".

The operational effectiveness and competence of state forest departments are directly tied to the performance of their frontline staff in many ways.

They may occupy the lower echelons of the forestry hierarchy, but frontline staff play a crucial role in wildlife conservation.

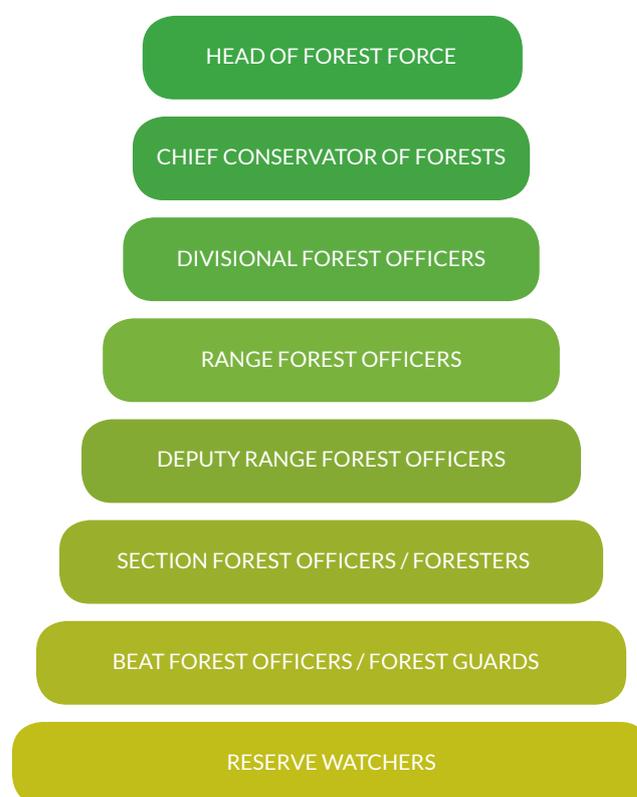
Vanrakshaks such as the Foresters, Forest guards and Watchers operate on the frontline of the forest, conducting daily patrols, maintaining vigilance from watch towers, ready to respond to threats and emergencies such as forest fire, human intrusions, human wildlife conflict and maintaining constant communication with local communities. Their jobs demand a fine balance as they have to often enforce laws with the same local communities among whom they live and interact and are a part of. They endure the extremes and vagaries of all three seasons prevalent in India, without the material comforts that are taken for granted by others in their workspaces. The Vanrakshaks operate out of remote camps equipped, if at all, with basic amenities.

Despite occupying the lower echelons of the forestry hierarchy, they play an active and crucial role in implementing forest-related rules and regulations and participating in management, protection, restoration, conservation and community development activities.

While the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) serves as the nodal agency of the Government of India, working towards planning,

promoting, coordinating, and overseeing the implementation of the nation's wildlife, forestry & environmental policies and programs, the forests are the property of the different states and union territories that form the Union of India. Thus, the onus of protecting the forests and implementing various forestry, wildlife and environmental policies falls upon the state.

Different states and forest departments have varying requirements for frontline staff. To understand the various roles of individuals safeguarding the forest under Indian State forest departments, it is crucial to understand the generic forest administrative structure in a state. This structure is based on how the forests in the states are divided concerning the area and region for administrative purposes. The specific structure and terms may vary slightly from state to state based on each state's administration.



Organisational structure of State Forest Departments

Broadly, the forest land in each state is classified into two areas: territorial forests and wildlife areas. The reserve forests and protected forests are classified into territorial areas where the focus of the government is to protect the forest cover, production of timber and other non-timber forest produce and co-existence with the local communities. These areas are governed under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 and the Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, 1980 (previously known as the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. Some of the territorial forests have been declared as protected areas (national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, conservation reserves and community reserves) under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and are therefore governed under the provisions of the wildlife act. The focus of management in these PAs is on the conservation of wildlife.

1. State: The Head of Forest Force is the overall administrative head of the forest department in each state. Multiple Principal Chief Conservators of Forests (PCCFs) handle different functions such as Protection, Conservation, Wildlife, Production, Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Vigilance, Administration etc. within the forest department. E.g. the PCCF (Wildlife) of a state also acts as the Chief Wildlife Warden to oversee the enforcement of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and implement activities prescribed under various wildlife protection policies across the state.

2. Circle: State forests are sub-divided into circles, each governed by the respective Chief Conservator of Forests (CCF).

3. Forest Division: Each circle is sub-divided into forest divisions with a Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) heading each division.

4. Range: Each forest division is further sub-divided into forest ranges, with Range Forest Officers (RFO) being in charge of each range.

5. Section: Each range is further sub-divided into smaller sections, with a Forester being in charge of each section.

6. Beat: Every section is broken down into small beats, with a forest guard in charge of each area. The beat is the smallest unit of forest protection in India. Each beat is further delineated into compartments which are numbered for various other forest management activities.

While the above is a general structure of the administrative setup in the State Forest Departments, there are some variations. Kerala is moving towards adopting a system of the Police Department. They have set up Rapid Response Teams (RRTs), which will function as a Forest Station, similar to a Police Station. However, this is being done at a pilot level currently. In some states, the smallest unit of forest protection is a sub-beat (e.g. Bihar). However, for all practical purposes such as data to be collected for All India Tiger Estimation, the sub-beat of Bihar is equivalent to a beat in other states. Temporarily employed staff or non-permanent members including forest watchers are employed for specific tasks such as grass-cutting, prevention and management of forest fires, guarding the anti-poaching or patrolling camps, or as additional staff for patrolling during monsoon, etc. These watchers work under the forest guards and assist them in the discharge of their duties.

In some states, there is a group of forest watchers who are employed on permanent basis (e.g. Van Majors in Maharashtra). These are not planned or sanctioned positions but an artefact of litigation under the country's labor laws. In case

of Maharashtra, such positions were made permanent by the courts after the temporary staff petitioned the courts that they have been in continuous employment for a period of a few years. Once a Van Majoor retires or completes their employment period, their positions will not be filled up via fresh recruitment.

1.4.1 Challenges Faced by India's Frontline Forest Staff

The relationship between frontline forest staff and the local community members and other stakeholders is complex and multi-dimensional. Forest guards and watchers, who may often be recruited from local communities and residing in nearby villages, are tasked with enforcing laws that can bring them into direct conflict with the very communities they come from. Their

unique position within both the formal administrative structure and the informal social fabric is particularly challenging and creates the need for maintaining a delicate balance.

Despite the pivotal importance of Vanrakshaks in ensuring conservation and protection of forest resources, they remain one of the least studied professional groups in India. The intersection of ecology, law enforcement, and community dynamics gives rise to a host of challenges that are poorly understood, owing to the paucity of systematic research. As a result, critical aspects of their work – including occupational risks, political and economic integration, and their role in interpreting and enforcing laws on the ground – remain underexplored.

A member of the Special Tiger Protection Force, Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, places a camera trap in the Tippi Range. (Photograph: Pranav Capila)



Frontline forest staff regularly face a wide array of challenges that hinder both their performance and well-being. The forests, especially the protected areas (PAs) where many of these individuals work, present extremely difficult working conditions. Chronic understaffing and low desirability of frontline positions relative to other government jobs further compound these issues. Many Vanrakshaks, especially in PAs, are temporary or daily-wage workers who perform critical duties alongside permanent employees – patrolling, monitoring, and ensuring the protection of forest areas, often at great personal risk. Unlike other government departments with fixed and regular working hours, forest staff have to respond to emergencies that can occur anytime. Vanrakshaks are on duty 24 hours a day, as there is no shift duty where other staff can relieve them after work hours.

Their work exposes them to numerous occupational hazards, including navigating difficult terrain, lack of communication infrastructure, and threats from wild animals, well-armed poachers and sometimes even hostile mobs. Moreover, they are vulnerable to communicable diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and filariasis due to their exposure in forest environments, as well as non-communicable illnesses like kidney stones (nephrolithiasis), often caused by the lack of access to clean drinking water (*Belhekar et al., 2019*).

In many instances, frontline staff are undertrained and underequipped. They may lack sufficient understanding of specialized work areas such as legal procedures, investigation techniques, wildlife crime reporting, and are often deprived of adequate field gear, first aid, safety equipment, or defensive weapons.

Difficult terrain, lack of infrastructure, harsh living conditions, and threats from wild animals, poachers and even hostile mobs are routine in a Vanrakshak's job.

There are also insufficient accident insurance and social security provisions to protect them against occupational injuries including attacks by wild animals, poachers, or insurgents. Living conditions in remote field camps add another layer of hardship. These camps are often shared accommodation, small and sometimes constructed with temporary material, which may not hold well in extreme weather conditions. Staff face extreme isolation with limited mobility during inclement weather, inconsistent access to provisions, insufficient electricity and illumination, and poor access to potable water and minimal medical support.

Daily life for many of these staff members involves long periods away from family and friends, poor communication facilities, and immense psychological stress. Their only means of defense in hostile situations is often a stick or cane – grossly inadequate against the threats they face. Yet, despite these challenges, their commitment to protecting India's forests and wildlife remains unwavering, often coming at great personal and familial sacrifice. 🦶



Frontline staff patrolling the evergreen rainforests of the southern Western Ghats
(Photograph: Renjith Hadlee)

Views from the Field

“Do the foot soldiers of our wild frontiers get the same respect that the jawans guarding our nation’s boundaries command?”

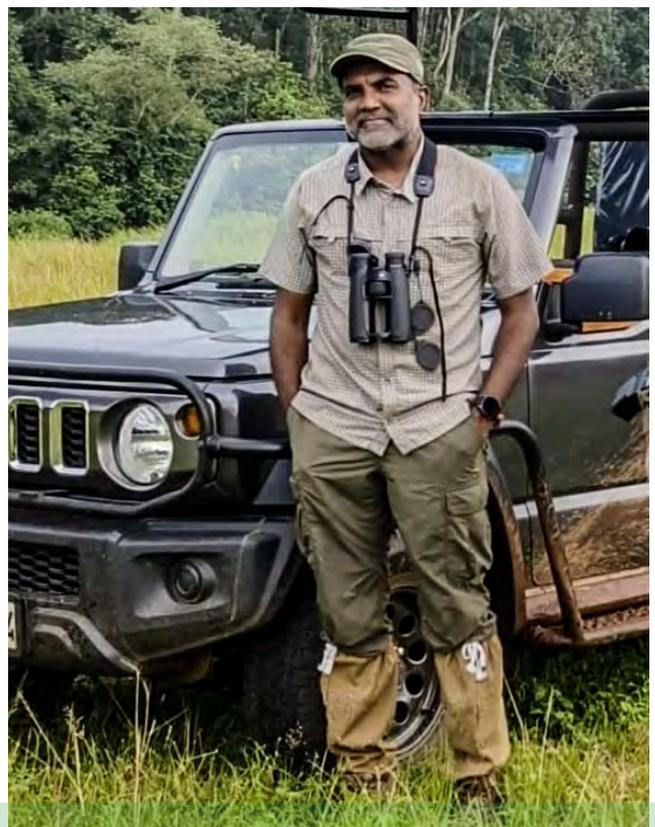
Manoj Nair

Director, Nandankanan Biological Park

Additional charge of Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife), Odisha

I Imagine. As you read this, be it day or night, rain or shine, across the wild landscapes of our vast and verdant country, gritty uniform-donned men and women go about their duty with silent determination - an onerous, and often thankless job of safeguarding our precious wildlife and their dwindling habitats. For all you might know, they could be scanning for snow leopards in the high mountains of the Trans-Himalayas, riding departmental elephants through the tall grasslands of the terai on the lookout for poachers, scanning for illegal trawlers on a patrol boat in the choppy seas of a marine Protected Area, waiting in ambush for a wildlife trader in a decoy operation in a small-town hotel or stopping the traffic on a National Highway to help a herd of elephants cross. They could also be mothering an orphaned tiger cub in a zoo, lending a helping hand to treat an injured leopard in a rescue center or might even be rescuing an itinerant king cobra which has ventured into someone’s home.

And all this is done by the frontline staff of our Protected Areas and Forest Divisions - the Forest Guards, Foresters and Rangers, not to forget the non-regular personnel or para-staff. Unsung, unfeted, relegated to the back pages of our conservation annals. But anyone who has spent enough time in wild India would realize in no time that behind the scenes of any conservation



success story, is the untold saga of courage, sacrifice and silent toil of the frontline staff. Each one of them deserve our collective thanks and respect. And their contribution deserves to be supported and celebrated. For me, it is precisely this that makes the 'Van Rakhsak Project' initiative of the Wildlife Trust of India so praise-worthy.

As a forest officer, almost at the verge of completing 25 years of service, I often ask this question to myself - are our frontline staff recognized enough? Do our van rakshaks, the foot soldiers of our wild frontiers get the same respect that the

jawans guarding our nation's boundaries command? Do we as a society value the job of a forester, including that of other frontline staff? As seniors in the service, do we seek their suggestions while implementing management decisions? Do we acknowledge or promote specially

committed individuals who have spent their lifetime in remote chowkis and are repositories of enormous knowledge? To me, the answers to these questions are often a resounding 'No', in most cases. Unfortunately, not much is known about the job profile of a frontline forest staff (or for that matter, even that of a senior officer of the Department) among the general society. Which brings us to importance of spreading a much-needed positive image about them to the society at large and celebrating their unseen work. Luckily this has started happening of late, thanks to some movies and documentaries.

Behind the scenes of any conservation success story is the untold saga of courage, sacrifice and silent toil of frontline staff.

During the past two decades or so, massive winds of change have swept across our Protected Areas. Take for instance, the frontline staff of Similipal, one of the first nine Tiger Reserves in India and among the largest. During my first posting as the Deputy Director there, I was dismayed to see the tough working conditions of the field staff. This was especially so in the core area, particularly during monsoons, when the Park literally used to get cut off from the outside world. Cerebral malaria was rampant and the side-effects of anti-malarial drugs was painfully visible in most of the staff. Most of them had very

basic educational qualifications, battle-hardened locals who were drafted into the service by the Reserve's Founding Field Director, the legendary Shri SR Choudhury. They had become largely immured to such conditions and lived and passed away in obscurity.

From those less-desirable times, the foot soldiers of the tiger reserve have come a long way now - from the mere 8th and 10th pass van rakshaks of yesteryears, today we have Masters' degree and even PhD qualified getting recruited to the frontline posts. No doubt they are highly qualified but they also come with equally high aspirations. And it is indeed tough catering to those expectations.

Unless a passion for their job and a sense of pride and belongingness to the Forest Department is nurtured in them in the early years itself, we face the risk of having

disgruntled and demotivated individuals, who can potentially do more harm than good.

So, now to the operative question – what can the government, the civil society organisations and other nature-loving citizens do to address this issue? Of course, providing creature comforts, and ensuring adequate physical and mental health is a sine qua non - comfortable living quarters, potable drinking water, safe working conditions, support for self and family in case of injuries or unfortunate loss of life, and most importantly, a decent work-life balance with regular access to family (both virtually and physically). But more important to them, I often feel, is the recognition and respect that they expect from their senior officers and the society at large. For that, every NGO and each one of us has a role to play. And as a forest officer, I have always tried to do my bit - by spending as much time as possible with them in field, trying to motivate and teach, and in the process getting motivated and taught.

If I have one tip to give to a young forest officer who has just taken charge of her/his first Forest Division, it will be this – care genuinely for your frontline forest staff, do listen to their grievances and try and sort them out. Engage with them and uncover their hidden talents. Some are excellent in community development work, some in photography, some in placing camera traps, some in grass identification, some in bird-watching, some can mimic animal calls to perfection, while some others are born trekkers and animal trackers. The moment you acknowledge their gift and encourage them, you have won their trust and have

kindled in them a sense of self-respect and a genuine love for their job. And most importantly, hike with them and learn from them. As the saying goes, a Forest Officer's footsteps is the best manure for the forest! And as a common citizen, do your bit by saluting and acknowledging any field forester you know. Build in them self-esteem, confidence, and a sense of belonging – and a firm belief that, in the selfless work they do, lies the ecological security of our future generations – not just for our country but for Mother Earth at large.

Salute! 



ପ୍ରକାଶ ପୁରଣା ଶିବିର
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Frontline staff stationed at the Chilika Division, Chilika Lake, Odisha.
Photograph: Pranav Capila

Frontline Portraits

Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary

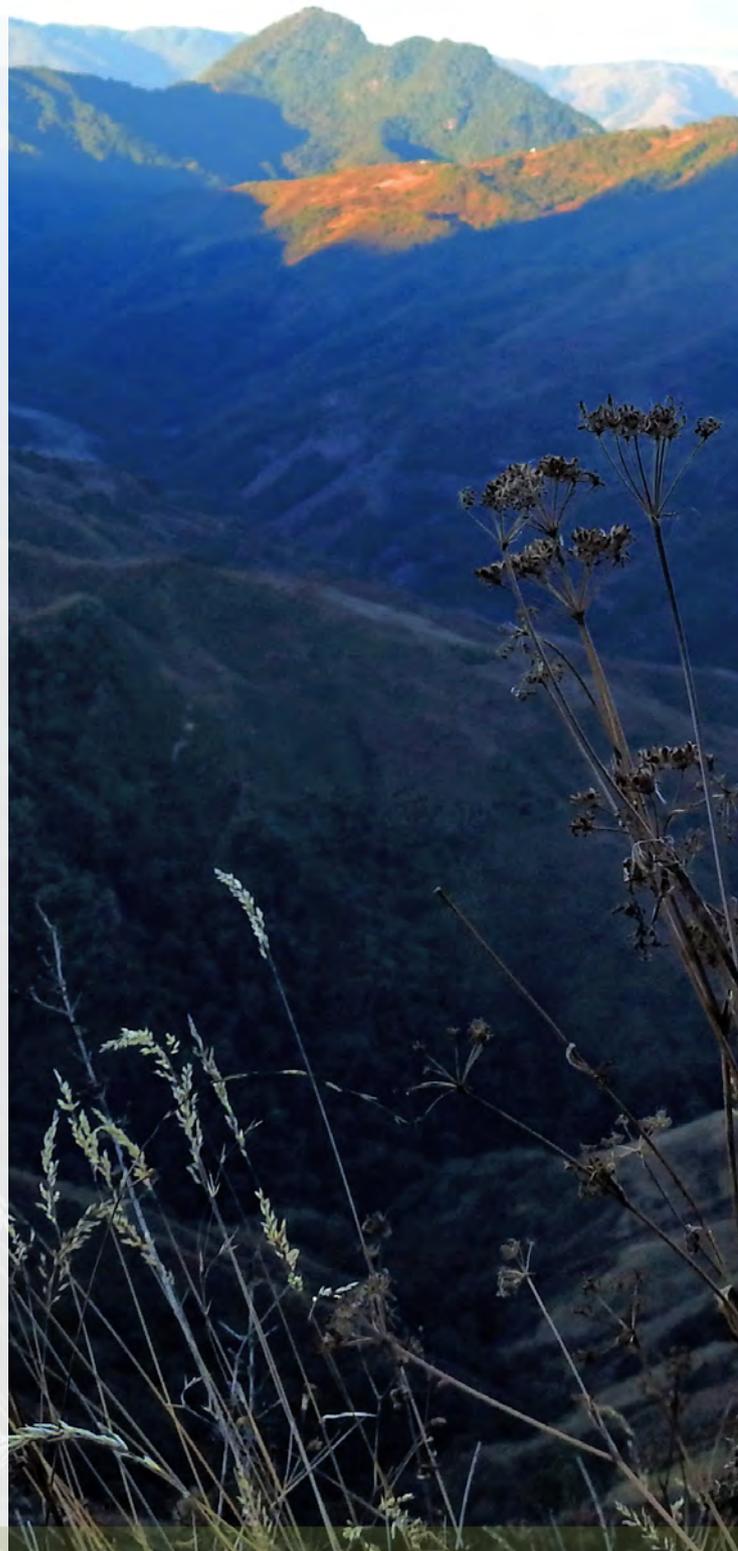
November 2018

AT 1.30 A.M. THE JUNGLE IS QUIET. You can hear the crunch of leaves underfoot, the triphammer of your pulse, the labour of your breath. Nothing else. Even the crickets have lost their chirp in the cold.

A dog barks somewhere in the distance, then again a minute later, closer. But it isn't a dog. Alemba stops and motions towards the sound: "Barking deer", he whispers. "It makes me happy to hear them in the community forests. There was so much hunting that they had all but disappeared some years ago; you could only find them deep inside the sanctuary."

*

Alemba – Alemba Yimchunger – belongs to the Yimchunger tribe of Fakim village, Nagaland. Father to five-year-old Barela, 23-year-old Limtemong and their seven in-between siblings, he is squat, square-jawed, built as solid as the Saramati mountain. Indeterminately aged, with an official ID that proclaims him at least six years younger than he says he must be. Proud warrior-dancer, head of the village cultural committee. Veteran of the





Alemba Yimchunger on patrol
in Fakim WLS, Nagaland.
Photograph: Pranav Capila

Nagaland Forest Department, pathfinder for numerous expeditions, Camp Guide for three decades, now leader of the recently formed Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary Anti-poaching Squad.

To meet him one must journey to the eastern edge of Nagaland, midway up the palm that India cups to Myanmar's cheek. A 14-hour drive on broken roads from Dimapur to Kohima, to Pfutsero, Jessami and Meluri. Then snaking off the map near Tutheze, down through dense forests and across a skin-of-its-teeth hanging bridge over the sparkling blue Zungki. Then up a hill through dense forests again on the other side before meeting the blacktop just shy of Pungro Town in the Kiphire District. Fakim village ("say 'Faa-kim', not the other way", Alemba chuckles) is 56 kilometres from here, another three hours down a road that is jeepable, but only just.

The village stands midway up a steep hill; the wildlife sanctuary, about a six-kilometre hike from Alemba's house, begins at the top. In-between lie community-owned forests. Land ownership in Nagaland is governed by Article 371A of the Indian Constitution – in effect, the land and its forest resources are owned by the tribal communities, not the government. Consequently, Protected Areas in the state were all purchased from village councils. Thus, on March 29, 1980, the Government of Nagaland bought forest land from "Shri Throngkiuba Yimchunger, s/o Late Tochimong Yimchunger of Fakim (Phakim) village". The area was formally declared a wildlife sanctuary vide notification no. FOR-44/83, issued in Kohima on January 16, 1984.

The sanctuary undulates across 641.5 hectares in the foothills of Mt Saramati (Nagaland's highest peak at 3286 metres

above mean sea level). As part of the larger Naga Hills Landscape it occupies a strategic location at the juncture of the eastern Himalaya and the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. The vegetation here is representative of Naga Hills Wet Temperate Forest (11B/C2 according to the 1968 Champion and Seth classification), though the larger Saramati region, which is contiguous with the forests of Myanmar, features Himalayan Sub-tropical Pine Forests (9/C1) as well.

Rare Sumatran rhinos were once found in this area, as were Bengal tigers. Common and clouded leopards, Asiatic black bears, hoolock gibbons, stump-tailed and Assamese macaques, wild boars, barking deer, gaur, lorises and martens are still sighted. The area is also known for threatened avifauna such as the rufous-necked hornbill and Blyth's tragopan.

"Sanctuary *mein bahut achha jangal hai*", Alemba says. "It's a beautiful, pristine jungle. So dense, many types of plants and trees, such a variety of mammals, birds, reptiles. But there are far fewer animals in the area than there were many years ago."

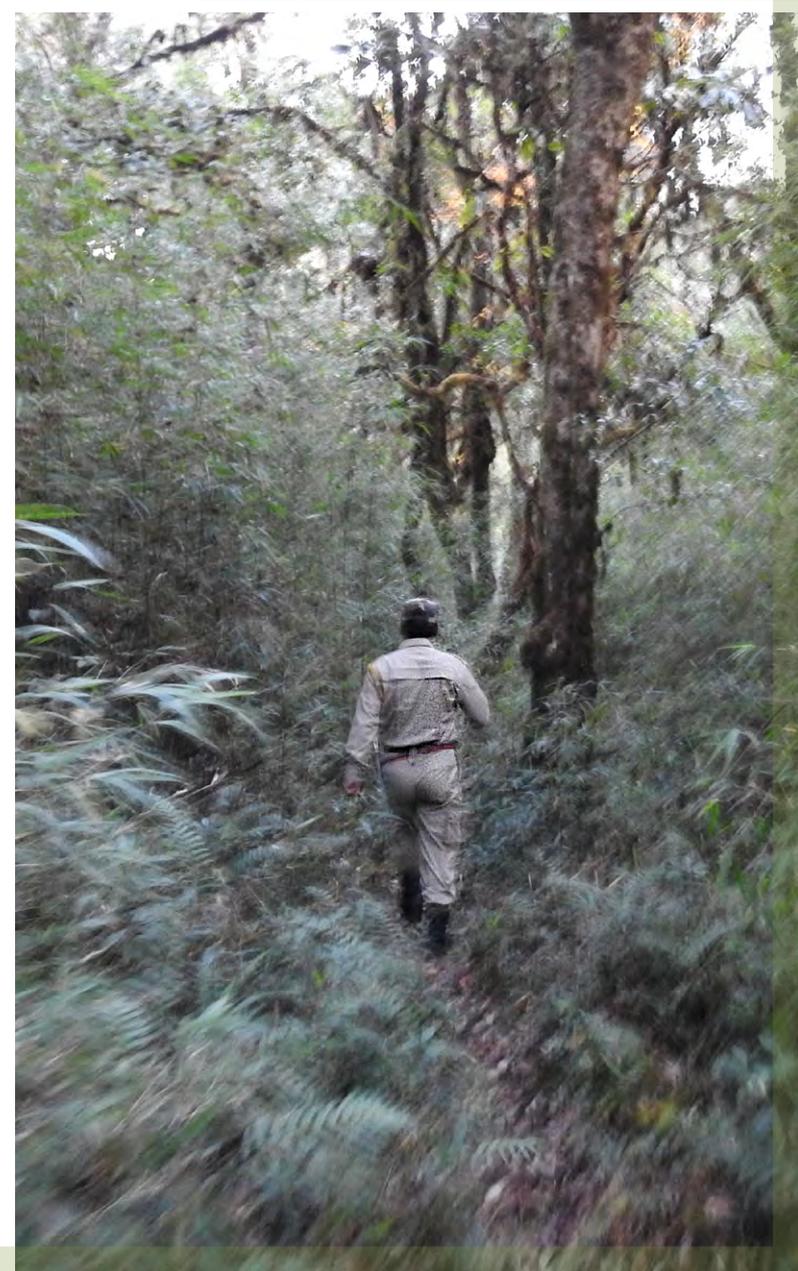
Alemba knows this because he has walked these steep hills and deep valleys over and over again for four decades. He knows this too, because as boy, as a young man, he used to hunt in these forests.

* * *

ALEMBA SITS ON A SHORT WOODEN STOOL by the cooking fire in his kitchen, cradling Barela in his arms. She squirms and giggles as he rubs his rough cheek against hers. Two of her sisters, Thushela and Yuhphula, eight and six years old respectively, clasp tumblers of hot milk on a bench by the door.



Top: A proud custodian of Yimchunger culture, Alemba heads out for a dance performance in traditional garb // Left and Right: Alemba on patrol in Fakim WLS and community forest lands (Photographs: Pranav Capila)



“We used to spend most of our waking hours in the jungle”, Alemba continues. “As young boys we carried slingshots, bringing down small prey: birds, squirrels... things like that. By the time we were a little older, 14 or 15, we had learned to use bows and arrows, spears.”

“I killed wild boars, barking deer, a couple of black bears... We hunted for the cooking pot, for fur, for tusks, teeth and claws that we used as ornaments or traded. Hunting was part of our tradition, a rite of passage for young men. It was also a matter of survival.”

Alemba was just 17 when he decided to join Nagaland Forest Department. It was an unusual decision, contrary to cultural norms. Though the Yimchungers have a deeper, more elemental bond with nature than most of us can comprehend, entirely giving up hunting in favour of forest protection was inconceivable at the time. Alemba was the department’s first recruit from the area.

“I could tell something was different”, he explains; “I spent so much time in the jungle that I knew there were fewer animals around. Especially the larger animals, the deer, leopards, bears... I felt that I could do something. And this was a government job – even at just a few hundred rupees a month, it was a good opportunity.”

So, for the last 32 years, Alemba has served Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary. In the early years he hauled stone pillars to demarcate its boundary. Now he helps install camera traps to record its wildlife. His knowledge of the area’s biodiversity has been crucial to the success of numerous expeditions into the sanctuary. He has helped the forest department implement outreach initiatives

Alemba has received several awards, but perhaps his greatest achievement has been changing his community’s attitude towards wildlife and forest protection.

in and around Fakim, including the distribution of solar lamps, seedlings and poultry to the community. For the last six months he has also led the area’s fledgling anti-poaching squad, which comprises two members each from Fakim, Vongtsuvong and Thanamir, the three villages flanking the sanctuary.

Thirty-two years. And most of them walking a lonely beat. (Since there are no facilities for staff or officers to stay in the sanctuary, the nearest Forest Guards are stationed in Pungro Town.) Yet Alemba is still officially a Camp Guide, the designation at which he joined the department. In November 2018, when the writer met him, he was earning just Rs 5000 a month, including the Rs 1500 allotted for his new anti-poaching role.

* * *

ALREADY A LOCAL LEGEND, Alemba attained wider recognition in 2018. In March he received a Rs 50,000 grant from the Sanctuary Nature Foundation’s ‘Mud On Boots’ project for grassroots

conservationists; in November the Balipara Foundation declared him a ‘Forest Rangers & Guards of The Eastern Himalayas Awardee’ for his “wide-ranging impact” on nature conservation in the region. But perhaps his greatest achievement has been to change his community’s attitude towards the protection of wildlife and forests.

“Alemba showed the way in Fakim. The community at large is now conservation oriented”, says Lansothung Lotha, a Range Forest Officer with the Nagaland Forest Department. Lansothung was posted in Fakim in 2016 and has frequented the sanctuary since he was a student. “I enjoyed my posting there because the community was very responsive. The smallest sensitisation activity had a big impact. I think conservation cannot be forced on people, it is most effective once it begins to grow organically, from within. That is what has happened in Fakim. A sustained process by the Forest Department, supplemented by community leaders, has borne fruit.”

The Fakim Village Council is now leading a concerted push for sustainable tourism. An Eco-tourism Guesthouse has already been

constructed by the North East Initiative Development Agency (NEIDA) and Tata Trusts has provided five villagers the hospitality training required to run it. Most important, the Council has now resolved to set aside 384 acres of community-owned land to establish the ‘Fakim Village Tragopan Conservation Reserve’ adjacent to the wildlife sanctuary. No agriculture or logging will be allowed on this land, nor, of course, will hunting. In a state where over 88 percent of forest land belongs to the tribal communities and hunting and shifting cultivation are major barriers to effective conservation, this is a momentous decision. To respect the rules of a wildlife sanctuary on government land is one thing, to set aside community land for wildlife conservation is quite another.

“We hope these decisions will generate employment for our people and give us the means to educate our children”, says Hanruthrong Yimchunger, Chairman of the Village Council. “With the right help we can show that conservation, not exploitation, is the right path to take. For wildlife and for the community. If we can do that our efforts will have been vindicated. Fakim will be an example for other communities to follow.” 

A camera trap image of a clouded leopard on community-owned forest lands near Fakim WLS (*Photograph: Bhutan Glory Eco Club*)



Views from the Field

“In addition to their primary duties, field staff provide great insights into wildlife behaviour and habitat interactions.”

Kasturi Prashant Sule

Deputy Conservator of Forests, Sirohi, Rajasthan

Frontline staff are the very backbone of forest management. Being deployed in the field, they reside in the forests including crucial wildlife habitats and are the first line of defence in wildlife protection against poachers. Their daily patrolling observations provide great insights into wildlife and habitat interactions and behaviour patterns, making them invaluable for research and knowledge development alongside their primary duty of protecting wildlife and its habitats.

These foot soldiers face very fundamental problems starting from basic hygiene and accommodation issues to a lack of quality protective gear. Being stationed in remote forest camps, they face difficulties in accessing immediate medical aid during emergencies, and are vulnerable to attacks by poachers and wild animals while on duty. Additionally, poor communication networks exacerbate these challenges. These conditions significantly impact the morale and mental health of the staff, highlighting the need for effectively management and support measures.

The Assam Forest Department (where

I was previously posted) has an armed Forest Protection Force, which is crucial in ensuring the security of our Van Rakshaks. We also ensure that our frontline staff are equipped with the necessary basic protective gear like leech socks, jungle boots, mosquito nets, rain and winter gear. Staff members are rotated periodically between interior camps to those closer to headquarters to avoid prolonged exposure to difficult conditions and to



maintain socialisation. Regular training programs, including refresher courses, skill enhancement, technology training and motivation and morale-building sessions are organised to foster the overall development of staff.

However, I would also like to see mandatory, regular medical checkups - including mental health and counselling sessions - being organised in an institutional manner. This will act as preventive and curative care for the staff.

I remember that when I joined the Digboi Division of Assam Forest Department for range in-charge training, the formation of the new Dihing Patkai National Park was underway. The ground survey for preparing the boundary notification was in full swing. With a small team of forest guards, foresters and AFPP staff, we walked through the dense rainforest, cutting through bushes and lianas and battling leeches and bruises. After a couple of hours, we had to survey the boundary

which was a river. Without hesitation, the staff entered the waters, handing me a crude bamboo stick. I was initially scared but looking at the dedication of the staff I was inspired and pressed on. For nearly three-and-a-half hours, we waded through waist-deep waters, tracking the boundary amidst dense water plants, remaining vigilant for elephants in the forest. By the time we returned to the office, each of us were soaked to the skin and had dozens of leech bites and scratches.

Reflecting that night, I realised that without the sincerity and dedication of the field staff to ensure the forest boundary is well demarcated and protected, the decision makers at higher positions would be severely hindered. Today, the area has been notified as a National Park and granted the highest possible protection. A significant portion of this pristine forest stands preserved: a testament to the sacrifices made by our dedicated and passionate field staff for the sake of our forests. 🦶🦶

Frontline staff patrolling Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, Assam, on elephant back
Photograph: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee / WTI





Building Capacity

A photograph showing four forest guards in khaki uniforms standing in a small boat on a river. They are surrounded by dense, tall green grasses and trees. The guards are engaged in a training exercise. One guard on the left is holding a fern frond. The guard in the center is holding a white paper. The guard on the right is holding a rifle. The scene is set in a lush, green forest environment.

Frontline forest staff during a training exercise in Kaziranga National Park

Photograph: WTI



Photograph: Subhamoy Bhattacharjee / WTI

2.1 Wildlife Trust of India's Van Rakshak Project

Developing a highly skilled and effective frontline workforce for India's forest and wildlife protection requires comprehensive training as well as robust infrastructure and equipment support to the Vanrakshaks. It has been stated that the effectiveness of many Protected Areas, including Tiger Reserves, could be strengthened by increasing the number of trained and well-equipped Vanrakshaks, who can perform their duties effectively

(National Tiger Conservation Authority, 2023). While existing forestry training institutions provide a solid foundation to the Vanrakshaks, there is also a felt need to further enhance their focus on the non-traditional forestry and specialized topics such as prevention of wildlife crime and mitigation of human-wildlife conflict. The Van Rakshak Project (Guardians of the Wild) or VRP was conceptualized by the founders of WTI in 1999 as the second

The Van Rakshak Project was launched in 2000 to assist forest departments across the country in developing a strong, well-equipped and motivated force of frontline staff in Protected Areas across India.

project that the then nascent organization undertook to strengthen the capacity of India's frontline forest staff. The project was officially launched in 2000, with a goal to assist the state forest departments across the country in developing a strong, well-equipped, and motivated workforce in the PAs and its fringes. This initiative was meant to supplement the professional training and support provided by the state governments to its frontline staff.

The three major objectives of VRP are:

- to create a strong and well-equipped frontline field staff.
- to boost field staff morale.
- to curb poaching and check forest degradation.

This initiative was envisaged to focus on **Training, Equipping, Awareness, and Morale Boosting (T.E.A.M)** of the Vanrakshaks. Considering the extensive network of PAs across India, it was decided

in the initial phases to prioritize forests having the presence of flagship species including tigers (*Panthera tigris*), elephants (*Elephas maximus*), and rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*).

VRP has been one of WTI's longest running projects and has been successful in making a positive impact on the professional capacities of Vanrakshaks across India. It is perhaps the largest such program in the country by any non-government agency, having supported over 21,000 frontline forest staff until March, 2025.

The three approaches employed under VRP to support the frontline forest staff include:

- Training workshops focusing on wildlife crime prevention, mitigation of human-wildlife conflict, and basics of wildlife rescue;
- Providing essential gear and equipment support to the Vanrakshaks; and
- Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme as immediate supplementary aid to the frontline staff or their families in case of injuries or death

These three approaches under VRP constitute a three-pronged framework by WTI to not only strengthen the capacities of the Vanrakshaks but also to provide them with a supplementary safety net. In subsequent sections, details of the VRP training workshops and equipping support implemented by WTI are discussed while the VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme is described in a dedicated chapter of its own. 📖

The Van Rakshak Project at a Glance

30,000+

frontline staff covered by
an ex-gratia umbrella

540 staff / dependents provided ex-gratia
support for injury / disability / death on duty

21,000+

frontline staff trained

across 150 Protected Areas in India
and transboundary regions



19,675

trained in Wildlife Crime Control

- > Overview of wildlife crime
- > Forensic investigation
- > Wildlife law
- > Patrolling and field craft
- > PA- specific antipoaching strategies



314

trained in Wildlife Rescue

- > Planning rescue missions
- > Securing distressed wildlife
- > Management and rehabilitation of rescued wildlife



1186

trained in Human-Wildlife Conflict mitigation

- > Drivers and dynamics of conflict
- > Capture and release principles and procedures
- > Stakeholder analysis
- > Mitigation measures



18,720

provided with requisite field equipment



2.2 WTI Trainings for Frontline Forest Staff

WTI's Van Rakshak Project (VRP) provides holistic training to the forest department's frontline staff through intensive, two to five day-long training modules supplementing the experience and proficiency of the participating personnel. These trainings primarily focus on enhancing the capacity of the Vanrakshaks on wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation. Between 2000 and 2025, WTI has trained over 21,000 personnel across 150 PAs in India and transboundary regions.

Based on the prior experiences and gap assessments, WTI has designed modules for both wildlife crime prevention and human wildlife conflict mitigation trainings, including those for different grades or categories of the frontline forest staff. Each training is preceded by a needs assessment of the participating personnel to identify the gaps in knowledge and skill, as well as to gauge the specific requirements of the PA. This helps to modify the modules to suit the Forest Department's specific requirements. Finally, each training is followed by evaluations through pre and post-training test to assess the change in trainee's knowledge base as well as feedback surveys to gauge the outcome and quality of the workshops.

In addition to the trainings for the Vanrakshaks, WTI also conducts trainings for trainers known as "Training of Trainers" (ToT). The goal of ToT is to equip suitable

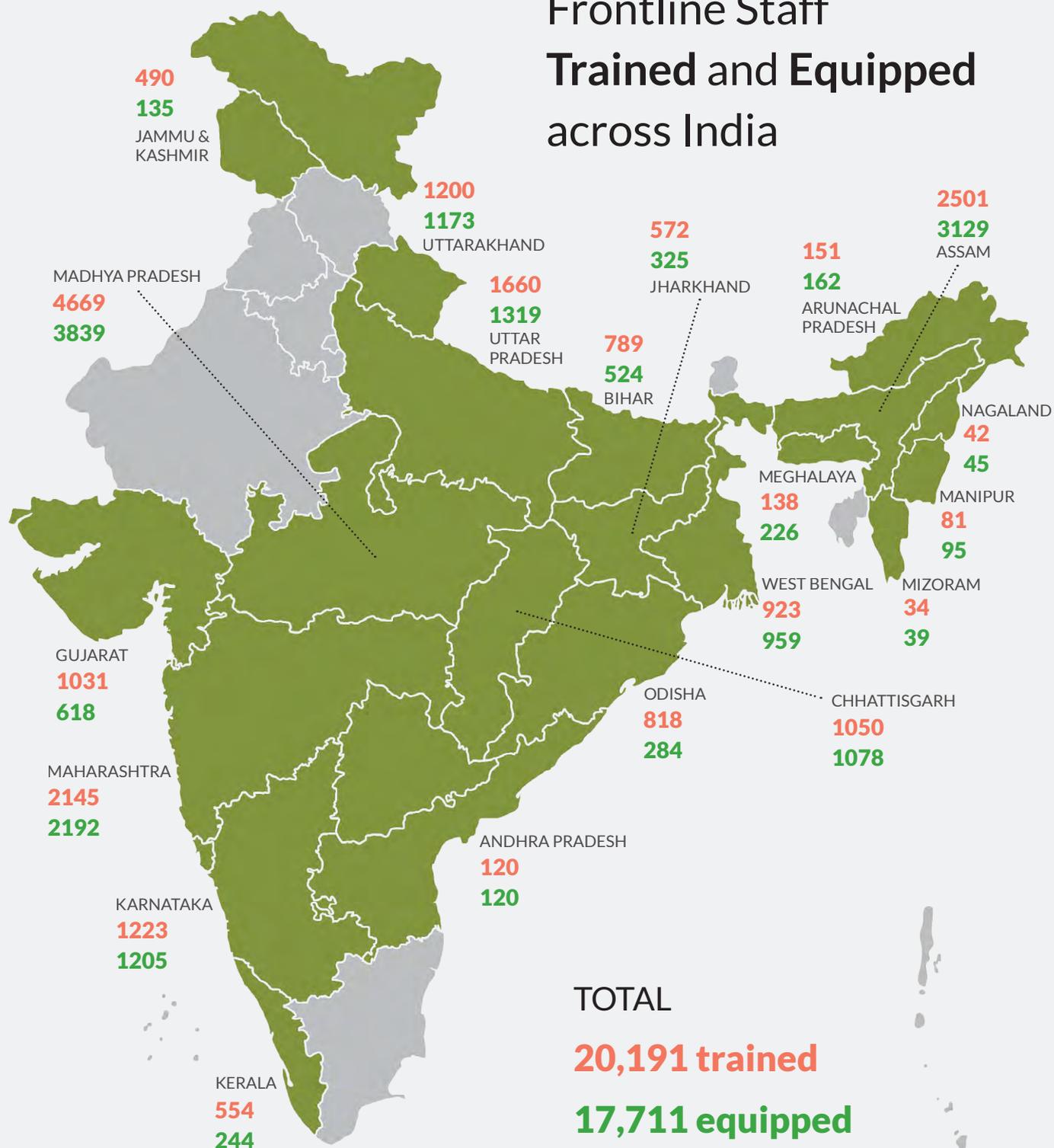
candidates with the skills and confidence to conduct WTI's VRP trainings on wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation for Vanrakshaks. These trainings cover a vast range of topics, with the curriculum divided into two main categories: a general training module followed by theme specific modules focusing either on wildlife crime prevention or conflict mitigation.

Before conducting wildlife crime prevention trainings or human-wildlife conflict mitigation trainings, WTI trainers/staff conduct need assessments in the concerned area (PA or fringes) where the training is planned. This is to identify the specific needs of the PA or fringes and participants' level of knowledge and accordingly modify the syllabus.

The need assessments help in getting details about the Vanrakshaks, the challenges and problems they face, the equipment and training needed to improve their performance, and the threats in the protected areas. These details are useful in creating an appropriate and successful training program that focuses on their needs. Furthermore, these assessments help in understanding the gaps and weaknesses of the forest department to be able to fill the gap during the training and also assist in organizing and planning the workshop.

To supplement the capacity strengthening

Frontline Staff Trained and Equipped across India





Clockwise from Top: Frontline staff receiving training in crime scene investigation, GPS tracking and snare removal in various PAs across the country (Photographs: WTI)



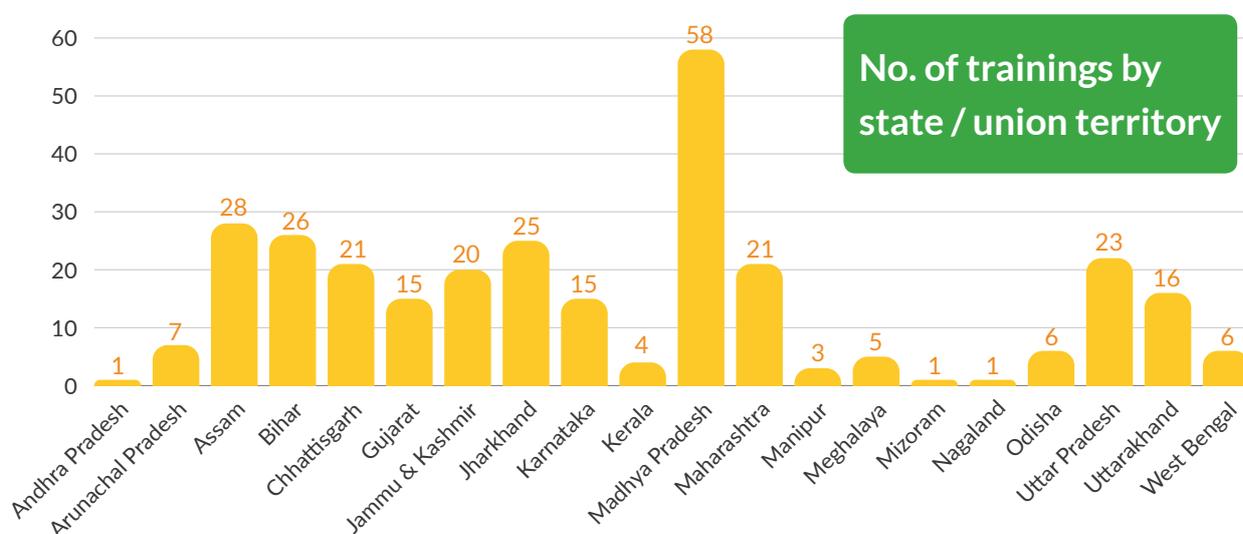
trainings, WTI also provides essential gear and equipment support to Vanrakshaks. Until March, 2025, WTI has equipped over 18,500 Vanrakshaks with requisite field gears and equipment. A specific kit has been carefully designed for this purpose, which includes a backpack, sleeping bag or raincoat, jacket, water bottle, cap, and a torch. Depending on the need assessment conducted before each training, the kits may be modified as per what works best in that specific PA. For example, if the training is done in a high altitude PA, then the jackets and sleeping bags provided will be those meant for high altitude areas, while it may not be the same in PAs located in lower altitudes.

2.2.1 VRP Wildlife Crime Prevention Trainings

Wildlife Trust of India's Wildlife Crime and Control Division (WCCD) is dedicated to combating key wildlife crimes, implementing illegal wildlife trade (IWT) control measures, training frontline staff, providing legal assistance, and employing

capacity strengthening techniques that aim to effectively reduce poaching or IWT across India. The VRP trainings on wildlife crime prevention work to strengthen the capacity of frontline staff and includes intense, three-day workshops focused on wildlife and criminal law, court procedures, ethical law enforcement practices, mock field and practical sessions on crime scene investigations. Since 2001, WTI's VRP has conducted more than **300 Wildlife Crime Prevention workshops** for Vanrakshaks, **training over 19,000 staff** from more than **120 protected areas** across India, including transboundary areas. In addition to training frontline staff, WTI has also assisted enforcement authorities in 347 wildlife enforcement operations, to dismantle illegal wildlife trade & trafficking, further strengthening our impact on curbing wildlife crime in the country.

Trainings are offered to forest departments based on their request as well as funding/ logistical assistance they can provide for it. A need assessment is conducted before each of the Wildlife Crime Prevention Trainings,



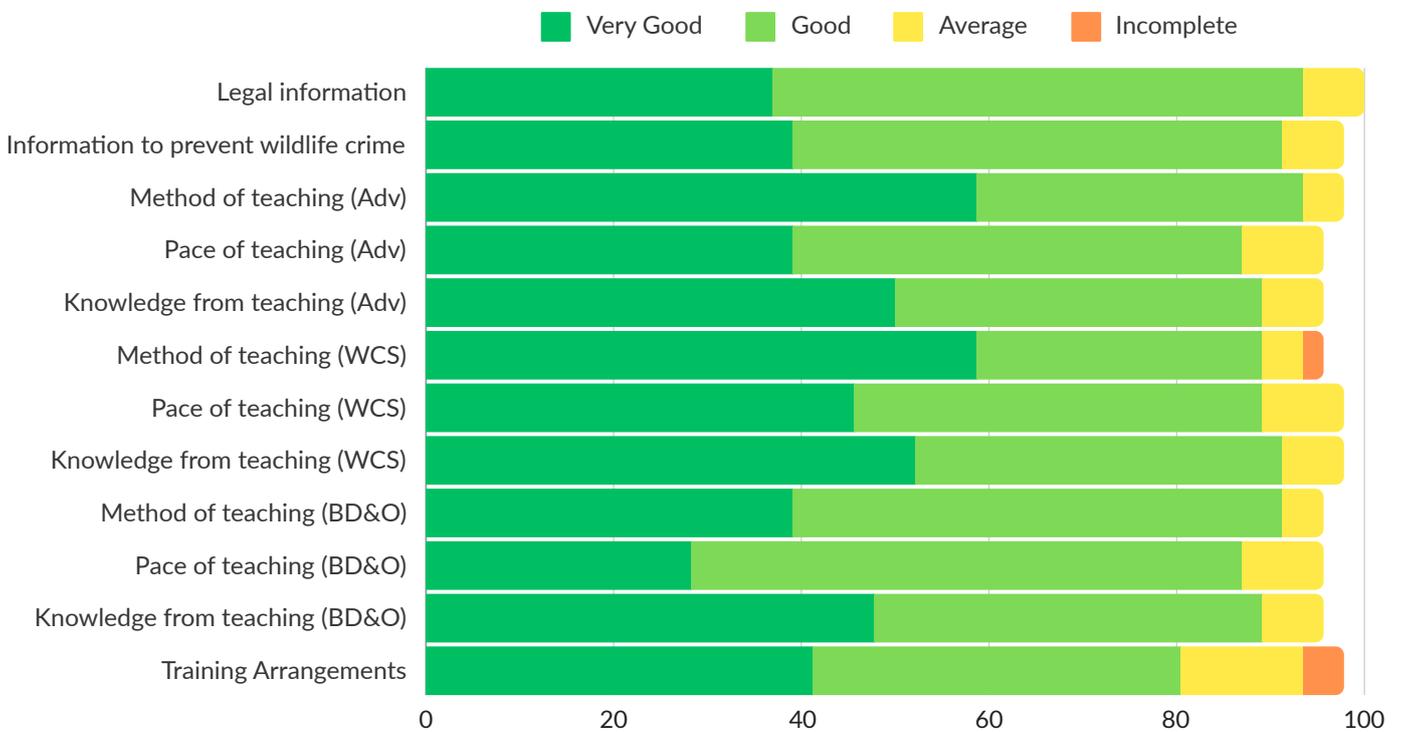
302 Wildlife Crime Prevention trainings conducted since 2001

and the training module, topics covered, kits procured for the department is refined based on the assessment results.

The Wildlife Crime Prevention training (WCPT) is designed for Vanrakshaks, with the goal of creating a strong, well equipped, and motivated workforce capable of combating poaching and other wildlife crime. The course is structured as a balanced combination of classroom-based learning and field exercises, aimed at delivering practical, on-site training on wildlife conservation, status of wildlife crime in India and in the world, provisions of wildlife and associated laws, field craft, and patrolling procedures – all contextualized to local realities. A complete WCPT cycle includes three sets of training over a period of 4 years, starting with a fresher training and followed by two refresher training, with a gap year in between.

Two distinct training modules for WCPT have been developed to reflect the different roles of Vanrakshaks:

MODULE A is designed for Deputy Conservators of Forests (DCFs), Assistant Conservators of Forests (ACFs), Range Forest Officers (RFOs), and Deputy Range Forest Officers (DRFOs). This module focuses on topics such as the nature of wildlife crimes, investigation procedures, the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (amended 2022) (WLPA 1972), and the preparation of anti-poaching plans. This 3-day training is conducted on-site and includes wildlife crime modules with practical exercises. Trainees are eligible to receive a certificate and a personal patrol kit upon completion. The training involves evaluations through pre-and post-tests, presentations, fieldwork, and interactive discussions.



Sample of the feedback received from trainees of a VRP Wildlife Crime Prevention training organized in Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra

Wildlife Crime Prevention Trainings: Course Content

MODULE {A}

- Introduction to WTI & the Van Rakshak Project
- Needs of frontline forest staff and expected goals of the capacity building training
- Overview of wildlife crime in India
 - Defining wildlife & wildlife crime
 - Subsistence, sport hunting, and commercial poaching and trade
 - Species in illegal wildlife trade and hunting methods
 - Global Wildlife Trade scenario
- Conducting a criminal investigation
 - Nexus between local, national, and international criminals
 - Steps to investigate a crime scene and collect evidence
 - Maintaining an informer network and intelligence analysis
 - Conducting sting operations, interrogations, and disposing confiscated specimens
- Understanding wildlife laws of India including the relevant sections of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: Sections 9, 11, 17 A, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 39, 40, 42, 43, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55, 56, 57
- Legal exercise on case study
- Identification of parts, products, and fakes
- Interactive session on creating an anti-poaching plan for the PA

MODULE {B}

- Introduction to WTI & the Van Rakshak Project
- Understanding the importance of wildlife conservation & ecology
 - Biogeographic classification
 - Biodiversity values, threats to biodiversity
 - In-situ and ex-situ conservation
 - Ecosystem structure and function
 - Types and Characteristic features of different kinds of ecosystems
- Overview of wildlife crime in India (as outlined in MODULE A)
- Field craft
 - Identifying hoof & pug marks and scat
 - Reading a toposheet and analysing maps
- Patrolling in the forest
 - Essential factors for successful patrol
 - Recording observations
 - Guidelines for patrolling
- Field investigations
 - Developing an informer network
 - Crime scene analysis and evidence collection
- Field work: Patrolling exercise and interpreting signs
- Understanding wildlife laws of India including the relevant sections of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972
- Anti-poaching plan for the PA and using an anti-poaching kit

MODULE B is designed for Range Officers, Deputy Range Officers, Foresters, Forest Guards, and other frontline or temporary field staff. It covers the importance of training and equipping frontline personnel, introduces the concept of wildlife conservation, provides an overview of wildlife law and crime, and imparts fundamental knowledge of field craft and patrolling.

EVALUATIONS: As part of the WCPT, participants are evaluated on their knowledge before and after the training sessions. This evaluation is conducted using pre- and post-training questionnaires, each consisting of 10 to 15 questions that gauge the staff's understanding of key aspects of wildlife crime, tailored to their specific landscapes. Over the course of the complete training cycle, the data compiled helps in assessing the level of increase or decrease in knowledge of the trainees (*refer to the case study on Valmiki TR below*).

Additionally, feedback surveys (*see previous spread, bottom left*) are administered to gain a better understanding of the staff's views on the training, which helps in improvement of the training structure and module.

>> CASE STUDY: VALMIKI TIGER RESERVE, BIHAR

A Report on Strengthening Wildlife Crime Prevention Capacity at Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar (2021 to 2024)

WTI, in collaboration with the Department of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of Bihar and the United States Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs (INL), implemented a series of Wildlife Crime Prevention trainings (WCPTs) (one Fresher Training in 2021, two Refresher Training in 2022 & 2024), under

the Van Rakshak Project (VRP) at Valmiki Tiger Reserve (VTR) in Bihar. This three-year structured training program aimed to build a legally competent, operationally skilled frontline forest workforce capable of detecting wildlife crimes, and investigating and prosecuting wildlife offenders efficiently.

Over the course of three trainings held in a period of three years (2021-2024), 126 frontline staff were trained following the training Module B for WCPT, while 90 were equipped in Valmiki Tiger Reserve. The participants for the three training were all Vanrakshaks up to the ranks of Range Forest Officer.

The training module was tweaked to address the requirements of VTR staff and emphasized the following four key competency domains:

- Understanding of the WLPA 1972 (and later, amendments) and allied laws (Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (now Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023), Indian Penal Code, Indian Forest Act, 1927, etc.);
- Application of investigative and forensic procedures;
- Field craft and anti-poaching tactics; and
- Procedural documentation and courtroom readiness.

The trainings included a mixed-method pedagogy, combining theory and practical sessions. The theoretical sessions included topics on law, wildlife crime trends, offender profiling, and cybercrime monitoring. The practical sessions included skill development exercises including anti-snare walks, mock crime-scene investigation, wildlife article identification, mock interrogation drills, preliminary wildlife offence registration, and mock courtroom trials.



A Wildlife Crime Prevention Training being undertaken at Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar (Photograph: WTI)

The trainings were preceded and succeeded by an evaluation of the trainees, where identical pre- and post-training tests (with post-test difficulty adjustments) were conducted to measure potential knowledge gain of the participants quantitatively over the period of three years, i.e. the entire training cycle. The knowledge gain of the Vanrakshaks in VTR was assessed by comparing the pre-test score of the fresher training with the post test score of the refresher training.

A benchmark of 25% increase in the knowledge level of the participants was set as the staff were assumed to possess a certain degree of knowledge before being trained. Out of the total number of participants (n=126), all of the participants had shown an increment of above 90%, which clearly indicated heightened increment in the knowledge level of the

trainees on completion of the 4-year training cycle. Further breaking this down, in 2021, 66.7% of the trainees scored below 60% in the pre-test, while the average score went up to 84% post training. In 2022, The percentage of participating Vanrakshaks scoring between 50%-75% rose from 42.86% in pre-test to 54.29% in post-test, while the percentage of staff scoring had more than 75% doubled from 17.14% in pre-test to 37.14% in post-test. And in 2024, the training pre and post-tests recorded +83.3% knowledge gain, as a result of a combination of a sharp drop in below-average scorers and the highest proportion of above-average performers recorded in all three trainings.

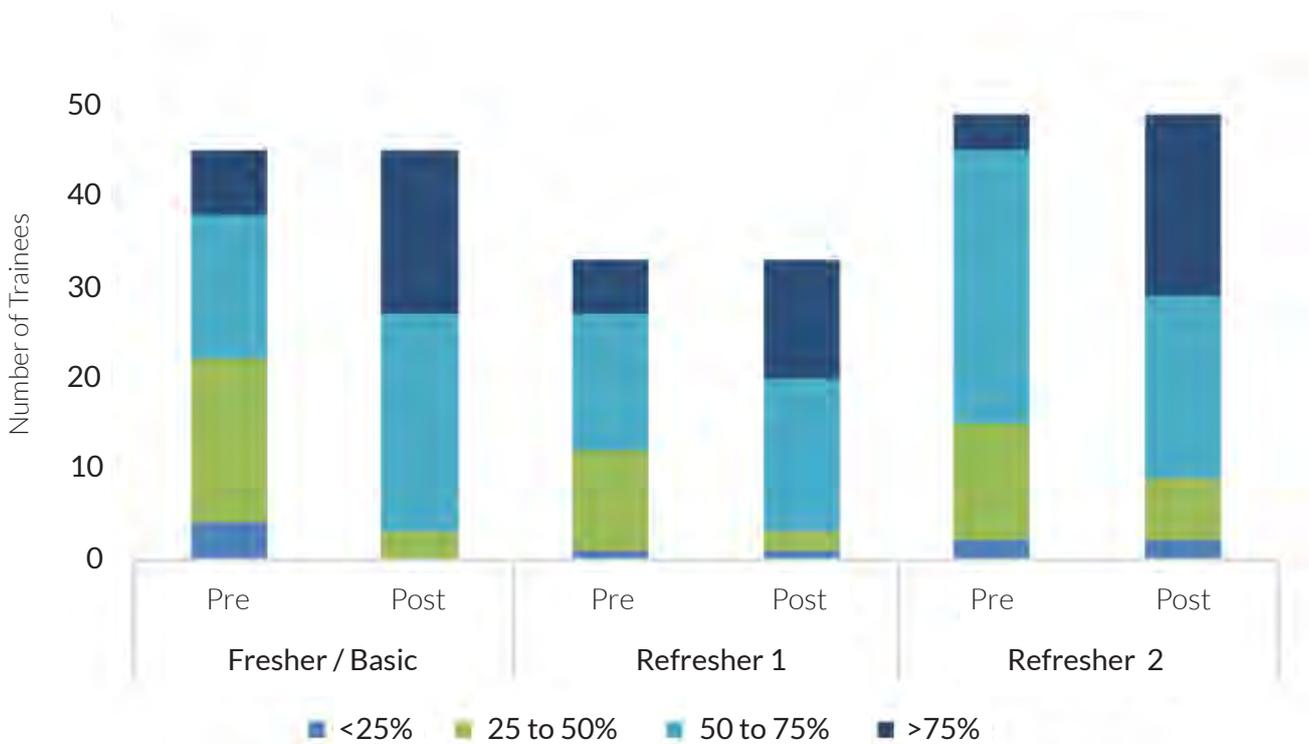
The team also identified few gap areas based on their assessment of the participating Vanrakshaks in VTR. It was noted that a shortage of permanent staff

in the frontline was leading to wildlife enforcement gaps on ground. The staff retention in the landscape was also a major concern, particularly among the younger recruits. The need for structured refresher training cycles to address evolving methods adopted by wildlife criminals in the field was also identified as a requirement by WTI.

To conclude, between 2021-2024, the Van Rakshak Project (VRP) WCPTs at Valmiki Tiger Reserve evolved from laying a basic foundation of legal awareness and patrolling skills, to equipping the frontline forest personnel with advanced, technology-enabled investigative capabilities. This change reflects not only the adaptability of the VRP curriculum to emerging threats – such as cyber-enabled wildlife crime – but also strengthening

of the trainee competencies over time in a structured manner. The cumulative approach in implementing a fresher followed by two refresher trainings on wildlife crime prevention for Vanrakshaks of VTR is critical for building their resilience, as they operate in a complex transboundary environment of the Indo-Nepal border region, where wildlife crime networks are dynamic, well-organized, and increasingly sophisticated.

Adding to this, the consistent improvement in post-training scores, together with the steady rise in the proportion of high-scoring participants, provides clear evidence that an investment in a structured and progressive capacity-building program for Vanrakshaks yields tangible results and is crucial to effectively enhance their capacities to combat wildlife crime.



Comparison of pre and post-training scores across the entire three-year WCPT cycle in Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar



Frontline forest staff during a training exercise in Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar

Photograph: Sreenath K / WTI

2.2.2 VRP Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation Trainings

Human-wildlife conflict (HWC) is a multidimensional problem, which not only is a major challenge for wildlife conservation, particularly for large mammals, but is also a significant source of distress for the affected communities. The IUCN SSC Human-Wildlife Conflict Task Force describes HWC as a clash between the interests or needs of humans and the perceived or actual threat, whether direct or recurring, posed by a wildlife species, eventually leading to negative implications for the people and/or the animal involved. If a HWC is not addressed effectively, it may foster long-term negative attitude among the local communities towards the specific conflict species. While addressing the major drivers of HWC requires holistic and multi-stakeholder approach, it is often the Vanrakshaks and the local communities who are at the forefront of facing the consequences.

WTI employs a comprehensive model of addressing HWC, which includes creation of Rapid Response Teams (RRTs), empowering the local communities through Primary Response Teams (PRTs) in conflict hotspots, and strengthening the capacity of Vanrakshaks on effective management of HWC situations. Forest Departments oversee Rapid Response Teams (RRT), which manage human-wildlife conflict and wildlife emergencies. In high conflict areas, WTI's model includes a RRT made up of a biologist, a sociologist, and a veterinarian. This model also involves Primary Response Teams (PRTs) consisting of local volunteers and influential community members who are trained to support RRTs by relaying information to the authorities and RRT members when an incident is reported in a village. Simultaneously, they inform

the villagers of the presence of a conflict animal as well as of the precautionary measures to be taken. Other tasks PRT members perform include managing crowds and negotiating safe passage for wildlife during conflict mitigation efforts, and providing first-aid to any person injured by the animal.

During conflict situations, the local volunteers from the PRTs act as the first responders. Meanwhile, RRT members take on specific roles: the veterinarian responds to wildlife emergencies, the biologist investigates the underlying causes of conflict in the landscape, and the sociologist focuses on sensitizing local communities and working towards preventing future conflict scenarios.

As a part of this model, the RRTs work in conjunction with the state forest department and PRTs. Additionally, they support the network of PRTs in the region by providing logistical and technical support. This includes supplying various types of equipment for crowd control, monitoring the movement of conflict animals, and snake rescue kits when required.

The increasing magnitude of HWC in India and the associated complexities, WTI realized the need to strengthen the capacities of Vanrakshaks in efficiently managing HWC situations. Therefore, VRP trainings on HWC mitigation were initiated in 2017 for the frontline personnel in Jammu and Kashmir. Since then, WTI has conducted **20 HWC mitigation trainings for over 1100 Vanrakshaks in seven Indian states.**

As is done with the WCPTs, each HWC mitigation training for Vanrakshaks is preceded by a needs assessment with



A Rapid Response Team (RRT) in Odisha being trained in the use of drones to monitor wildlife during conflict situations (Photograph: WTI)

the concerned PA or forest department and the module is accordingly tweaked to offer region and species-specific training. The needs assessment for HWC mitigation trainings identifies the following aspects:

- Frontline forest staff strength in the forest division
- Human-Wildlife Conflict issues surrounding the Protected Area or division
- Magnitude and nature of conflict & the mitigation measures employed
- Existing equipment and infrastructure used by the Forest Department for mitigating conflict
- Existing knowledge and skills of the Vanrakshaks in the forest division

These VRP HWC mitigation trainings are focused on participatory mapping of HWC, identifying causes and drivers of HWC (including human behavior and practices), ecology and behavior of the animal (and the species) involved in the conflict, identifying and facilitating stakeholder involvement, and providing the frontline staff with support and strategies towards conflict mitigation. Each of the HWC mitigation trainings are also accompanied with trainee

evaluations involving pre- and post-training tests as well as feedback surveys to gauge the trainings’ effectiveness.

Some of the key VRP HWC trainings are discussed below as case studies.

>> CASE STUDY: ODISHA

The surge in human-wildlife conflict cases in Odisha prompted WTI, in collaboration with the Odisha Forest Department, to conduct a series of capacity-strengthening trainings for all the eight Forest Circles in the state in 2021. Adopting a similar approach as WCPTs, these workshops were structured over multiple years, starting with a basic training, followed up by advanced or refresher trainings. The first level or the basic HWC mitigation trainings for 166 Vanrakshaks were conducted from October, 2021 to November, 2022. The advanced training program, structured over eight trainings, was held in August, 2024, and saw participation from 131 trainees of eight Forest Circles. For each of these trainings, the frontline members involved, included rangers, foresters, forest guards, and other regional officers from each forest division within the eight circles.

Forest Circle	Number of Participants	Number of Forest Divisions	Participants showing positive increase in knowledge
Angul	21	7	42%
Baripada	31	7	70%
Berhampur	15	7	60%
Bhawanipatna	30	6	76%
Bhubaneswar	15	8	53%
Koraput	19	5	84%
Rourkela	18	5	72%
Sambalpur	17	5	64%
TOTAL	167	50	Average: 65%

Increase in instantaneous knowledge based on the scores of participants’ pre- and post-tests in Odisha

Human-wildlife Conflict Mitigation Trainings: Course Content

MODULE [GENERAL/CORE]

(These are compulsory to be covered during the VRP trainings)

- Human-Wildlife Conflict identification & its dynamics
- Facets of human behaviour inducing HWC
- Stakeholder identification, interest & influence
- Concepts of HWC mitigation measures
- Tools of HWC mitigation measures: Opportunities & Challenges
- Decision support system for HWC mitigation: information & data collection

MODULE [OPTIONAL/NEED-SPECIFIC]

(Depending on the need of the training, context of the conflict and region, etc.)

- Ecology and Behaviour of Conflict species
- Principles of Managing temporarily displaced wildlife or conflict animal
- Community Engagement in Conflict Mitigation
- Species specific HWC management methods
- Communication, as a conflict aversion tool
- Tools and Techniques of monitoring conflict animals
- Legal framework and SOPs for HWC mitigation

The basic training covered various topics related to HWC management such as identifying high-conflict areas in Odisha, assessing the type and intensity of conflicts, drivers and dynamics of HWC, potential mitigation measures, stakeholder analysis, animal capture and release principles and procedures, etc. The primary objective of the basic trainings was to develop a holistic understanding and knowledge on various aspects of species and site-specific conflict management among the Vanrakshaks. Subsequent sessions focused on various wildlife conflict management strategies, detailing the tools and techniques applicable for managing conflict with different mammals. The trainings also included group activities where participants analyzed a hypothetical emergency of wildlife presence in human habitation, identified stakeholders, developed strategies for stakeholder engagement, prioritized necessary equipment, and formulated plans to manage conflict situations. The workshops

concluded with an interactive session where participants created a Conflict Management Strategy for a specific HWC situation in their administrative area. They outlined potential interventions to address each cause and driver of conflict, working towards effective mitigation.

The advanced HWC mitigation training focused on building on the first level training and included sessions on identification and monitoring of the conflict animal using camera traps, soft and hard release of animals as well as techniques for monitoring animals after their release. This two-days training also included a technical session on the use of modern technology in wildlife, which included topics such as the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) and their usages, and mobile applications to gather data from public sources for scientific analysis. Participants also had the opportunity to engage in a hands-on demonstration of thermal imaging drones and UAVs.

Both the basic and advanced trainings began with a pre-test to gauge participants' baseline knowledge and concluded with a post-test to understand their retention of information and increase in knowledge level at the end of the training. They also included group sessions and practical sessions.

These training sessions significantly boosted the morale of forest department staff, enhanced their teamwork and equipped them with valuable skills for effectively mitigating conflict. Based on the pre- and post-training tests for the basic training workshops, the average increase in instantaneous knowledge and capacity of the participants across the eight forest circles in Odisha was an impressive 65%. Meanwhile, in case of the advanced trainings, the cumulative average percentage of the pre-training tests of all the 131 trainees was found to be 48.4%, while the cumulative average score of the post-training test was 55.4%, indicating a 7% increase in trainees' knowledge.

>> CASE STUDY: BANDHAVGARH - SANJAY LANDSCAPE, MADHYA PRADESH

The Bandhavgarh-Sanjay landscape is home to 55 elephants with additional elephants migrating from Chhattisgarh. This influx has resulted in an increase in human-wildlife conflict in the area, highlighting the need to train frontline forest staff on elephant ecology as well as pro-active and reactive measures for elephant conflict mitigation.

In January 2022, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Forest Department, Government of Madhya Pradesh and WTI to work on a project aimed at Human Elephant Conflict Mitigation in Bandhavgarh, which included enhancing the capacities of Vanrakshaks.

Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve

A two-day training program was held in August, 2022 for 28 frontline forest staff from 9 forest ranges in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve. This training focused on understanding conflicts and their causes, mitigating Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC), the ecology and behaviour of elephants as well as of humans, HEC management with the help of stakeholders, and the decision support system of HEC mitigation through information and data collection. Participants explored various strategies for preventing and mitigating conflict in their respective forest ranges, including the following:

- *Installation of an early warning system, hanging solar fences, bio-fences, chili ropes around the village*
- *Constitution of Hathi Mitra Dal to provide facilities for HEC mitigation*
- *Relocation of small villages that are severely affected by HEC*
- *Training frontline forest field staff and Hathi Mitra Dal while raising awareness among local communities to help reduce HEC, and also patrolling affected areas*

This VRP training also focused on aspects such as regional elephant conflict, mapping out the causes, drivers, and conflict spots in the landscape, etc. It included interactive sessions on the ecology and behaviour of both elephants and humans. Participants also engaged in discussions on preventive, reactive and pre-emptive conflict mitigation followed by a group activity exploring various HEC mitigation practices and their effectiveness.

The second half of the training focused on stakeholder identification and analysis, along with a group activity, discussions on the adoption of appropriate HEC mitigation measures, and the creation of a conflict mitigation strategy for each range.

Sanjay Tiger Reserve

In January 2023, a two-day training program was conducted for Vanrakshaks in Sanjay Tiger Reserve to understand the causes and management of HEC and to develop effective conflict management strategies. Thirty participants from three forest ranges attended this VRP training, which included a variety of exercises focused on identifying elephant movement in the villages, factors leading to conflict, interactions with elephants, and different mitigation strategies for future implementation. As a part of the training, pre-tests and post-tests were conducted, with the post-test showing an increase in the participants' increased knowledge.

Anuppur Forest Division

In September 2023, a two-day HEC training was conducted in the Anuppur division, where human-wildlife conflict has been a persistent issue since 2014. The training followed a similar format to the other two HEC mitigation trainings, with a total of 40 participants and an increase in participants' knowledge of HEC post training.

Between 2022 to 2023, 98 frontline forest staff were trained and 15 Primary Response Teams created as part of the Sanjay-Bandhavgarh HEC mitigation project. These VRP HWC mitigation trainings

were followed by further trainings in 2024, training an additional number of 132 Vanrakshaks from central India (Bandhavgarh-Sanjay landscape in Madhya Pradesh and Guru Ghasidas National Park in Chhattisgarh).

>> CASE STUDY: WAYANAD, KERALA

In view of the rise in human-elephant conflict in Wayanad, Kerala, WTI initiated its Wayanad Conflict Mitigation Project, which aims to establish PRTs in HEC hotspots across Wayanad district along with other stakeholders to effectively mitigate conflict, reduce response times, and work towards alleviating the issues on-site. The project also involves strengthening the capacity of the Vanrakshaks to deal with HEC in a proficient manner.

For this, VRP trainings focusing on HEC mitigation were conducted from 2022 to 2023. In this period, three basic courses on HWC mitigation were conducted across three forest divisions in Wayanad, for 75 frontline forest staff. These trainings covered aspects such as the drivers and dynamics of HWC, mitigation measures, stakeholder analysis, and capture and release principles and procedures, along with region-specific interactive sessions. 

State	No. of Trainings	Frontline Staff Trained
Madhya Pradesh	4	130
Odisha	22	297
Kerala	11	324
Jammu and Kashmir	1	250
Uttar Pradesh	4	89
Chhattisgarh	2	60
Arunachal Pradesh	1	36
TOTAL	45	1186

Frontline staff trained under the VRP Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation Trainings until March 2025

TRAININGS FOR PRIMARY RESPONSE TEAM (PRT) MEMBERS

Human-wildlife conflict involving large mammals is a major threat in the fragmented, human-dominated landscapes of India, where local communities are often the foremost to be affected. Not only do they bear major losses, directly or indirectly, they may also end up retaliating against the wildlife, exacerbating the situation further. Since, they are at the forefront of such issues, empowering them with the right set of information on potential mitigation measures as well as involving them in on-ground interventions, helps in fostering coexistence and promoting a positive perception of the wildlife. One such intervention pioneered by WTI with close involvement of the local communities is the creation of Primary Response Teams (PRTs), a network of village-level volunteers, which function as the first line of response, helping in preventing and mitigating human-wildlife conflict (HWC) situations. It is a proven tool for mitigation of HWC involving large mammals through bringing the local stakeholders at the forefront. Till March 2025, WTI was operating 29 PRTs across five states in India involving a total of 414 members from local communities. Each PRT operates and attends to cases within a distance of at least 5 km radius. Therefore, depending on the intensity of the conflict, an area may have multiple PRTs operating at a time. In specific sites, PRT members also provide their assistance in monitoring illegal wildlife activities and are known as Village Vigilance Volunteers. Since 2018 to March, 2025, a total of 77 villagers have been identified as Village Vigilance Volunteers across six PAs.

Members of a PRT usually include local volunteers, village elders, influential people, and local leaders belonging from the local communities in addition to representatives from forest staff and other local stakeholders. PRTs act as frontline responders within a community, working in collaboration with the local Forest Department, Rapid Response

Teams (RRTs) and other relevant agencies during HWC. Therefore, while the focus of this CAR is on the training of the frontline staff employed by the state forest departments, WTI also conducts annual capacity-strengthening trainings for the volunteering members of PRTs.

Once a PRT is set up in an area, the members undergo a comprehensive training in the initial phases on the roles and responsibilities of PRT members, concept of human-wildlife conflict, its prevalence in the region, significance of collaborative efforts in avoiding the negative outcomes of HWC, identifying the conflict species using direct/indirect sign surveys, basic behavior and ecology of the conflict species, etc. This initial training includes various approaches ranging from theoretical sessions, group discussions, and practical sessions on conducting sign surveys and tracking the conflict species to film screenings and conducting mock drills on various aspects of a HWC situation including crowd management and communicating with the forest department or a RRT. The sessions also train the members on appropriately providing support to the affected people including providing first-aid to victims and taking them to the nearest emergency center, securing the conflict location, ensuring safe passage to the animal(s), and helping the Forest Department staff and RRT members in rescue operations. These trainings help the PRT members to be adequately prepared and respond appropriately as the first line of responders to a HWC incident.

WTI also provides refresher trainings to the members of PRTs twice a year to reflect upon the successful approaches and challenges faced by the PRTs in an area, reiterate roles and responsibilities of the members, and exchange relevant updates and ideas. These refreshers also allow the members to communicate with members of other PRTs as well as with the managing teams (RRTs and Forest Department).



Frontline staff of the Kerala Forest Department work with PRT members during a leopard rescue // (Below) A PRT training event conducted at Valmiki Tiger Reserve, Bihar
Photographs: WTI



2.3 Training of Trainers (ToT)

Apart from the trainings for Vanrakshaks on wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation, WTI also conducts an intensive capacity-building program focused on training skilled professionals to conduct VRP trainings. This Training of Trainers (ToT) is designed for individuals working on the ground alongside frontline staff, often in remote and challenging environments, while navigating complex situations that require immediate and informed responses.

The ToT is a training module that helps in building a cadre of trained professionals who could further carry out capacity-building workshops for the Vanrakshaks. Through this, participants from diverse ecological backgrounds and regions are brought together for an interactive training, sharing concepts, unique insights and experiences while working towards enriching the learning environment, fostering collaborative problem-solving and exchanging best practices with each other.

The goal of the ToT is to equip suitable candidates to train Vanrakshaks as per the VRP modules, in an effective and structured manner. As of March, 2025, WTI has created a key group of 35 ToT-qualified trainers, of which 23 trainers are experts on human-wildlife conflict mitigation while 12 are experts on wildlife crime prevention. These qualified trainers include domain experts, officers from forest department, lawyers, university professors, and researchers, allowing for creation of a diverse and robust group of trainers

who can touch upon various conservation challenges and regional contexts.

The ToT covers a vast range of relevant topics, with the curriculum being divided into two main categories – a general training module and a theme specific module. The general training module focuses on developing essential soft skills for conducting training workshops such as training qualities, the training cycle, adult learning principles, and effective communication techniques for public speaking. The theme-based module is further divided into two courses: one on human-wildlife conflict mitigation, which includes human-wildlife interactions and losses, animal management strategies, and mitigation concepts; and another on wildlife crime prevention, covering aspects of illegal wildlife trade, an introduction to Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), enforcement of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and more.

Participants are assessed during the workshop through pre- and post-tests, as well as by conducting mock training sessions on specific topics. Based on these evaluations, a list of qualified trainers is established, who then help WTI with conducting capacity- strengthening programs for Vanrakshaks in India.

>> **GENERAL TRAINING MODULE FOR ToT**

The first half of the ToT focuses on preparing future trainers to effectively train

Vanrakshaks. This session highlights the types of trainer qualities and competencies required for trainers, incorporating practical situations they experience while training others. Conducted during the first two days of the workshop, it covers aspects of a comprehensive training cycle encompassing needs assessments, training design, training delivery, and training impact evaluation, along with the critical elements of adult learning.

Additionally, this section covers effective communication strategies, exploring various methods such as the art of questioning and responding to inquiries, along with a practical session. As a part of this general session, other topics that are touched upon include various learning styles and modules, training tools and mediums, and a practical training exercise, which participants can use and implement when they conduct their own trainings.

A few important teaching/behavioral points emphasized in ToT for future trainers include:

- *The trainers should tailor presentations, exercises, and group activities based on their training's purpose and audience, and keep notes that future presenters can reference.*
- *As trainers create their presentations, they should customize them based on the learners' perspective incorporating games, interactive activities, as well as practical and field sessions to break the monotony of a prolonged session. This creates better engagement.*
- *The language of delivery should be one that the trainer is proficient in and which the audience is also comfortable with.*
- *Before organizing the event, the trainer / concerned forest department should first conduct a needs assessment while also ensuring a project budget and the logistics necessary for the training.*

Actions for ensuring effectiveness	Measures of effectiveness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-training monitoring should be done, communication and support should be provided to trained staff even after training (especially regarding legal matters) • Refresher trainings should be conducted after a year • Selecting local self-motivated trainers • Creating intelligence networks • Evaluation of the training by independent agencies • Providing basic infrastructure and equipment • Train key personnel in crime hotspots • Improving motivation by sharing success stories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase in the number of detections and convictions • No. of cases registered/charge-sheeted (prepared by FL Staff) • Self-motivated reporting and support of local communities in intel, detection and RTI • Increase in population of key species, biodiversity and habitat/forest cover • Change in crime trends • Case studies • Attitude surveys

Actions and measures of effectiveness of Wildlife Crime Prevention training presented to participants during WTI's Training of Trainers

**>> THEME-BASED TRAINING
MODULE FOR ToT**

In this session, the participants are divided into the specific theme based on their expertise. The two themes that are currently included as part of ToT are wildlife crime prevention and human-wildlife conflict mitigation. Once the trainees qualify the ToT, they can hold training sessions on the respective theme they are assigned to.

WILDLIFE CRIME PREVENTION MODULE

This session emphasizes the uniformity and consistency in wildlife crime prevention trainings for Vanrakshaks, effectively imparting a curriculum covering wildlife protection laws, wildlife crime detection and investigation, and, changing trend in wildlife crime, and the tools and methods to adopt for effectively training the Vanrakshaks on these key aspects.

*HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT (HWC)
MITIGATION MODULE*

This module mitigation focuses on key concepts such as the drivers and dynamics of HWC, WTI’s approach to its mitigation, stakeholder mapping and engagement, managing distressed animals during conflict situations, data collection, and both short-term and long-term mitigation strategies. This section of the ToT course emphasizes the various types and the factors driving conflict among local communities and wildlife, as well as the impacts of HWC.

Participants engage in group activities during each theory session to explore various dimensions of HWC management in the region. Additionally, the course covers a section on preparing for animal capture during emergencies based on insights from case studies. The ToT syllabus on this theme involves rigorous, dedicated, and impactful engagement with trainees who are professionals with extensive experience in HWC mitigation, have experience conducting trainings, and those interested in continuing to impart training.

>>TRAINEE EVALUATION IN ToT

Participants must score 65% or higher in their evaluation in order to be certified as a VRP trainer through WTI’s training program and be qualified to train Vanrakshaks. Post-training test scores represent participants’ subject proficiency, which is important for effective knowledge dissemination. During the evaluation of their performance in the training, their understanding of the theoretical material, as reflected in their test results, carries the most weight in determining their eligibility to become trainers for frontline staff in wildlife crime prevention or human-wildlife conflict mitigation.

The Training of Trainer workshops have seen 40 participants trained in 2013, 40 in 2022 and 28 in 2024. Of these, a total of 35 have successfully qualified to deliver VRP trainings.



Activity evaluated	Weightage
Pre-test & post-test score	50%
Group Activity	30%
Individual Assignment	10%
Quality of the prepared strategy document	10%
Total	100%

Criterion for evaluating Trainees/Participants attending WTI’s Training of Trainers



Images from a 'Training of Trainers' event organised by WTI in New Delhi in 2024
Photographs: Madhumay Malik, Sreenath K /WTI



Views from the Field

“Without the concerted efforts of our frontline staff, many more species would be on the brink of extinction”

Rashid Yahya Naqash

Regional Wildlife Warden (Headquarters), Jammu & Kashmir

Our frontline staff are crucial to the protection of wildlife and its habitats. They are responsible for monitoring, patrolling, and protecting wildlife and habitats from poaching, illicit cutting and removal of vegetation, and various other threats. They also play a key role in educating local communities about the importance of wildlife conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. Without their serious engagement and efforts, many more of our species would be at risk of extinction.

Usually, frontline staff are largely neglected and face an uphill task to contribute their best with slog and sweat to protect wildlife. However, they receive no benefits or welfare measures except a rudimentary salary structure. Many frontliners receive a basic per-day pro-rata salary and no benefits such as salary hikes, daily allowances, assured pay at the end of the month, or other benefits that a regular government employee would receive. They overcome both hot and extremely cold climates, douse forest fires, walk their patrol areas facing threats from wild animals as well as from those who try to illegally benefit from forests, and risk their

lives in the line of duty.

In my capacity and area of command, I have always tried to bridge the gap and make the voices of our frontliners heard in the right corners. The decades-old stalemate in career progression has been settled to a great extent by holding frequent Departmental Promotion Committee Meetings. I tried to provide all types of safety gear to the frontliners for full protection and security attached



to their line of duties. For those like daily rated workers who are not entitled to any government welfare schemes or amenities, the role of NGOs like Wildlife Trust of India and others eventually became essential.

I look forward to seeing a strong and organised institutional framework that addresses timely career progressions, risks, and other allowances to be at par with the police and paramilitary personnel. My work will focus on the regularisation of daily-rated labourers who have now attained the status of backbone for the department. I will also work on pursuing the requirement of adequate numbers of field functionaries, their capacity, and training.

For the past three decades, I have had the privilege of working shoulder-to-shoulder with the wildlife frontline staff in the department and can attest that the frontline staff of the UT of Jammu and Kashmir have put in their best abilities to protect our wildlife and habitats. They are working tirelessly in spite of hardships, inhospitable working conditions, and rugged and tough terrain to ensure that wildlife areas are maintained as pristine and managed effectively.

The job of a wildlife guard involves patrolling vast swathes of often tough terrain with minimum protection or equipment and with little or no basic amenities. They have hardly any access

to emergency medical facilities in case of any severe mishaps or illnesses suffered in the line of duty. On average, they walk up to 15-20 km a day to patrol the areas they are assigned to, facing the dangers of encountering wild animals and poachers.

The efforts put in by the field-level staff often go unrecognised. While appreciating the healthy natural areas and even the increase in numbers of flagship species and

successful recoveries of some critically endangered species or restoration of lost habitats like the wetlands, we often miss the fact that these areas and species have been conserved due to the efforts of our frontliners who have tirelessly been protecting and managing these landscapes. Besides,

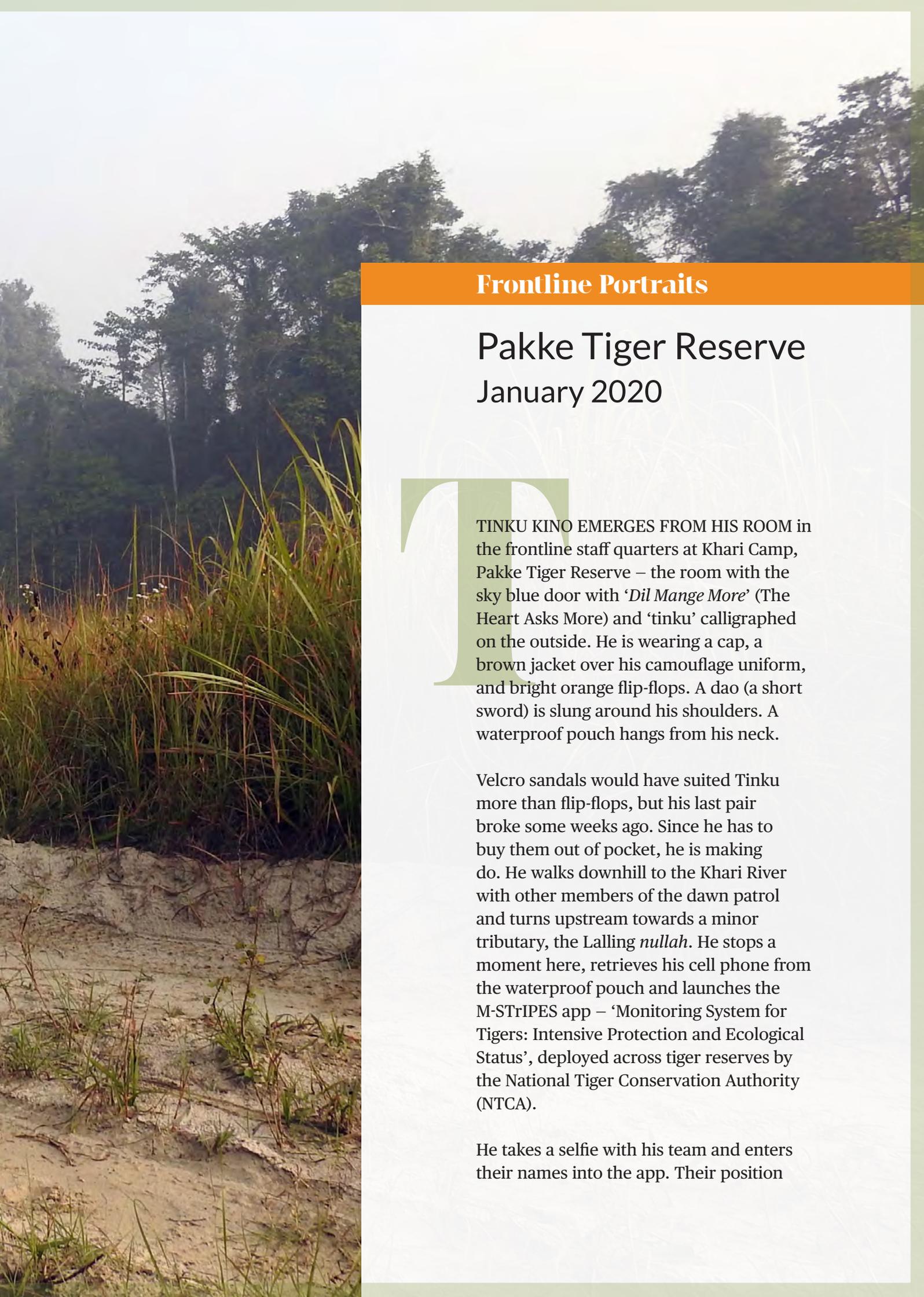
they have always worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the local community members and have played an important role in building an interface between communities and wildlife conservation.

To sum up, the last three decades have witnessed large-scale changes in the Kashmiri landscape with respect to political, socio-cultural, and economic development, as well as environmental and other external factors. These drastic changes have emerged as serious challenges for our field staff, who protect and manage our wild habitats even at the cost of their lives, and have decided not to rest until they see the conservation flag flying high. 

I look forward to seeing a strong, organised institutional framework that addresses timely career progressions and risks.



STPF guard Tinku Kino out on morning patrol
in Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh
(Photograph: Pranav Capila)



Frontline Portraits

Pakke Tiger Reserve January 2020

TINKU KINO EMERGES FROM HIS ROOM in the frontline staff quarters at Khari Camp, Pakke Tiger Reserve – the room with the sky blue door with ‘*Dil Mange More*’ (The Heart Asks More) and ‘tinku’ calligraphed on the outside. He is wearing a cap, a brown jacket over his camouflage uniform, and bright orange flip-flops. A dao (a short sword) is slung around his shoulders. A waterproof pouch hangs from his neck.

Velcro sandals would have suited Tinku more than flip-flops, but his last pair broke some weeks ago. Since he has to buy them out of pocket, he is making do. He walks downhill to the Khari River with other members of the dawn patrol and turns upstream towards a minor tributary, the Lalling *nullah*. He stops a moment here, retrieves his cell phone from the waterproof pouch and launches the M-STripES app – ‘Monitoring System for Tigers: Intensive Protection and Ecological Status’, deployed across tiger reserves by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

He takes a selfie with his team and enters their names into the app. Their position

appears on an offline map of the tiger reserve; the route and distance of their patrol will now be part of the official record.

It is 6.30 a.m. and Tinku maintains a brisk pace along a jeep track, stopping occasionally to photograph animal signs and sightings. He wades across a knee-deep rivulet and reaches under a bush, retrieving a dull brown rectangular box: a camera trap. He adjusts the preset capture interval, replaces the batteries and conceals the camera once again. With the nullah sickle-curving around a bend, he decides to take a trail that cuts through the jungle.

On the other side, just as he emerges from the undergrowth, he stops dead in his tracks. In the water ahead, less than 10 metres away, there is a *makhna* (tuskless male elephant).

Pakke's *makhnas* can sometimes be ill-

tempered, but this one takes a long look at the patrolling team, then lumbers into the tall grass and melts into the trees beyond.

Tinku is a member of the Arunachal Pradesh Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF). He has been with the STPF since August 2013, posted first at Upper Dekorai and then at Khari. His association with Pakke, however, began several years prior. When he was a lad just out of school, he

began working at the Nameri West Camp as a beat guard, a 'daily wage' or 'casual' worker, earning Rs. 1,430 a month. "*Uss time main bhaag gaya thha...*" he says; "I ran away... I was terrified of living in the jungle."

On April 19, 2007, Forest Guard P.D. Majhi was shot and killed in an encounter with poachers. Young Tinku was among the frontline staff called to the scene. "I will never forget what I saw that day," he says.

"There was blood everywhere. Majhi sir's body was all stiff, hunched over. Jaimala [a forest department elephant] was called for and they took Majhi sir's body to the Range Office on her back."

It was all too much for the boy. He left soon after, began a Bachelor's degree in Political Science in 2010, got married in 2011. That he found himself back with the Forest Department in 2013 was, he feels,

inevitable. "I needed a job and you don't get many other opportunities out here."

Tinku has been in the STPF for over six years now but remains a casual worker. He earns just Rs. 14,000 a month, plus rice rations. His wages, often delayed by several months, are effectively paid by the kilometre, since STPF personnel in Pakke must walk a minimum of 200 M-STripES-logged kilometres on patrol per month.

"It's not as if we never feel tired when we are out on patrol, or afraid when we encounter an animal or a poacher. But we keep each other's spirits up. We look out for each other; we have each other's back."



Top: A makhna (male tuskless elephant) encountered on patrol // Left: STPF guard Sanjay Tisso at the Khari Camp // Right: A leopard pugmark by the Lalling nullah (Photographs: Pranav Capila)

He asserts that he is no longer the frightened boy in the jungle, describing encounters with Pakke's *makhnas*, and the time he saw a leopard at close quarters ("just a glimpse and it was gone"). He has learned that comradeship is at the heart of life in the jungle: "It's not as if we never feel tired when we are out on patrol, or afraid when we encounter an animal or a poacher. But we keep each other's spirits up. We look out for each other; we have each other's back."

* * *

SANJAY TISSO HAS WORKED IN PAKKE since 2007, first with the anti-poaching squad and subsequently with the STPF. Waiting at the West Bank Gate to accompany a VIP safari arriving from the Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival in nearby Seijosa, he is in full uniform, scrubbed and shining from cap to boots, and armed with a .315 rifle.

The Forest Department provides each STPF guard with a raincoat, a pair of jungle boots and just enough cloth to get a shirt and a pair of trousers stitched. The uniform and boots, to be worn in field conditions day after day, are required to last at least a year. "Earlier we also used to get a torch, an umbrella and a mosquito net if there was a tiger or elephant census," Sanjay says. "But not in recent years." The headlamp he wears on night patrol, the dark green jacket with which he keeps out the winter chill – he bought them himself, from a local market.

Even firearms, it seems, aren't always deemed essential: there has been a crippling shortage of weapons for Pakke's frontline staff for several years now. And for once funds aren't the issue; the state government just hasn't got around to

Each STPF guard is provided a raincoat, a pair of jungle boots and just enough cloth to get a shirt and a pair of trousers stitched. The uniform and boots, worn everyday, are supposed to last at least a year in field conditions.

clearing the purchase of weapons, despite repeated entreaties.

Like the other STPF guards Sanjay received six months of overdue wages just a day ago. STPF personnel get their wages through Project Tiger, a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. The issue is that the state government, which has to contribute just 10 percent of the funds, holds up the entire disbursement until it can release its share. "It's an impossible situation to be in," Sanjay says. "Only we know how we run our households without a salary. Our children's education suffers. We can't even buy them a toy during the festive season."

* * *

THE TIPPI RIVER CAMP stands on a hill next to the river of the same name. It is an

austere structure, just three bare rooms and a toilet raised up on stilts. Field staff don't live here – this is a transit camp used to patrol some of the more inaccessible parts of the Tippi Range – so it lacks the lived-in feel of other camps.

Last night, four STPF guards – Nabam Rakesh, Tangru Sangchoju, Lokhiram Ronghang and Chandan Patro – slept on the concrete floor in their sleeping bags. Now, at 6 a.m., they are reheating their dinner (potato curry, rice and a local saag-patta) so they can have a bite before the day's patrol.

Rakesh, who is 23 years old, has been with the STPF for six years. He shows off a camera-trap image he has on his phone: the leopard that nearly killed him three

years ago. “It came up behind me when I went down to the river to collect water”, he recalls. “It had me in its jaws. I remember the blood and the pain. I don't know how I got away.”

The men are in good spirits, having just received their overdue wages. There is a palpable sense of relief, even though they know it will be short-lived. “We live on borrowings; we have debts to pay off with interest. The money will soon be gone,” Lokhiram says. But they shrug off their troubles and fears as they have a thousand times before and get to work. A rubber raft is unpacked, inflated and carried to the river. They row across the jade waters to a beach on the other side. The team's details are entered into the M-STripes app, and the day's patrol begins. 🦶

(l to r) STPF guards Chandan Patro, Tangru Sangchoju, Lokhiram Rongkhang and Nabam Rakesh at the Tippi River Camp, Pakke Tiger Reserve (Photograph: Pranav Capila)



Patorlling gear provided to frontline forest staff in Munnar, Kerala.

(Photograph: Renjith Hadlee)

Rapid Action Support



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Wildlife Trust of India

3.1 Rapid Action Projects: Providing Aid to Vanrakshaks



Another one of WTI's oldest initiatives is its Rapid Action Projects or RAPs, which was launched in 1999. For over 25 years, RAPs have aimed to address conservation emergencies in India – urgent or critical in nature, with immediate, innovative aid provided to conservation partners. These conservation partners are usually individuals working at the grassroots such as local conservationists, experts, a member of the local community or a staff member of state Forest Departments. RAPs are one-off, short term, low cost, and swift conservation-action oriented aid, with a goal to nip an emergent conservation threat in the bud before it escalates, requiring more resources and time to tackle.

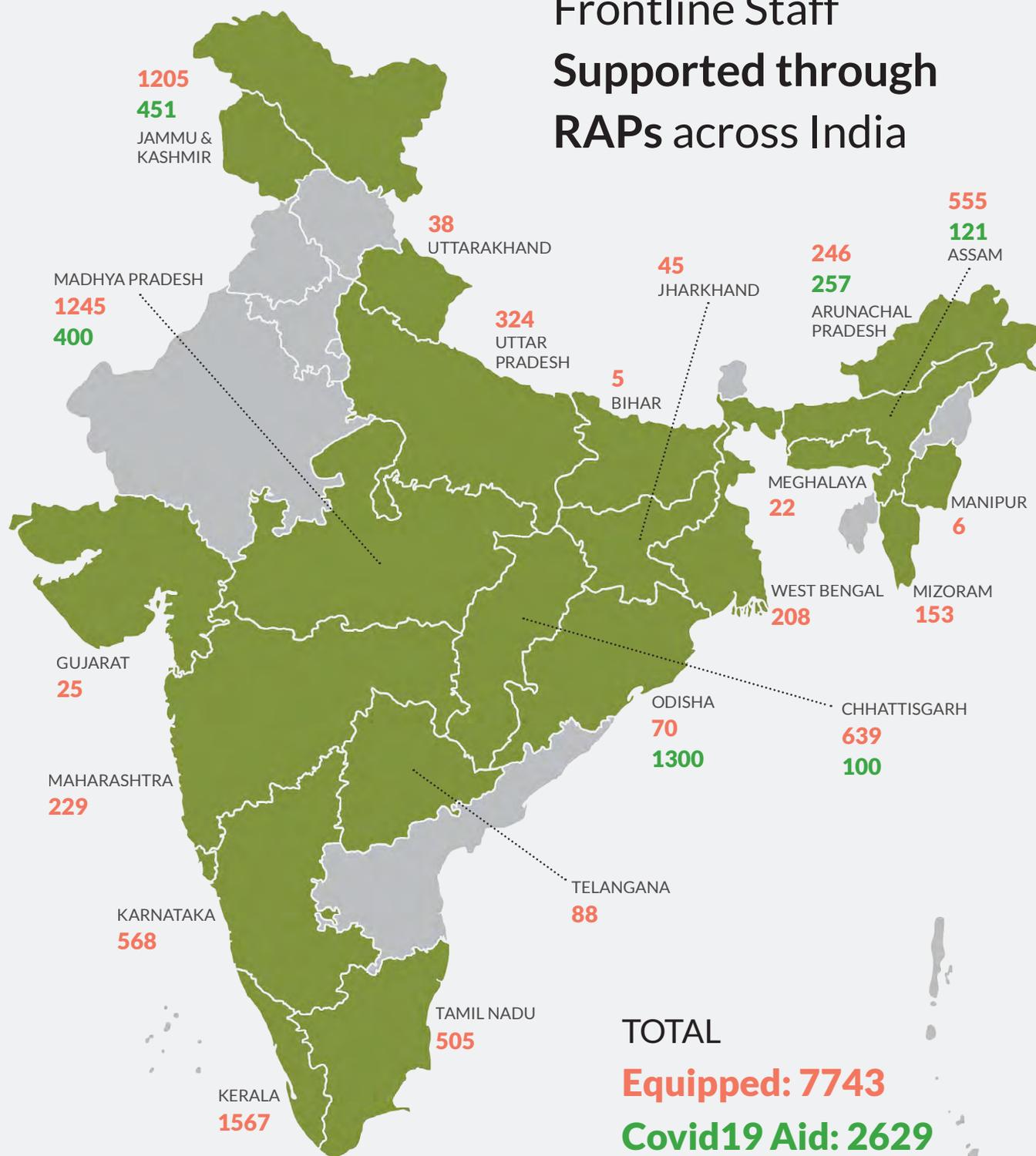
To initiate a RAP, a conservation partner can submit a RAP application form available on WTI's website. The website also has additional information about RAPs and the application process. Alternatively, WTI's own team can identify and facilitate a RAP; however, the team also needs to identify a suitable conservation partner to carry out the work. All RAP applications are reviewed by a panel that includes internal and external subject experts. Once approved, the aid is swiftly processed by WTI's team, with the entire process taking as little as 15 days after receiving the application.

Till March 2025, WTI has implemented nearly 800 RAPs through its network of conservation partners. Of these, 35.8% have been granted to support Forest

Departments across 26 states and Union Territories in India. These RAPs have also facilitated training of over 1,100 frontline staff on wildlife crime prevention, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, wildlife rescue, and other specific issues. These trainings follow the same modules as the VRP workshops and use trainers, who have qualified WTI's Training of Trainers workshop (*see chapter 2*), but are typically one-off workshops. Only the RAPs that involve specialized training like those on snake rescue and release are conducted by external resource personnel, who are carefully handpicked by WTI based on expertise, experience, and ability to train the frontline staff.

Likewise, these RAPs helped equip over 7,700 Vanrakshaks with critical patrolling gear and equipment to aid in anti-poaching, human-wildlife conflict mitigation, or forest patrolling responsibilities. While the field gear provided to the Vanrakshaks as part of RAPs is similar to the VRP kits (*refer Chapter 2*), items are not always the same as RAPs are designed to be flexible. Which means all the items in a VRP kit (*refer chapter 2*) may not be handed over when this is done as part of an RAP. RAPs being small budget interventions, the gear provided through RAPs may also vary based on the number of staff that need to be supported and the need of the hour when the request comes in. There could also be specific requirements based on a few factors such as the weather

Frontline Staff Supported through RAPs across India





(Top): Patrolling boats provided to frontline staff in D'Ering Wildlife Sactuary, Arunachal Pradesh // Tractor-mounted water sprayer to fight forest fires in Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka (Photographs: WTI)



conditions, or an emergency like a forest fire, or increased poaching activity or man-animal conflict etc. Some factors like altitude, climate etc are also taken into consideration while finalising the kits. For example, if the request is to support frontline staff of a high altitude protected area, then the jackets or sleeping bags provided will differ to those provided to frontline staff from a lower altitude. WTI has also provided first aid kits to frontline staff.

Apart from the basic patrolling gear, WTI's RAPs have also supported forest departments with strategic aid. For example, RAPs have facilitated the construction of watch towers in Karbi-Anglong and Manas, Assam in 2011 and 2013 respectively to enhance surveillance. RAPs have also boosted communication between patrol staff in PAs by providing walkie-talkies to Vanrakshaks in Kerala (in 2011 & 2024) and Assam (in 2024); and in an effort to strengthen anti-poaching camps across multiple PAs, RAPs have also provided solar-powered lights and fences, water filters etc.

Sometimes, simple and cost-effective interventions through RAPs help the Vanrakshaks immensely. RAPs have helped Vanrakshaks enhancing their mobility and patrolling efforts through bicycles in Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, Madhya Pradesh (2001), Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram (2003), and Bor Wildlife Sanctuary, Maharashtra (2010), while in Pakke Tiger Reserve (2005) and D'Ering Wildlife Sanctuary (2012) in Arunachal Pradesh & Okha in Gujarat

(2011), aid in the form of boats helped them boost their water-based patrols. Likewise, essential wildlife rescue equipment including snake rescue kits, rescue nets, and catch poles are also given out to the forest staff through RAPs.

WTI has also granted equipment aid like high power leaf-blowers and fire safety jackets in the recent past to aid the Vanrakshaks in fighting forest fires, a major and escalating challenge. Beyond these equipment, an innovative approach of dousing forest fires in Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka was facilitated by WTI through a RAP in 2021. This

Apart from patrolling gear, RAPs have also supported forest departments with strategic aid.

groundbreaking approach involved collaborating with the Karnataka Forest Department in fabricating a tractor and jeep mounted with 1000L water tank and sprayer. This method proved extremely effective in dousing fires in remote

areas of the reserve from a safe distance and in creating fire lines to prevent the spread of fires across rest of the forest. Moreover, the tankers could also be filled from any water body, reducing the time to refill them. This innovative and effective approach not only motivated the patrol staff to maintain continuous patrols, even during the COVID-19 lockdown, but also encouraged forest officials and staff from the neighboring states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala to replicate the model in Nagarhole National Park and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, respectively.

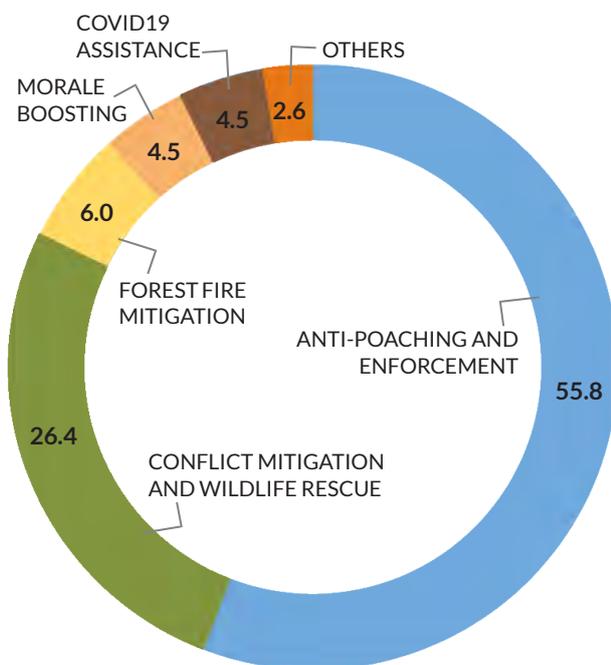
Similarly, RAPs have assisted Forest Departments with innovative solutions to complex challenges of a particular nature.

For example, in 2002, RAPs supported Vanrakshaks in Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand, in patrolling the railway track through critical elephant corridors to help prevent elephant deaths caused by train hits. These rapid projects pioneered joint patrolling of railway tracks, particularly at nights, by Vanrakshaks with walkie-talkies to alert train drivers. This simple intervention was so effective that it was later developed into a long running project by WTI, which ensured zero mortality of elephants on this stretch of railway tracks for over a decade – a conservation milestone indeed.

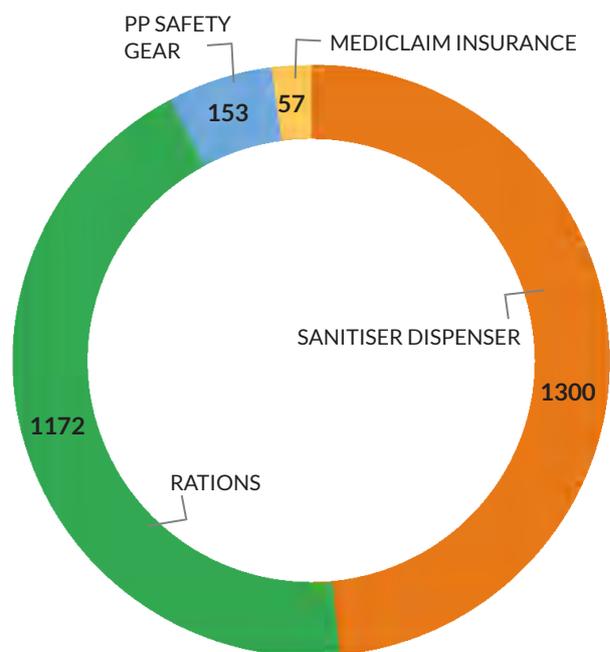
In addition to addressing ecological emergencies, RAPs catalyzed crucial healthcare and logistical support to Vanrakshaks during the dreaded COVID-19 pandemic. Through one such RAP in 2021, WTI, in collaboration with the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department, provided one-off health insurance policies to 57

Vanrakshaks of Pakke Tiger Reserve – a first of its kind intervention for the frontline members during the pandemic, while another RAP facilitated ration support to 200 anti-poaching staff and their families in Pakke. This support helped boost their morale and confidence immensely. Several other RAPs in 2020 and 2021 supported Vanrakshaks across India through aid in the form of PPE gear, sanitizer dispensing machines, and essential rations for their field camps, to help them continue their duties under difficult circumstances.

The overall contribution of RAPs has proven to be an important support for Vanrakshaks, supplementing the work implemented by WTI’s VRP. In over 25 years of functioning, VRP and RAPs have both combined trained over 22,000 and equipped over 28,000 frontline staff across India, making these two of WTI’s most successful projects. 🐾



RAPs supporting frontline forest staff (%)



RAP support during Covid19 Pandemic (No. of staff)



Solar handpump handed over to frontline staff at Nawegaon-Nagzira TR, Maharashtra // (Below): Anti-poaching watchtower constructed in Manas TR, Assam. (Photographs: WTI)



STRATEGIC AID PROVIDED TO FRONTLINE STAFF THROUGH RAPs



4 watchtowers / anti-poaching camps

3 tractor-mounted water sprayers



42 boats provided / repaired

1 communications tower

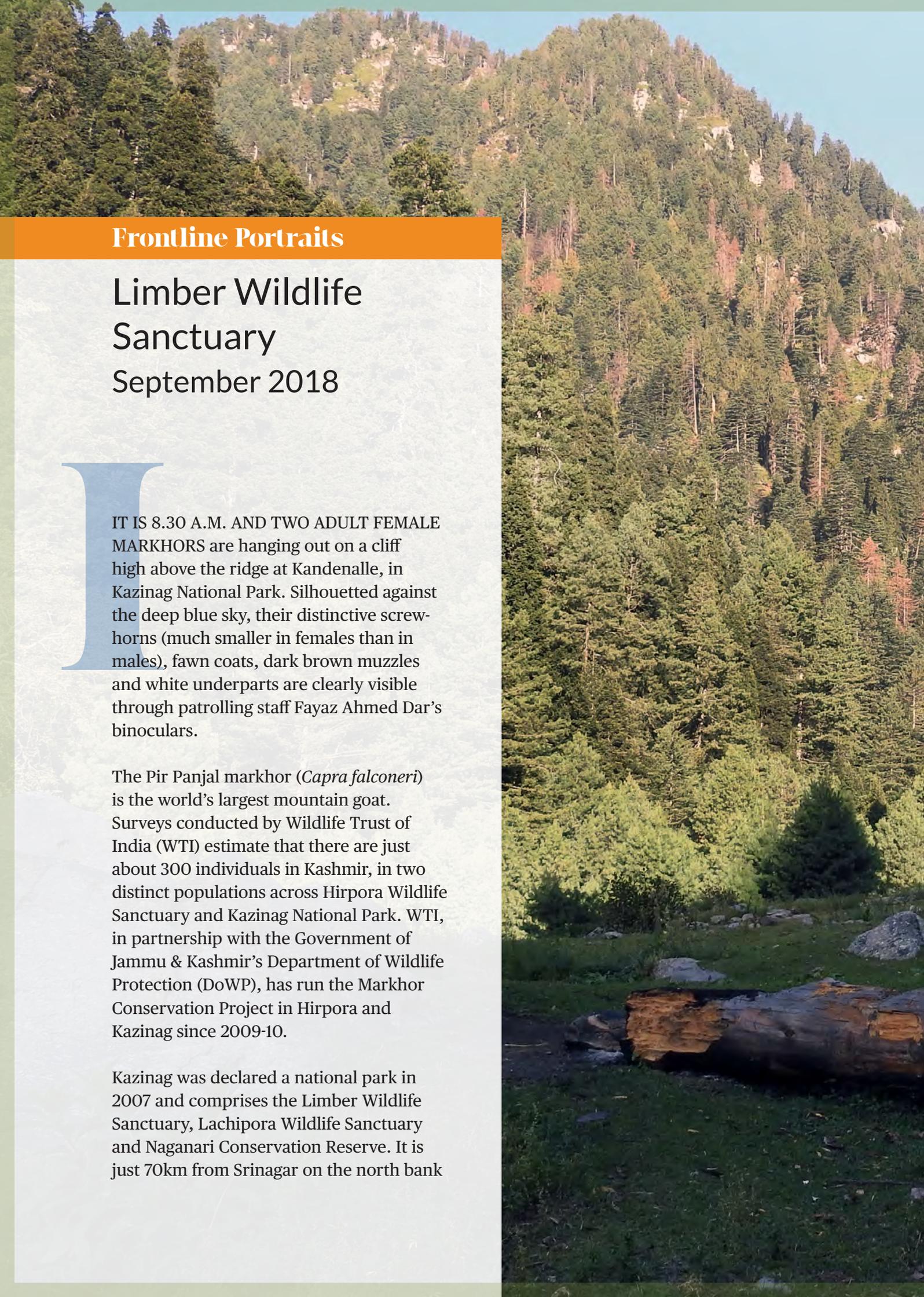


2 water tankers / waterholes

3 power fences



108 bicycles



Frontline Portraits

Limber Wildlife Sanctuary

September 2018

IT IS 8.30 A.M. AND TWO ADULT FEMALE MARKHORS are hanging out on a cliff high above the ridge at Kandenalle, in Kazinag National Park. Silhouetted against the deep blue sky, their distinctive screw-horns (much smaller in females than in males), fawn coats, dark brown muzzles and white underparts are clearly visible through patrolling staff Fayaz Ahmed Dar's binoculars.

The Pir Panjal markhor (*Capra falconeri*) is the world's largest mountain goat. Surveys conducted by Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) estimate that there are just about 300 individuals in Kashmir, in two distinct populations across Hirpora Wildlife Sanctuary and Kazinag National Park. WTI, in partnership with the Government of Jammu & Kashmir's Department of Wildlife Protection (DoWP), has run the Markhor Conservation Project in Hirpora and Kazinag since 2009-10.

Kazinag was declared a national park in 2007 and comprises the Limber Wildlife Sanctuary, Lachipora Wildlife Sanctuary and Naganari Conservation Reserve. It is just 70km from Srinagar on the north bank

A photograph of a man standing in a lush forest. He is wearing an orange polo shirt and grey trousers with a red stripe down the side. He is positioned in the lower center of the frame, standing on a grassy clearing. In the foreground, a large, weathered log lies horizontally across the scene. The background is filled with dense green trees, and a rocky mountain peak is visible in the distance under a clear blue sky.

Fayaz Ahmad Dar, a 'daily wager'
working in Limber Wildlife Sanctuary,
Jammu and Kashmir
(*Photograph: Pranav Capila*)

of the Jhelum, close to the Line of Control (LoC) in Baramulla district. It hosts the largest markhor population – around 200 individuals – this side of the LoC.

A solitary signboard by the side of the highway announces the national park as one drives up from Baramulla town. A motorable road winds into Limber WLS, up through Limber village and to the army camp below Babagail village. With its proximity to the LoC, this area was once a hotspot for militant infiltration. The focus in recent years has shifted to Lachipora but the landscape remains heavily patrolled. All visitors, frequent or infrequent, must register their presence with the army.

*

Fayaz, who lives in Babagail, works as a temporary / contract worker in Limber WLS. He usually sets out on patrol from the village at 6.00am with a couple of his colleagues. Today the men go along the Mithwani nullah, through exquisite coniferous forests with deodar (at lower altitudes), fir, spruce and kail pine. They pass Gujjar tents pitched below vital markhor breeding habitat, then climb atop a flat rock overhanging the waterfall at Chemb, then onto a higher ridge at Kandenalle, from where they spot the markhors.

They bring out *noon chai* (a buttery salt tea) and some *tchot* (a traditional Kashmiri flatbread), having their breakfast while watching Himalayan Griffons soar on the updrafts. “We are on duty 24 hours at times”, says Muzaffar Hussain Lone, who has been a contract worker in Limber for eight years. “We are in the upper reaches of the national park even during the night. We meet army patrols sometimes, but since we register our name at the camp we have no issues.”

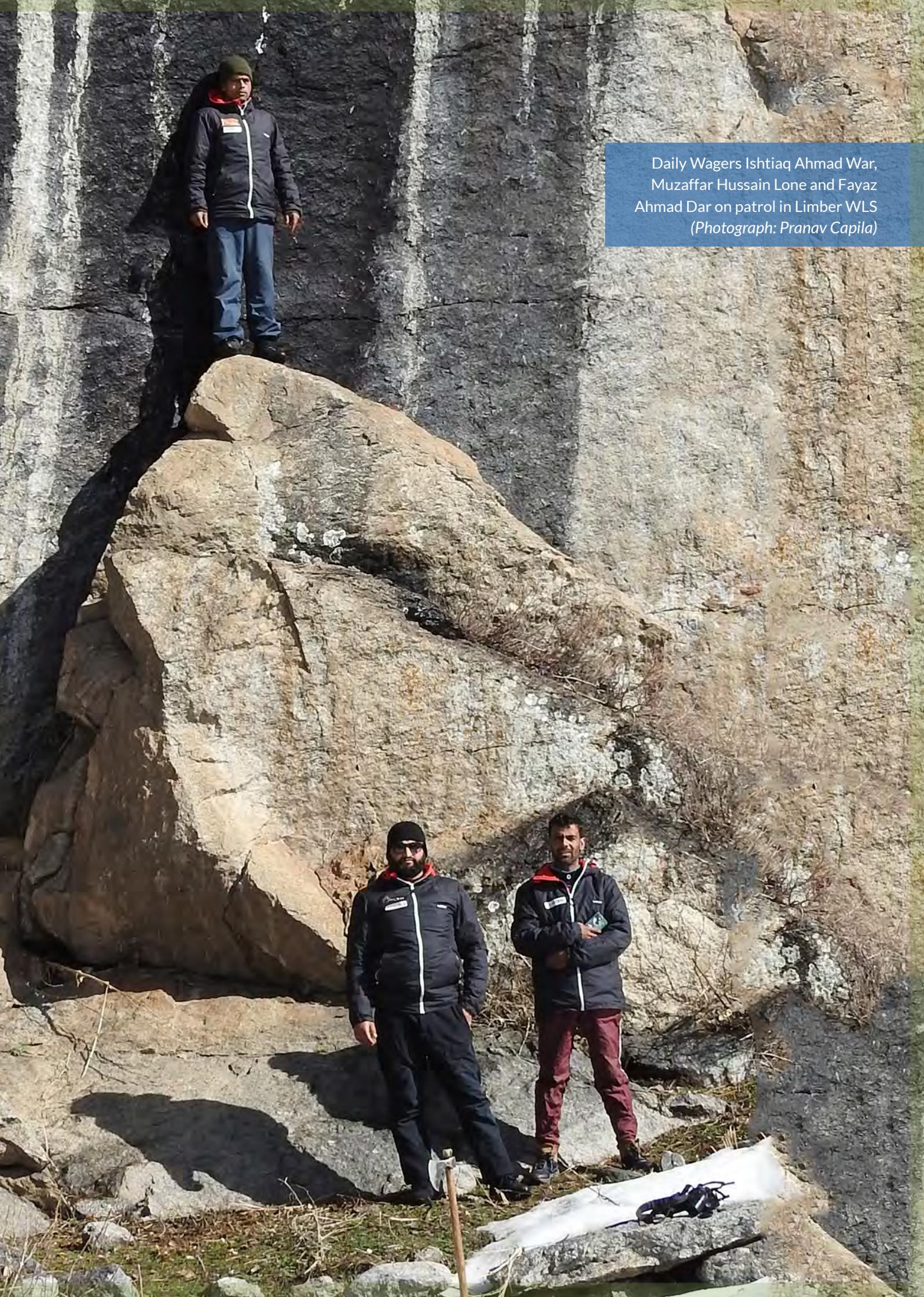
‘Daily wage’ workers like Fayaz, hired to make up for the frontline staff shortfall across Kashmir, have they been hanging on for years in the hope of getting a permanent job. Unfortunately, they are paid only sporadically for their services, just once or twice a year.

The limited access into Kazinag, especially from the Limber side, means it doesn’t see rampant problems with migratory herders, timber smuggling and poaching. Human-animal conflict is a big issue, however, particularly with bears and leopards, and the biotic pressure exerted by villages adjacent to the national park remains an enduring concern.

Another major problem is the pitiful lack of wildlife protection staff on the ground. There are only two Forest Guards on site in Limber, with a Ranger and Forester in Baramulla town.

*

A lack of career growth. The absence of appropriate field gear, from terrain-

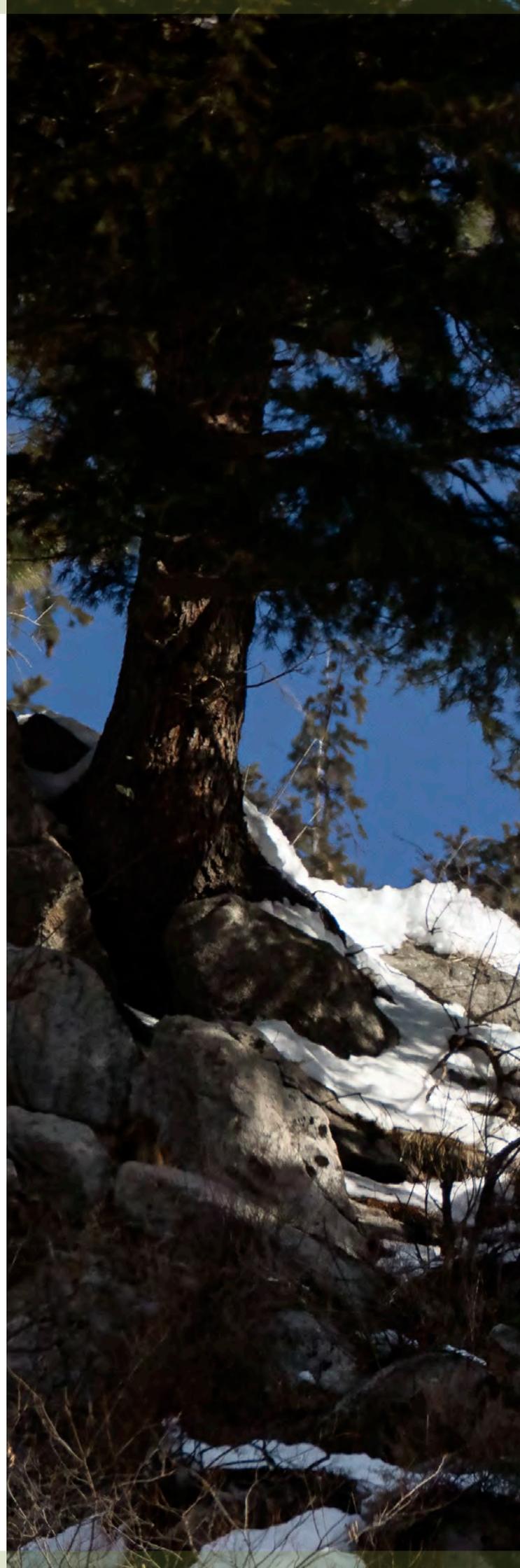


Daily Wagers Ishtiaq Ahmad War,
Muzaffar Hussain Lone and Fayaz
Ahmad Dar on patrol in Limber WLS
(*Photograph: Pranav Capila*)

appropriate boots to wireless sets or GPS units. No access to first-aid. No vehicles allotted to the entire wildlife sanctuary. These are some of the issues raised by the *permanent* staff in Limber. And yet contract workers like Fayaz, hired to make up for the staff shortfall, have it even worse. Not only have they been hanging on for years in the hope of getting that coveted permanent job, “no salary” is topmost on their list of grievances. They receive lumpsum amounts ranging from Rs. 800 to Rs. 3,000, “*Eid-ke-Eid*”: just once or twice a year.

When he isn't on duty, Fayaz usually sits at his family's small shop in the village from 7 to 9 p.m. “*Doosra kaam dhoond leta...* I would look for other work, but what other work is available to us out here?”, he says. “I can only sit at the shop and work in my fields and go out on duty in the sanctuary.” His wife Zubeida is pregnant and he worries about meeting her medical needs. “*Aapko pata hai ki hospital ke maamle mein sab paise se hota hai...* One needs money to get good medical care”, he says. “I hope I will receive my wages from the department on time, the baby is due in six months and if I haven't been paid, I will have to borrow money.”

“I will do what I can to send my children to study in the city when they grow up” he asserts. “They won't waste their time here. They won't spend their lives in idle hope.” 🐾





A male markhor in Limber WLS
(Photograph: Shivang Mehta)

Views from the Field

Van Durgas – Nature’s sentinels: Celebrating the women defending our wilds

Dr Sonali Ghosh

Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forest &
Field Director, Kaziranga National Park & Tiger Reserve, Assam

In former days the forester, when on furlough from India, was frequently asked the question “what do you do in the forests?” and as a rule, being unprepared to explain the multifarious duties in a few words, (s)he commenced a hesitating reply, as was relieved when the subject was dismissed by the remark, “oh, you plant trees, I suppose.” ...the planting of trees.. is in India one of the least frequent duties of the forest officer.. with a view to study the habits of some valuable species. The Executive Forest Officer is therefore a planter of trees by profession... and to these accomplishments (s)he can add some hobby which has its foundation in a love of nature, and at the same time success in keeping his health, he has the certainty of contentment, so fast as that can be secured by constant occupation, for he will never have an idle hour.

(Excerpted from *Forest Life and Sport in India, 1910* by Sainthill Eardley-Wilmot, C.I.E, Inspector -General of Forests, Govt of India)

The Indian Forest Service (IFS), a successor to the Imperial Forest Service founded in 1865, was restructured as a national service in 1966. For much of its history, the IFS was a male-dominated service due to the challenging nature of working and living in remote forested locations. This changed in 1980, when three pioneering women became the first female IFS officers, following slight relaxations in physical requirements such as height and chest measurements. Since then, the number of women in the IFS has grown significantly, with over 350 women officers currently serving across India. Their increasing presence has transformed the service, bringing in qualities like effective

Photograph: Dr AJT Johnsingh



communication, sincerity, and deep dedication. Back home, a new revolution was underway at the forest frontline, one that shattered the gender divide as women entered the field, gained acceptance, and proved their success – a story detailed here.

Women in Forest Protection: The Kaziranga Experience

Kaziranga National Park in Assam, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is globally renowned for having the world's largest population of the Greater one-horned rhino. In 2023, the Assam State Government launched a major recruitment drive, inducting over 300 women as forest guards, foresters, and battalion constables. Most were young women from rural backgrounds, thrown into a demanding three-month training regimen designed to prepare them for the rigors of jungle postings. Handling automatic weapons and coping with the physical and psychological challenges of the wild toughened them for their new roles.

Overcoming Infrastructure and Mindset Challenges

The park's 233 anti-poaching camps, among the most numerous and widespread globally, were traditionally built for individual men, lacking facilities for women. When the first female recruits arrived, basic amenities like bathing areas, toilets, and kitchens had to be established from scratch to make the camps livable for women. Beyond physical infrastructure, a bigger hurdle lay in challenging entrenched attitudes—many peers and supervisors initially doubted whether women could handle the job's demands.

Women Frontline: Trial by Flood

The monsoon floods of July 2024 put these newly appointed women officers to a severe test. Kaziranga faced its worst floods since 1991, cutting off anti-poaching camps and leaving supplies of food and water dangerously low. During this emergency, wild animals fled the rising waters, seeking refuge on higher ground, often straying



onto National Highway 715 along the park's southern boundary. Women staff were at the frontlines – regulating traffic to allow animals to cross safely, rescuing and rehabilitating stranded wildlife, and continuing anti-poaching duties despite personal hardships. Thanks to their dedication, wild animal road kills in 2024 dropped to an all-time low – just two hog deer – despite unprecedented flood conditions. In 35 days, the combined efforts of women officers, local communities, and volunteers led to the rescue of 180 animals, of which 148 were released safely back into their natural habitat.

Breaking Barriers, Setting Records

Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, during his March 2024 visit to Kaziranga, met these courageous women and dubbed them “Van Durgas” –goddesses of the forest. Their contribution is reshaping both forest protection and rural perceptions about women’s capabilities. By breaking social and cultural barriers, these women have shown that with training and trust, they can protect wildlife, combat poachers, and connect with local communities as effectively as men, if not more so.

The Way Forward

The growing participation of women at every level of forest management and protection signals a new chapter for conservation in India. Their skills – communication, community engagement, and resilience – have already proven vital in crisis situations. Nature does not differentiate by gender, and neither should conservation efforts. The “Van Durgas” of Kaziranga and the women at senior positions in the Indian Forest Service, exemplify how empowered women are becoming the crucial guardians of India’s wild spaces. 🐾

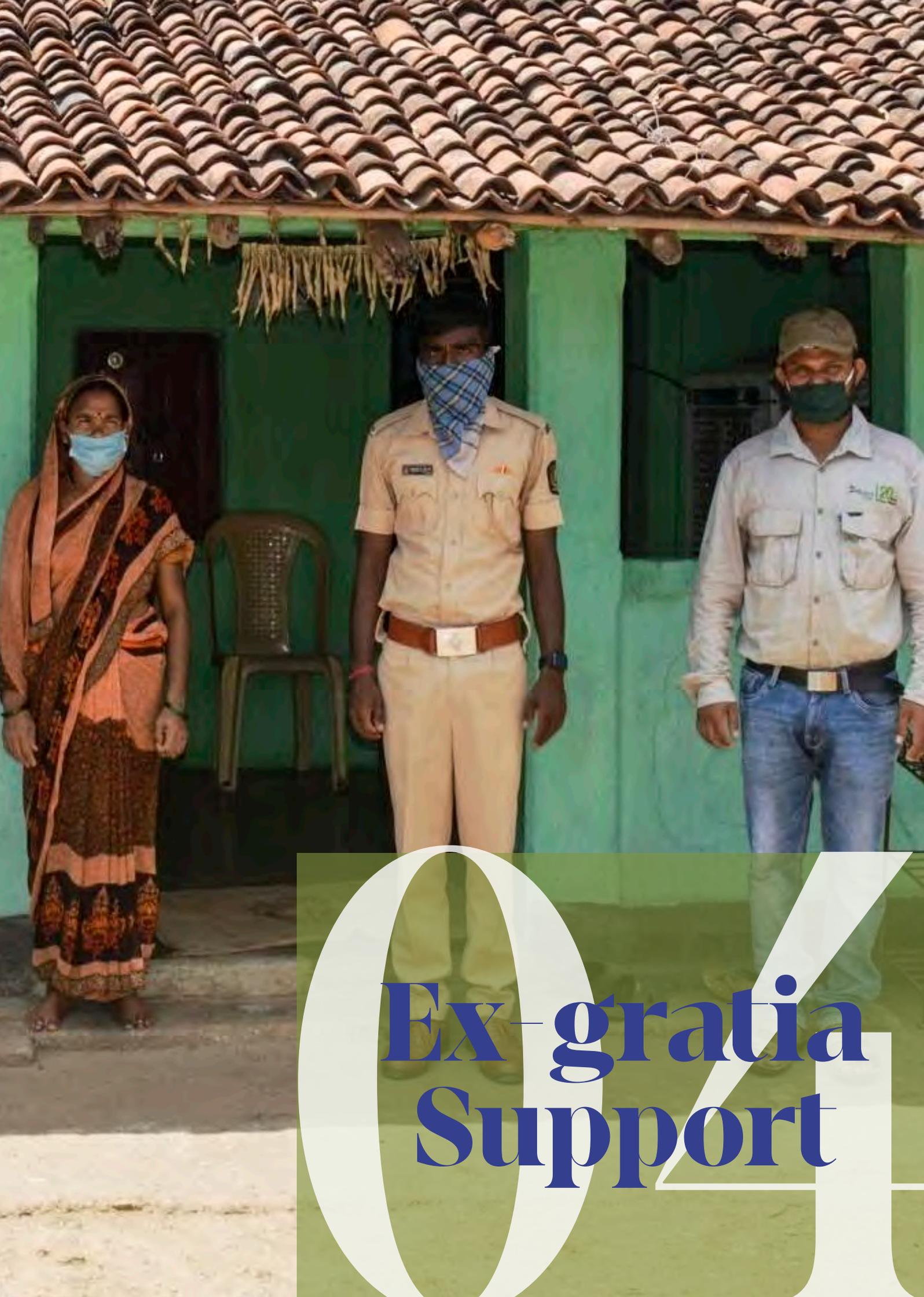




(Previous page and this spread): The Van Durgas of Kaziranga Tiger Reserve, Assam.
(Photographs: Dr Sonali Ghosh)



The family of the late Sachin Shrirange, Labourer, Navegaon-Nagzira TR, Maharashtra, receiving ex-gratia support. Photograph: WTI



**Ex-gratia
Support**

4.1 The VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme

Since 2001, Wildlife Trust of India has been providing supplementary accident assurance support to Vanrakshaks or their families in the event of injury or death on duty. While many state governments provide ex-gratia at varying levels, the WTI scheme is planned to provide immediate succor. WTI's financial support supplements any existing governmental support and ensures that an affected frontline member or his/her family receives additional financial support in the shortest possible time during a crisis.

Timely financial aid is critical for several reasons. In many instances, injuries received from animal attacks, accidents in forests or isolated areas, or during a conflict may necessitate extensive and costly medical treatment. On-duty injury or death of a Vanrakshak, who oftentimes is a family's sole earning member, may thrust them to sudden and severe financial duress, compounding the family's trauma. Therefore, the VRP's supplementary accident assurance scheme ensures that the Vanrakshaks and their families receive rapid financial support, when they need it the most.

Some of the key features of this scheme include:

- All Vanrakshaks working in a PA or a State's Wildlife Division, be it a permanent staff or a non-permanent member, are assured for financial aid

if they receive an injury or if there is a fatality caused due to an accident, while performing their duty.

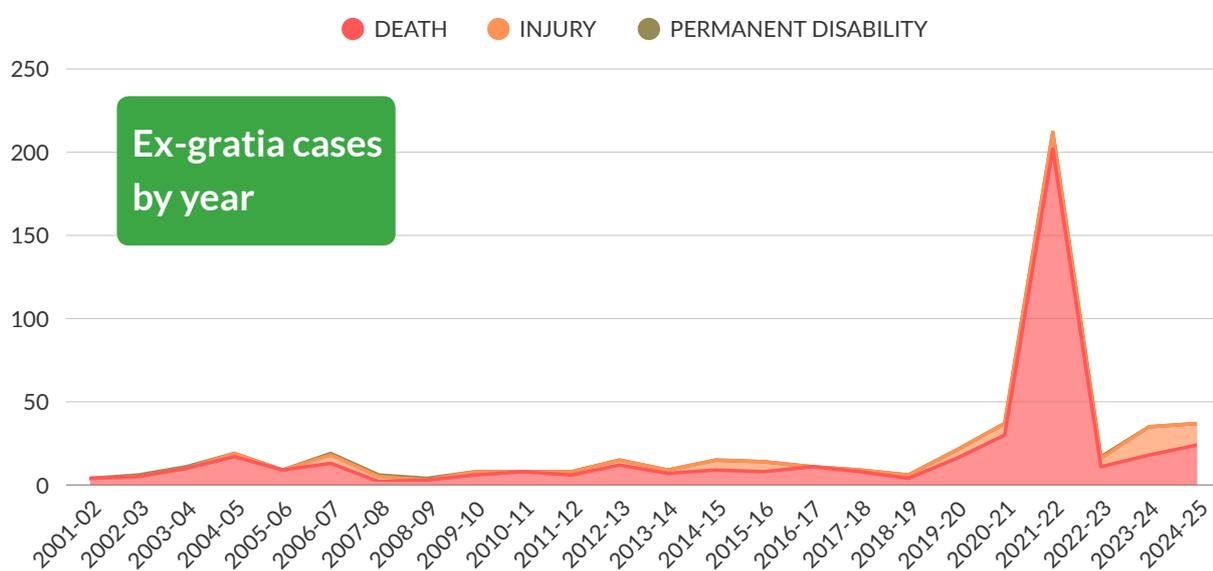
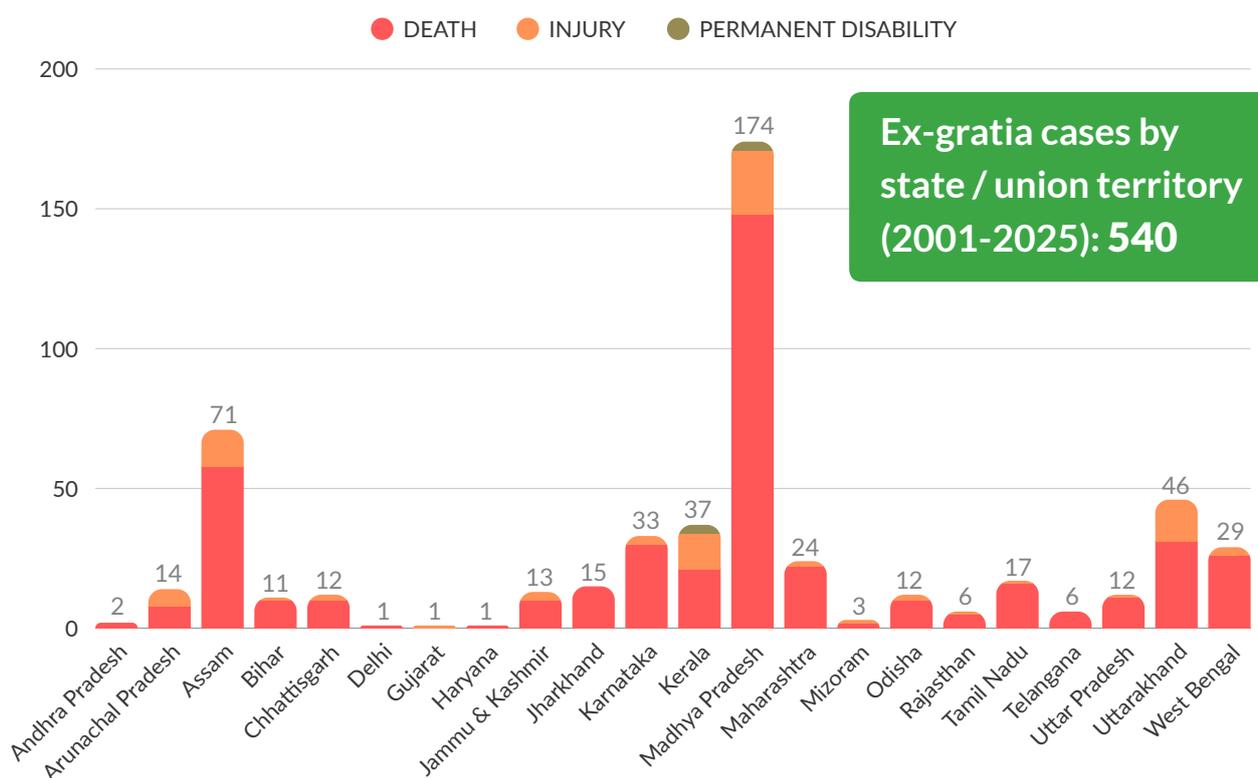
- Each eligible Vanrakshak is assured INR 1,00,000 in case of death or a permanent disability, while in case of an injury a sum of up to INR 25,000 is provided to the injured staff member depending on the severity of the injury.
- The claim is either addressed to the employee themselves (in case of an injury) or to a nominee (in case of death or permanent disability).
- To provide prompt support to a distressed Vanrakshak or a family, the claims are settled within 30 days of receiving the necessary documents from the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) or relevant forest officer not below the level of Range Forest Officer (RFO) for the concerned division.

Over the past 24 years, WTI has supported 540 Vanrakshaks or their dependents. This includes families of 173 Vanrakshaks who lost their lives to COVID-19 between 2020 and 2022, through a specially created Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund (further discussed in section 3.2). Of the remaining 367 non-COVID claims, ~74% were for fatalities and ~25% for injuries. Another six Vanrakshaks (or 1% of the non-COVID claims) were supported for

permanent disability due to extensive injuries sustained from attacks by animals or poachers.

The highest number of aid cases have been from Assam, Madhya Pradesh, and

Uttarakhand. This is perhaps a reflection of the stronger presence of WTI in these states, as well as a greater awareness among local forest department officials on the VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme.



It is equally important to unravel this data to provide a glimpse into the nature of risks faced by Vanrakshaks on a daily basis. An examination of the various causes of the overall instances show that apart from COVID-19 (-31%), attacks by animals (25%) and accidents, which include vehicular crashes, fall from heights in treacherous terrain, accidental gunshots, and cracker burst (-22%), account for the largest share of incidents. Due to the nature of their duties that includes daily patrolling of forests- sometimes in treacherous terrain, rescue of animals, responding to human-wildlife conflict situations, and in some cases direct handling of wildlife, these professionals are highly vulnerable to attacks by animals, particularly elephants, tigers, and rhinoceros, as well as on-duty accidents.

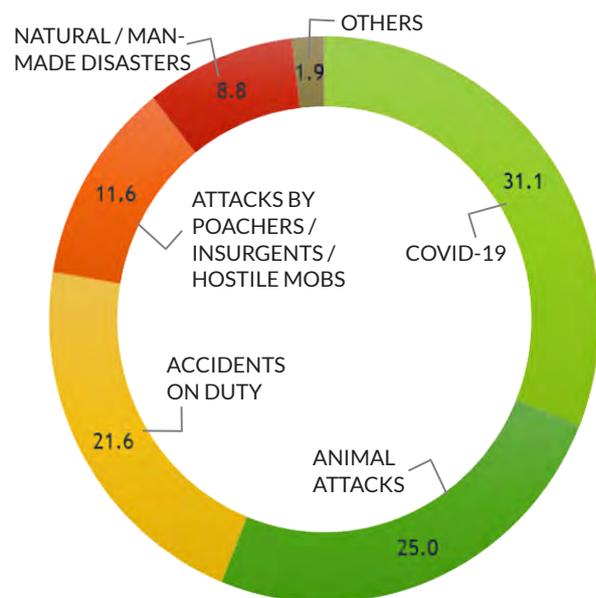
The occupational hazards for a Vanrakshak extend to a serious risk of homicides and attacks by poachers. Likewise, in many instances a PA or forest is located in a conflict zone rendering them vulnerable to attacks by irate communities or even insurgents. Such attacks by poachers, irate mobs or insurgents constitute a smaller but significant portion of the incidents (11.6%) recorded by WTI. This is in contrast to the global pattern where the highest number of ranger fatalities have been linked to killings by poachers, hunters or other unscrupulous persons (Galliers et al. 2022).

Natural or man-made disasters such as cloudbursts, landslides, or forest fires are equally important factors, contributing to nearly one-tenth of the total incidents recorded by WTI. With changes in weather patterns and increasing risk of forest fires, this becomes a major threat that needs to be accounted for.

These varied factors ranging from animal

attacks, natural calamities to vehicular crashes and homicide by poachers, etc. underscore the serious risks this profession entails on a daily-basis.

WTI recorded an average of 15.3 incidents (non-COVID) annually between 2001 and 2025, constituting an average of 11.3 Vanrakshak on-duty non-COVID deaths each year. The number of these aid peaked in the years of COVID-19 pandemic, i.e. from 2020 to 2022, with 37 non-COVID claims addressed in 2020-2021 and 39 non-COVID claims in 2021-2022. The highest number of annual Vanrakshak deaths (30 deaths) were recorded in 2020-2021. These deaths were in addition to the aid provided by WTI to the families of 173 members who died from COVID-19 during the same period. This is not a surprising finding since several studies and anecdotal evidence have already suggested a surge in deforestation, poaching, and other illegal forest activities during the pandemic (Singhal et al., 2023; Badola, 2020; Rana



Factors contributing to death/injury/disability of Vanrakshaks supported by WTI from 2001 to 2025

& Fleischman, 2023), thus increasing vulnerability of the forest staff manifold to existing threats (Bavadam, 2020; Rana & Fleischman, 2023).

With growing realities of climate change, increasing threats of zoonotic disease outbreaks, and an ever-evolving nature of global wildlife crimes, the profile of a Vanrakshak is becoming more challenging than ever. While the findings discussed above may not describe an accurate status

of the Vanrakshaks across India, since they are limited by the number of aid supported by WTI as well as dependent on other factors such as the extent and awareness of WTI's geographical presence and work, they still present a strong and valuable evidence of the multi-faceted threats and challenges that this frontline profession entails. To better support Vanrakshaks in India and improve their safety, a more comprehensive and structured analysis is crucial. 📍

Frontline staff engaged in firefighting duties in Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka (Photograph: WTI)



4.2 Conservation Heroes

In homage to the efforts of India's conservation heroes, who face incredible challenges on the frontlines of conservation, we present an inclusive list of all Vanrakshaks who have been supported by WTI through the VRP Supplementary Accident Assurance Scheme from 2001 to 2025.

4.2.1 North India

Uttarakhand

Sohan Singh

Forest Watcher

Kalagarh Tiger Reserve,
Uttarakhand



Sohan Singh, a 23-year-old watcher, **was attacked and killed by a tiger** while patrolling the Dandapani Beat on **July 15, 2019**.

Sohan was posted in the Plain Range of Kalagarh Forest Division and had been

working with the forest department for three years. He was known to be extremely hardworking. He is survived by his father, Meherban Singh Rawat, a sister and a brother. Along with WTI's ex-gratia support, the government provided compensation of Rs 3 lakh to the family.

Rajesh Negi

Forest Guard

Kalagarh Tiger Reserve,
Uttarakhand



Rajesh Singh Negi **lost his life on October 20, 2019**, following a **tiger attack** while patrolling in the Plain Range. The incident

occurred in the Chaubeli/Mandalti Beat of Lansdowne.

Rajesh had worked as a Temporary Watcher from 1995-2009 and was appointed as a Forest Guard in 2009. He was the sole breadwinner for his family, consisting of his mother, wife, and three

The ACF, Kalagarh TR, hands over an ex-gratia cheque to the late Sohan Singh's brother



young children. His children are currently studying at Saraswati Vidya Mandir, Kotdwar. His eldest daughter is in Class 11, the middle daughter in Class 9, and the youngest son in Class 5.

The state government provided the family with a compensation of Rs 5 lakh and a pension of Rs 15,500, apart from the ex-gratia given by WTI. The state government also gave Asha a job as an orderly to help her earn a living.

Boby Chandra

Casual Labourer

Corbett Tiger reserve,
Uttarakhand

On June 17, 2022, Boby Chandra was walking through the forest to Dhangadi when he was **attacked by a tiger**. Thankfully, as a team of forest staff were patrolling nearby, they were able to reach the spot in time to stop the tiger from killing him.

Boby was taken to a local hospital for immediate treatment and later **transferred to a hospital in Delhi owing to the serious nature of his injuries**. Although he survived his injuries and his medical expenses were borne by the Uttarakhand Forest Department, his family faced grave financial problems as they were dependent on his daily wages to survive. WTI provided an ex-gratia amount to aid Boby and his family in their hour of need.

>>2001-05

Ram Singh

Forest Guard

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand

Death due to drowning

Govind Ram

Forest Guard

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed by poachers

Bipin Chandra Pandey

Range Officer

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand

Killed by poachers

Bag Singh

Daily Wage Worker

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Death due to accidental fall

Kishore Lal Bahuguna

Forest Guard

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in road accident on
duty

Ram Bharose Dhobal

Casual Worker

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed by poachers

Uttar Pradesh

Abdul Gani

Casual Worker

Sohelwa Wildlife Division,
Uttar Pradesh

On **February 17, 2013**, Abdul Gani was **patrolling an area of Sohelwa Wildlife Division** close to the international border with Nepal. During this patrol, he unexpectedly encountered and was **murdered by poachers**.

Described as hardworking and brave by his colleagues, Abdul had worked with the division for fifteen years. He is survived by his wife, four daughters and a son.

Ajay Singh

Forest Guard

Katarniaghat Wildlife
Sanctuary, Uttar Pradesh



On **February 24, 2023**, Ajay Singh, a forest guard at Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary, was patrolling Beat No. 1 of the Trans-guerua Range when he was **attacked by a wild elephant**. He survived the attack but underwent intensive medical treatment for his injuries. WTI provided timely ex-gratia to support his medical expenses.

2001-05 (contd)

Sesha Giri

Forest Guard

Dudhwa NP, Uttar Pradesh
Killed by poachers

Harish Chandra Tripathy

Forester

Kishanpur WLS, Uttar
Pradesh

Killed in road accident on
duty

Padma Tandin Wildlife Guard

Leh WLD, Jammu & Kashmir
Killed in road accident on
duty

Farooq Ahmad Wani

Helper

North Kashmir Division,
Jammu & Kashmir
Killed by timber smugglers

>>2006-10

Subhrati Ahmed Forester

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
Death due to accidental fall

JP Verma

Forester

Dudhwa NP, Uttar
Pradesh

Killed in accident on duty

Gulab Singh

Forest Guard

Tarai Central FD,
Uttarakhand

Killed by poachers

Joginder Kumar Bakshi

Wildlife Guard

Pipli Mini Zoo, Haryana

Death due to heart attack
while chasing poachers

Jagdish Prasad

Daily Labourer

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Death due to accidental
fall

Desh Raj

Forest Guard

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Injured in accidental fall

Ram Nath

Forest Guard

Haridwar FD, Uttarkhand

Injured in Leopard attack

Brahma Ram

Forest Guard

North Lakhimpur FD,
Uttar Pradesh

Death due to accidental
discharge of weapon

>> 2010-15

Bhupendra Singh

Forest Guard

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Injured in road accident
on duty

Maan Singh

Casual Worker

Tarai Central FD,
Uttarakhand

Death due to heart attack

Jahangir Ahmad Sheikh

Casual Worker

Hirpora WLS,

Jammu & Kashmir

Death due to accidental fall

Jitendra Kumar Dhyani

Forest Guard

Kalagarh TR, Uttarakhand

Death by accidental
drowning

Roop Singh

Casual Worker

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand

Injured in accidental fall

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over by Shri ND Tiwari, then Chief Minister of Uttarakhand, to Munni Devi, wife of the late Ram Bharose Dhobal, a Casual Worker who was killed by poachers in Rajaji National Park, Uttarkhand



Jammu & Kashmir

Gh. Qadir Naik

Forester

Panyer Conservation Reserve,
Jammu & Kashmir

Qadir Naik died while on duty on **February 23, 2006**. He was leading a Hangul census team when they **encountered a black bear**. While trying to protect himself, he **slipped from a steep slope and fell to his death**.

Qadir was a dedicated member of the forest service, which he had joined in 1981. He is survived by his wife, two sons and three daughters. In addition to WTI's ex-gratia support, his family received the sum of Rs 3,50,000 from the Jammu & Kashmir Forest Department.

Bilal Sheikh

Wildlife Guard

Wetlands Division Srinagar,
Jammu & Kashmir



Bilal Ahmad Sheikh has worked at the Wetlands Division in Kashmir since December 2018. He is responsible for carrying out anti-poaching raids and anti-encroachment drives in wetland areas.

2010-15 (contd)

Rakesh Kumar Sharma

Daily Labourer

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in tiger attack

Laxman Chand Thakur

Casual Worker

Nandhaur WLS,
Uttarakhand
**Death due to unknown
disease**

Rajendra Prasad Joshi

Casual Labourer

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
**Injured in motorcycle
accident on duty**

Jai Kishan

Casual Labourer

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
Injured in tiger attack

Sushil Kumar Forester

Dudhwa NP, Uttar Pradesh
Death due to snake bite

Bharat Singh Choudhary

Forester

Landsdowne FD,
Uttarakhand

Killed in wild elephant
attack

>>2016-25

Suresh Kumar

Casual Labourer

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in a road accident
on duty

Gaurav Kumar **Forest Guard**

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in wild elephant
attack

Dinesh Lal

Forester

Garhwal FD, Uttarakhand
Killed during fire-fighting
operation

Hari Mohan Singh

Forest Guard

Garhwal FD, Uttarakhand
Killed during fire-fighting
operation

Vijendra Kumar

Casual Labourer

Haridwar FD,
Uttarakhand

Injured in vehicle accident
on duty

Irshad Ahmad **Casual Labourer**

Shopian Wildlife
Division, Jammu &
Kashmir

Injured in black bear
attack

Bashir Ahmad **Gardener**

Chenab Division, Jammu
& Kashmir
Killed in a flash flood

Mohd Sharif **Casual Labourer**

Chenab Division, Jammu
& Kashmir
Killed in a flash flood

Shakir Hussain **Casual Labourer**

Chenab Division, Jammu
& Kashmir

Killed in a flash flood

Abdul Khaliq Lone

Casual Labourer

North Kashmir Division,
Jammu & Kashmir

Injured in leopard attack

Pawan Kumar **Forest Watcher**

Corbett NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in tiger attack

Aloki Lal **Wildlife Warden**

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in a road accident on
duty

Shailesh Kumar **Range Officer**

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand
Killed in a road accident
on duty

An ex-gratia cheque being handed
over to the wife of the late Sushil
Kumar, a Forester from Dudhwa
Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh, who
died of a snake bite while on duty



On **June 20, 2021**, Bilal was participating in a drive against encroachers who were trying to cultivate paddy in the Hygam Wetland Reserve. While protesting the drive, the **encroachers manhandled Bilal, injuring him severely**.

While his injuries were not life-threatening, he had to undergo orthopaedic surgery at Srinagar's Government Hospital for Bone and Joint Surgery to treat his fractured left arm, for which WTI provided ex-gratia support.

Tariq Hussain

Forest Guard

Chenab Division,
Jammu & Kashmir



On the night of **July 27, 2021**, a cloudburst in Honzar village of Kishtwar district triggered **flash floods**, leading to the deaths of 11 people, while 19 individuals were critically injured. Among the people who passed away in this incident was Tariq Hussain, a Forest Guard at Chenab Division, who was declared dead on **July 28, 2021**.

Tariq joined the forest service as a Watcher in 1996. He demonstrated an excellent aptitude for protection work, which earned him a promotion to Forest Guard in 2007. He was part of a team implementing management plans in Kishtwar High Altitude National Park prior to his demise. 🦶

2016-25 (contd)

Parmod Dhyani

Deputy Range Officer

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in a road accident
on duty

Rakesh Nautyal

Veterinarian

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in a road accident on duty

Saif Ali Rehman

Outsourced Staff

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in a road accident
on duty

Himanshu Gusain

Driver

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in a road accident on duty

Amit Semwal

Driver

Rajaji NP, Uttarakhand

Killed in a road accident on duty

Trilok Singh Mehta

Forest Guard

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand

Killed while dousing a forest fire

Diwan Ram

**Daily Wage
Labourer**

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Killed while dousing a
forest fire

Puran Singh

**Security
Personnel (PRD)**

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Killed while dousing a
forest fire

Bhagwat Singh Bhoj

Driver

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Injured while dousing a
forest fire

Krishna Kumar Watcher

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Killed while dousing a
forest fire

Kundan Singh Security

Personnel (PRD)

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Killed while dousing a
forest fire

Karan Arya Watcher

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Killed while dousing a
forest fire

Kaliash Chandra Bhatt

**Daily Wage
Labourer**

Binsar FD, Uttarakhand
Injured while dousing a
forest fire

Ganesh Singh

**Daily Wage
Labourer**

Corbett Tiger Reserve,
Uttarakhand
Injured in a tiger attack

WTI'S CONSERVATION HEROES



Mohd. Akbar War
Field Attendant,
Kashmir Markhor
Recovery Project,
WTI

A naturalist par excellence, Akbar War was widely known as the star markhor-spotter of the rugged Himalayan terrain of Limber in the Kazinag Range. Among those passionate about Kazinag and its iconic markhor, Akbar was fondly regarded as a 'barefoot ecologist' for his deep knowledge of the landscape and its species.

At WTI, he assisted in surveying markhor populations and other biodiversity. He also actively participated in various other survey expeditions and conservation initiatives conducted by WTI in Kazinag National Park.

WTI lost Akbar to heart failure on June 13, 2019. He was on duty, traveling with fellow project team members to a forest range in Limber. His passing was sudden and unexpected, without any prior health complaints. With his untimely demise, the Kazinag Range lost its beloved 'Markhor Man of Limber'.

4.2 Conservation Heroes

4.2.2 South India

Kerala

PJ Joseph

Forest Guard

Kottayam Forest Division,
Kerala

Joseph, a Forest Guard at the Erumeli Range, was **attacked by armed poachers** in the early hours of **December 3, 2002**. He was on night patrol when his team when they noticed two men, armed with a gun and bill hook, near an area from where poachers would usually trespass into the reserve forest. On seeing the guards, the men tried to retreat; a member of the patrolling team threw a baton causing one poacher to fall. Joseph ran and caught the man, but was attacked with the bill hook. The other poacher threatened the staff with the gun and

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Wayanad WLS Section Forest Officer Shaji VR, who was injured during an elephant conflict incident

both culprits escaped. Joseph **sustained non-fatal but serious injuries on his left cheek and eye**, leading to the loss of vision in his eye. He had been working as a guard for 12 years at the time. WTI provided an ex-gratia amount to aid Joseph and his family in their hour of need.

U Baby

Forester

Thrissur Forest Division, Kerala

Baby, a Forester, was **attacked by a group of men** while on board a private bus, on **September 20, 2006**. It was suspected that the men belonged to gang led by **timber poacher Unnikrishnan**, whom Baby had apprehended in 1993 when he was a forest guard. His injuries were severe, resulting in **23 stitches to his head and a loss of vision in one eye**.

Baby had been working in the forest service since 1982 and was the sole breadwinner for his family, comprising his parents, wife, son and daughter. WTI's ex-gratia amount and the Kerala Forest Department's support enabled his family to tide over these hard times.



Divakaran KU

Forest Watcher

Velayudhan A

Daily Wage Watcher

Sankaran VA

Daily Wage Watcher

Thrissur Forest Division, Kerala

On **February 16, 2020, a fire broke out** in the Pallikal area of Poongode Forest Station in Wadakkanchery Forest Range. Divakaran, Velayudhan and Sankaran were among the forest staff sent to the area. Unfortunately, they got **separated from the larger group and were engulfed by the fire**. Divakaran is survived by his wife and 10-month-old son Dhayan. Velayudhan is survived by his wife, two sons Anilan and Subeesh, and his daughter, Subitha. Sankaran is survived by his wife and two sons, Sarath and Sanal. WTI provided immediate ex-gratia support to the families.

TK Hussain

Daily Wage Tracker

Wayanad Wildlife Division,
Kerala



A team of wildlife vets, conservation biologists and trackers began an elephant depredation operation in the Palappilli

>>2001-10

Venkataraju

Casual Worker

Bannerghatta NP,
Karnataka

Killed by local gang

Sureshan C

Forest Guard

Mannarkkad FD, Kerala

Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Satheesan P

Van Majdoor

Mannarkkad FD, Kerala

Injured by firecracker
during elephant conflict

Bose

Watcher

Eravikulam NP, Kerala

Accidental death

Pavithran

Watcher

Aralam WLD, Kerala

Accidental drowning

>>2011-15

Dilip Kumar

Casual Worker

Anamalai TR, Tamil Nadu

Killed by captive elephant

Range of Wayanad Wildlife Division on **September 4, 2022**, when one of the **wild tuskers charged** at them. Hussain was gravely wounded and despite treatment at Thrissur, passed away in the early hours of September 15.

Hussain had joined the veterinary team of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary as a tracker in October 2016. He had performed admirably as an elephant tracker in Kerala as well as neighbouring states. He had also assisted in several rescue operations involving tigers, leopards and snakes. WTI's ex-gratia helped his family in their hour of need.

KL Sakthivel Watcher

Munnar Forest Division, Kerala



A member of the Chinnakkal human-elephant conflict mitigation team,

Sakthivel had been felicitated for his contribution towards reducing conflict in his area at WTI's Gajotsavam in Kerala. On the morning of **January 25, 2023**, he was **called in to track an elephant herd** in the Panniyar Estate under the Chinnakkal forest section. When he did not return, a search was conducted. Sakthivel was found to have been **attacked by a wild elephant** and died before reaching the hospital. It is believed that he had stumbled upon the herd in the dense fog and been attacked.

2011-15 (contd)

P K Udayappan Forest Guard

Periyar TR, Kerala

Death due to disease

Appu Mahaut

Wayanad WLS, Kerala

Killed by captive elephant

Shaji VR Section Forest Officer

Wayanad WLS, Kerala

Injured by firecracker
during elephant conflict

>>2016-20

Bomman Forest Watcher

Wayanad North Division,
Kerala

Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Basavan Forest Watcher

Wayanad Wildlife
Division, Kerala

Killed in a tiger attack

B Vijayan

Forest Watcher

Munnar WLD, Kerala

Killed in road accident on duty

Maruthi Pujari

Daily Wage

Labourer

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

Killed in road accident on duty

Kariyan

Forest Watcher

Wayanad WLS, Kerala

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Nagaraj

Daily Labourer

Chinnar WLS, Kerala

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Alaga Thambadi

Forest Watcher

Cauvery WLS, Karnataka

Killed in a wild elephant attack

L N Annegowda

Forest Watcher

Hassan WLD, Karnataka

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Karunakaran

Temporary

Watcher

Wayanad WLS, Kerala

Injured in a tiger attack

Kenchan

Forest Watcher

Wayanad WLS, Kerala

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Amrutheshwar

Swamy

Daily Wage Driver

Nagarhole TR,

Karnataka

Killed in a road accident on duty

Ganesh G

Forest Guard

Nagarhole TR,

Karnataka

Killed in road accident on duty

Rehmath Ulla

Temporary Staff

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

Killed in a road accident on duty

Mahesha

Caretaker

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

Drowned in boat accident

Shiva Kumar

Forest Watcher

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

Drowned in boat accident

Palani

Watcher

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

Killed in a road accident on duty

Ganesh P

Watcher / Driver

Eravikulam NP, Kerala

Killed in a landslide

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Karunakaran, a Temporary Watcher in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, who was seriously injured after being attacked by a tiger



Karnataka

Shiva Kumar

Daily Wage Labourer

Bandipur Tiger Reserve,
Karnataka



Shiva Kumar was **attacked by a tiger on November 19, 2015**. He was tying a buffalo to a bush as live bait during a rescue operation to capture the tiger. He **sustained several wounds and a fracture on the left leg**. He had been working in the Hediya Range as a temporary labourer since 1993 and had been promoted to a contract position in 2012.

Mahadeva Swamy N

Watcher

Nagarhole Tiger Reserve,
Karnataka



Mahadeva worked as a temporary forest watcher at the Dattahalla Beat anti-poaching camp of Metikoppe Wildlife Range in Nagarhole Tiger Reserve. He began working with the Karnataka Forest Department in July 2018 and had acquired a vast knowledge about forests

2016-20 (contd)

Gururaj

**Daily Wage
Watcher**

Nagarhole TR, Karnataka
[Killed in a wild elephant
attack](#)

Sasikumaran T Range Officer

South Wayanad FD, Kerala
[Injured in a tiger attack](#)

Bijesh

**Daily Wage
Watcher**

South Wayanad FD, Kerala
[Injured in a tiger attack](#)

Puttaraju V Forest Guard

Chikmagalur FD,
Karnataka
[Killed in a wild elephant
attack](#)

Jadeya

Forest Watcher

BRT TR, Karnataka
[Injured in a wild elephant
attack](#)

>>2021-25

**Babu
Forest Watcher**

South Wayanad FD,
Kerala
Killed in accidental fall

**Ahammed
Basheer
Watcher**

South Wayanad FD,
Kerala
Injured by firecracker
during elephant conflict

**Sijo C J
Watcher**

South Wayanad FD,
Kerala
Injured in a wild elephant
attack

**V Rajalingam
Range Officer**

Sathyamangalam FD,
Tamil Nadu
Killed in road accident on
duty

**Manjunath
Deputy Ranger**

Hassan FD, Karnataka
Injured in a forest fire

**Holasalaiah
Forest Watcher**

Bannerghatta NP,
Karnataka
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**Subramanian
PK
Forest Watcher**

Mallayattoor FD, Kerala
Permanent disability in a
wild elephant attack

**Ravi Chandran
Forest Watcher**

Anamalai TR, Tamil
Nadu
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**R Selvan
Forester**

Sathyamangalam FD,
Tamil Nadu
Killed in road accident on
duty

**Mujeeb
Daily Wage
Watcher**

Kozhikode FD, Kerala
Injured by firecracker
during elephant conflict

**Thankachan
Temporary
Watcher**

North Wayanad FD, Kerala
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Shiva Kumar, a daily wage labourer who was injured by a tiger during a rescue operation in Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka, receives an ex-gratia cheque from WTI program head Nagaraj Bhat, who himself tragically died in a road accident while on duty.



and wildlife. His proactive involvement in conflict mitigation and crop protection operations made him popular with the farmers and fringe residents.

On **December 31, 2022**, he was working on an **elephant depredation operation** near the forest boundary when he was suddenly **attacked and killed by one of the elephants**. He is survived by his wife and two young children.

Tamil Nadu

Deya Lenin Raj

Member, Anti-depredation Squad

Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve,
Tamil Nadu

A dedicated, well-liked and skilful member of the anti-depredation squad in the Thalavady Range of Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve, Deva Raj was involved in an **elephant conflict operation** on some farmlands on **December 6, 2022**, when one of the elephants chased after him. He managed to escape, but **suffered a grievous head injury due to a fall**. He was admitted to the Thalavady Government Hospital but did not, unfortunately, recover, succumbing to his injuries a day later. WTI's timely ex-gratia support aided his family in their hour of need. 🙏

2021-25 (contd)

Eldhose PY

**Daily Wage
Watcher**

Kothamangalam Division,
Kerala

Injured by firecracker
during elephant conflict

R Raviraj

Forest Guard

Sathyamangalam FD,
Tamil Nadu

Killed in a gaur attack

V Ragunathan Forester

Namakkal FD, Tamil Nadu

Killed in road accident on
duty

Sundaresh

Forest Guard Hassan
Forest Division, Karnataka

Died in a forest fire

Rajesh K

**Deputy Range
Forest Officer**

Vazhachal Forest Division,
Kerala

Bitten by a snake

Varadaraj
Daily Wage
Watcher

Wayanad WLD, Kerala
Injured in a firecracker
accident on duty

A. Tamilsevan
Animal Keeper

Kurumbapatti Zoological
Park, Tamil Nadu
Killed in an animal attack

J Murugesan
Animal Keeper

Kurumbapatti Zoological
Park, Tamil Nadu
Injured in an animal attack

Rareesh T
Temporary Forest
Watcher

Tholpetty Range, Kerala
Injured in firecracker
accident on duty

R Ashok Kumar
Forest Guard

Periyanaickenpalayam
Forest Range, Tamil Nadu
Killed in a gaur attack

WTI'S CONSERVATION HEROES



Nagaraj Bhat
Assistant Manager
Wildlife Crime
Control Division,
WTI

Nagaraj Narayan Bhat was a key member of WTI's Wildlife Crime Control Division. He was a person who truly loved working on the ground, in the field – whether dealing with a tiger-related conflict case, setting up camera traps, or removing snares. Perhaps his favourite activity, though, was going undercover to investigate wildlife criminals.

He started his career in the late 1980s working with a team of tiger-monitoring experts around the Bandipur and Nagarhole Tiger Reserves. Later, at

the Wildlife Trust of India, he led anti-poaching initiatives in the same landscape – removing snares, executing wildlife rescues, and resolving human-wildlife conflict situations. He also built a reliable network of local informers who provided him intelligence that led to multiple suspects being identified and illegal wildlife products being recovered.

On December 20, 2019, Bhat was on the way to meet a suspected ivory trader along with a member of the forest department. On the way, his car lost control, hitting a culvert at the very spot he was seated. Sadly, Bhat met his untimely demise within a few minutes of the incident. WTI mourns the loss of one of its most fearless footsoldiers in the battle against the illegal wildlife trade.

4.2 Conservation Heroes

4.2.3 East & West India

Odisha

Sunaram Singh

Watcher

Similipal South Wildlife
Division, Odisha



A Protection Assistant (Watcher), Sunaram was on patrol with a Forest Guard and four Fire Watchers in the Dukura

Range of Similipal South WLD on **April 22, 2022**. The team **encountered two poachers with country-made guns** and a couple of barking deer carcasses in their possession. When they tried to apprehend the poachers, the latter

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Pariya Devi, wife of the late Dharmdeo Mahto, a Tracker working in Valmiki TR who was killed by poachers



opened fire and fled the scene. **Sunaram survived the attack but was severely injured in the incident**. WTI provided ex-gratia support to aid him and his family in their hour of need.

Chandrakanta Rout

Forest Guard

Baripada Forest Division,
Odisha



Posted in the Rasgovindpur Forest Range of Baripada Forest Division, Chandrakanta was actively involved in

anti-poaching and elephant protection operations, and had helped capture 36 poachers during the last Akhand Shikar.

On **March 21, 2022**, Chandrakanta was **monitoring elephants in his range when he was suddenly attacked and trampled to death** by one of them. WTI's timely ex-gratia and the Odisha Forest Department's support helped his family in their hour of need.

Bimal Kumar Jena

Forest Guard

Similipal North Division, Odisha



Posted in the Baunskhal Beat of Nawana North Wildlife Range in Similipal Tiger Reserve, Bimal was highly regarded for his courage and dedication by his senior officers and his peers. While patrolling his beat on **May 22, 2023**, he **came across a group of poachers and was mercilessly gunned down**. WTI provided timely ex-gratia support to the family of this brave fallen warrior.

West Bengal

Tarun Mahalanabis

Range Officer

Gorumara National Park,
West Bengal

Tarun was left **partially blinded after being attacked by a leopard** that had strayed into a human inhabited area on the fringes of Gorumara National Park, on **May 16, 2013**. The Range Officer, who had been in the forest service since 2003, was skilled at handling human-

>>2001-10

Paramvir Khati

Forest Beat Officer

Mahananda WLS,
West Bengal

Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Bikhu Chowdhury

Casual Worker

Valmiki TR, Bihar

Killed by anti-social
elements

Luther Tirkey

Forester

Saranda FD, Jharkhand

Killed by Naxalites

Tapeshwar Singh

Casual Worker (Tracker)

Palamau TR, Jharkhand

Killed by Naxalites

Jeetan Singh

Casual Worker (Fire Watcher)

Palamau TR, Jharkhand

Killed by Naxalites

wildlife conflict operations. He was trying to rescue the leopard from a crop field with his team when the leopard, which had been surrounded by a mob of local villagers and was in a panicked state, tried to attack a member of his' team. Tarun intervened, sustaining an injury to his right eye, which unfortunately resulted in a permanent loss of vision in the eye. WTI provided vital and timely ex- gratia support for him and his family.

Rajib Oraon

Mahout

Jaldapara National Park, West Bengal



Employed as a mahout, Rajib was often required to carry out elephant-back monitoring in areas not accessible on foot

or by vehicle. He was in charge of the captive elephant Prithviraj in the national park's Bengdaki beat.

On **February 5, 2023**, Rajib took Prithviraj to graze in the Torsa-2 Compartment. While returning, they were **chased by a herd of wild elephants**. Rajib fell from Prithviraj's back and was found grievously injured by forest staff. Unfortunately, he **succumbed to his injuries** en route to the nearest hospital. Rajib was the main source of income for his family and WTI's ex-gratia support aided them in a time of great distress.

2001-10 (contd)

Bhagwati Yadav Casual Worker (Tracker)

Palamau TR, Jharkhand
Killed by anti-social
elements

Baleswar Singh Casual Worker (Tracker)

Palamau TR, Jharkhand
Killed by Naxalites

Harihar Yadav Tracker

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Killed by villagers in
retaliation for action on
illegal tree felling

Paaspat Yadav Tracker

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Injured by villagers in
retaliation for a raid

Md. Umar Miyan Casual Labourer

Palamau TR, Jharkhand
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**Daniel
Khalkho**

Forester

Palamau TR, Jharkhand
Killed by Naxalites

**Sitaram Yadav
Tracker**

Palamau TR, Jharkhand
Killed by Naxalites

**Chaitanya
Behra**

Forester

Rairangpur FD, Odisha
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**Nanda Lal
Tirkey**

Bana Shramik

Jaldapara WLS,
West Bengal
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**Kumar
Prodhan
Acting Mahout**

Jaldapara WLS,
West Bengal
Killed by a captive
elephant

**Prasad Damai
Forest Guard**

Mahananda WLS,
West Bengal
Killed in accident on duty

**Gouranga
Debnath**

Bana Shramik
Buxa TR, West Bengal
Killed by a lightning stike

**Bhola Nath
Dhal**

Forest Guard

Debrigarh WLS, Odisha
Killed in a retaliatory
attack by villagers

**Giridhari
Pradhan**

Forester

Debrigarh WLS, Odisha
Killed in a retaliatory
attack by villagers

**Sanjit Barua
Forest Guard**

Jaldapara WLS,
West Bengal
Killed in road accident
caused by a rhino attack

**Fazlul Haque
Forester**

Buxa TR, West Bengal
Killed in road accident on
duty

**Lalsai Kawar
Bana Shramik**

Gorumara NP,
West Bengal
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Nandu Ram

Forester

Hazaribagh WLS,
Jharkhand
Killed in a road accident on
duty

**Ratan Kumar
Dutta**

Forester

Gorumara NP,
West Bengal
Killed in road accident on
duty

**Moolchand
Driver**

Keoladeo NP, Rajasthan
Killed in road accident on
duty

Jharkhand

Jasbin Aind

Forest Guard

Khunti Forest Division,
Jharkhand



On **July 23, 2022**, a herd of elephants entered Konhappa, a village located in the Karra block of Jharkhand's Khunti district. Even as local villagers gathered in an attempt to protect their property from damage. A team of frontline staff — Jasbin Salker Aind, Shashi Bhushan Sahay, Sandeep Kumar, Reshma Agnesh Guriya and Devendar Kumar Sahu — headed to the area to provide safe passage to the elephants and prevent conflict.

The team was able to rescue two out of three elephants that had been separated from their herd. However, as the villagers had been pelting stones, the remaining **wild elephant ran amuck and Jasbin was attacked and seriously injured**. Despite being rushed to hospital, he **succumbed to his injuries the same day**. WTI's timely ex-gratia and the Jharkhand Forest Department's support helped his family in their hour of need. 🙏

BV Bokotra Van Rakshak Sahayak

Gir West Division, Gujarat
Injured in a poacher attack

>>2011-25

Jaidev Singh Forest Guard

Keoladeo NP, Rajasthan
Killed in a road accident on
duty

Dharmdeo Mahto Daily Wage Tracker

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Killed by poachers

Surendra Shah Casual Worker

Ranchi WLD, Jharkhand
Killed in a wild elephant attack

Sourav Talukdar Forester

Buxa TR, West Bengal
Died of a heart attack

Pujeru Ram Tiger Tracker

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Killed by poachers

Ratan Kr Dey

Forest Guard

Buxa TR, West Bengal
Accidentally shot during
elephant conflict incident

Vishwanath Singh

Tracker

Ranchi WLD, Jharkhand
Killed by poachers

Sunil Mahto

Tiger Tracker

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Killed in a gaur attack

Girish Biswal

Forest Guard

Dhenkanal FD, Odisha
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Goutam Dey

Casual Labourer

Gorumara FD,
West Bengal
Killed in a road accident
on duty

Sanjay Munda Mahout

Keonjhar FD, Odisha
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Biplab Roy

Forest Guard

Jaldapara NP, West
Bengal
Injured in a road accident
on duty

Basdev Baitha

Daily Wage Driver

Valmiki TR, Bihar
Killed in accident on duty

Sasikala Sahu

Forest Guard

Kuldiha WLS, Odisha
Injured in a wild elephant
attack

Rajendra Rai

Casual Worker

Kurseong, West Bengal
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Amalendu Halder

Forest Guard

Sunderban TR, West
Bengal
Killed by an intruder

Suresh Tigga

Daily Wage Labourer

Jaldapara, West Bengal
Killed in an elephant
attack

Madho Kheriya

Patawala

Gorumara, West Bengal
Killed in an elephant attack

Madan Dewan

Forest Guard

Buxa TR, West Bengal
Killed in an elephant attack

Basanta Kumar Mahanta

Forest Squad

Keonjhar FD, Odisha
Killed in an elephant attack

Ganesh Shyamal

Tiger Rescue Team

South 24 Parganas
Division, West Bengal
Inured in a tiger attack

Kishore Kumar

Range Officer

Rajsamand WLD,
Rajasthan
Killed by sand miners

Vishnu Meena

Forest Guard

Rajsamand Wildlife
Division, Rajasthan
Injured by sand miners

4.2 Conservation Heroes

4.2.4 Central India

Madhya Pradesh

RD Shrivas

Forest Guard

Babu Singh

Casual Labourer

Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary,
Madhya Pradesh

Shrivas and Babu Singh had confronted some poachers entering the forest of Kuno Wildlife Division with illegal weapons. The poachers outnumbered them at the time and managed to escape. A few days later, on **May 25, 2006**, the **poachers attacked the patrolling camp at Madanpur**, targeting Shrivas and Babu.

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to the son of the late Ram Darash Sharma, a Forest Guard who was killed by a captive elephant in Singrauli FD

Babu was severely injured, requiring extended treatment in Gwalior. **Shrivas, unfortunately, was shot and killed on the spot**. He had been working with the forest department since 1968 and is survived by his wife, daughter and two sons. . WTI provided ex-gratia support to Babu and to Shrivas' family to aid them in their hour of need.

RK Adivashi

Forest Guard

Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary,
Madhya Pradesh

A Forester at Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary, RK Adivashi was **killed by poachers** while on duty **on September 30, 2009**. He is survived by his wife Leelabai, four daughters and a son.

In addition to WTI's ex-gratia support, the state government declared that the family would receive a sum of Rs 12.75 lakh for their loss. The funds were divided between Adivashi's wife and daughters, and his son was provided a job as a Forest Guard.



Deepu Singh Rana

Forest Guard

Gwalior Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh



A 24-yr-old Forest Guard at Gwalior Forest Division, Deepu Rana was **killed by poachers on May 4, 2020**. A team

of frontline staff was patrolling the Mohna forest area in the southern part of Ghatigaon Beat, having received a tip about illegal bamboo felling. They **encountered a poacher**, who fired at them. **Deepu was shot in the chest** and died on the spot. WTI's ex-gratia aided his family in their hour of need.

Ram Darash Sharma

Forest Guard

Singrauli Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh



On **October 11, 2020**, Ram Darash was participating in an **operation to rescue a herd of wild elephants**

that had entered the crop fields at North Gobha, Beat R-398. During the mission, the herd suddenly charged towards him and **he was crushed by an elephant**.

>>2001-10

Mansingh Sanodiya

Forest Guard

Pench NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a road accident

Prakash Kumar Routail

Mahout

Bandhavgarh NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Killed by a captive elephant

Hetram Singh Grass Cutter

Bandhavgarh NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Killed by a captive elephant

Uddav Gopalrao Take

Forest Guard

Janakwadi WLS,
Maharashtra

Died in a road accident

Rajbhan Singh Casual Worker

Bandhavgarh NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Died after contracting
malaria in field camp

He was rushed to the nearest hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival.

Ram had started working at Singrauli as a daily wager in 1995 and was given the post of Forest Guard in 2008. He was known for his devotion to duty: in 2016, when he came across a convoy of trucks carrying coal without the required paperwork, he stopped them until the necessary permits were obtained, standing guard for 12 hours. He left behind a family of eight: his wife, five daughters and two sons. In addition to WTI's ex-gratia, the Madhya Pradesh government provided the family Rs 10 lakh for their unfortunate loss.

Ajit Singh

Forest Guard

Sanjay Tiger Reserve,
Madhya Pradesh



Ajit Singh lost his life after being **struck by lightning** on his way to work on **September 20, 2020**. He had been working at the tiger reserve since August 2013 and was known for his devotion to wildlife conservation. He was involved in tiger tracking and monitoring, and had acquired exceptional knowledge about tiger behaviour.

Ajit was the sole breadwinner in his household and is survived by his wife, Roshmi. She is grateful to WTI for the timely ex-gratia support.

2001-10 (contd)

Dhiraj Lal

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh
Disabled after being
attacked by a sloth bear

Babu Singh

Casual Labourer

Kuno WLS,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured by poachers

Sanjay Pralhad Jadhao

Forest Guard

Wan WLS, Maharashtra
Died in a road accident

DK Chandra- shekhar

Forester

Wan WLS, Maharashtra
Died in a road accident

Ramachandra Kondwal

Forest Labourer

Radhanagari WLS,
Maharashtra
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Chandrabhan Singh

Forester

Bandhavgarh NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Disabled after being
attacked by a tiger

Shyam Dhurvey

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Killed in a tiger attack

Dada Bapurao Nannaware

Temporary Labourer

Tadoba-Andhari TR,
Maharashtra

Died in a road accident

Hamel Pattai

Grass Cutter

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Disabled after being
attacked by a tiger

Amrit Pandey

Forest Guard

Bandhavgarh NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a road accident

Deelip Gop

Forest Guard

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a road accident

Jeevan Singh Vais

Forester

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a road accident

>>2011-20

Mal Singh Yadav

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Injured in an accidental
fall while on patrol

Bhola Yadav

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Died of a heart attack

Sukkuh Gond

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Injured by poachers

Dilip Rajak

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Injured in a road accident

Ram Singh

Casual Worker

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh

Died due to an accidental
fall while on patrol

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to the family of the late Sitaram Tiwari, Deputy Ranger, Manendragarh Forest Division, by the Chief Conservator of Forests, Sarguja, Chhattisgarh



Maharashtra

Sitaram Mahadeo Wadve

Permanent Labourer

Pench Tiger Reserve,
Maharashtra

A labourer at Bor Wildlife Sanctuary in Pench Tiger Reserve, Sitaram Wadve **died in a tiger attack on April 20, 2012.** As part of his duties, he used to fill water in artificial waterholes in the Pedhri Beat during the summer. While checking the water level of one such waterhole in Chichkhori, he was attacked and killed by a tiger. Sitaram had joined Pench in 1994; he is survived by his wife, three daughters and a son.

Swati Nanaji Dhumane

Forest Guard

Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve,
Maharashtra



Swati Dhumane had joined the Maharashtra Forest Department in 2009. She started working at the Kolara Range of Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve in December 2020, keeping a firm

2011-20 (contd)

Sukhram Dasaram Chakate

Casual Labourer

Nagwira WLS,
Maharashtra
Killed by poachers

Shivan Marshkole

Casual Worker

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Killed by unknown
assailants

Diwan Singh Gond

Forest Guard

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Died after contracting
malaria and jaundice in
field camp

Ravindra Meshram

Forest Guard

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured by poachers

Santosh Patel
Forester

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured by poachers

Sukkham
Singh Daheria
Casual Labourer

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured by poachers

Sanjay Parte
Samiti Labour

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured in captive
elephant attack

Naresh Kumar
Kakodia
Deputy Ranger

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured in a vehicular
accident

Surendra
Yadav
Forest Guard

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured in a vehicle
accident in the PA

Surendra
Thakur
Casual Labourer

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured in a road accident

Mahavir Maravi
Forester

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Died in a road accident

Pothi Ram
Yadav
Casual Labourer

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh
Died due to accidental
electrocution

Tilak Yadav
Casual Labourer

Kanha NP,
Madhya Pradesh
Died in a road accident

Sukhdas Maravi
Casual Labourer

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh
Injured in a vehicle accident
in the PA

Raj Kumar
Gawal
Casual Labourer

Nagzira-Navegaon TR,
Maharashtra
Died in a forest fire

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Bhagota Devi, wife of the late Pothi Ram Yadav, a Casual Labourer who died due to accidental electrocution in Kanha Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh



control on grazing, illegal felling and encroachment activities around Kolara, Bamangaon and Satara villages. She was also in charge of maintaining fire lines and tourist roads in her area, as well as camera trapping, patrolling and more. On **November 20, 2021**, Swati was **carrying out a carnivore sign survey** as part of the 2022 All-India Tiger Estimation when she was **attacked and killed by a tiger**.

WTI's timely ex-gratia and support from the Maharashtra Forest Department aided her family in this difficult time.

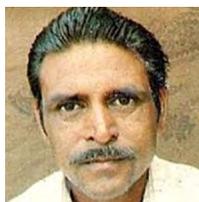
Sachin Ashok Shrirange

Daily Wage Labourer

Rekhachand Gopi Rane

Daily Wage Labourer

Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra



On **April 8, 2021**, Sachin Shrirange and

Rekhachand Rane were **engaged in a fire-fighting operation** in Beat No. 4, Compartment 99 of NNTR. They tried their utmost to extinguish the forest fire but it got out of hand. Sachin,

2011-20 (contd)

Sitaram Tiwari

Deputy Ranger

Manendragarh FD,
Chhattisgarh

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Shravan Yadav

Casual Labourer

Kanha TR,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a lightning strike

Yogeshwar Sonwani

Forest Guard

Barnawapara WLS,
Chhattisgarh

Injured by poachers

Bindeshwar Ram Bhagat

Range Officer

Panna TR, Madhya Pradesh

Killed by a captive elephant

Balchand Gond

Forest Watcher

Udanti-Sitanadi TR,
Chhattisgarh

Injured by a wild buffalo

**Bhikam Singh
Dhurwey**

Forest Labour

Kanha NP,

Madhya Pradesh

Died in a road accident

>> 2021-25

**Chhatrapal
Singh Lodh**

Forest Guard

Panna FD,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured by teak loggers

**Rakesh Hivraj
Madavi**

Daily Wage

Labourer

Nagzira-Navegaon TR,

Maharashtra

Died in a fire-fighting
operation

**Vijay Tijab
Marshkole**

Daily Wage

Labourer

Nagzira-Navegaon TR,

Maharashtra

Died in a fire-fighting
operation

**Raju Shamrao
Sayam**

Daily Wage

Labourer

Nagzira-Navegaon TR,

Maharashtra

Injured in a fire-fighting
operation

**Surya Prakash
Yede**

Forest Guard

Balaghat FD, Madhya

Pradesh

Died in a fire-fighting
operation

**Swamideen
Kushwaha**

Forest Labour

Panna FD,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured by teak loggers

**Madan Lal
Verma**

Forest Guard

Dewas FD,

Madhya Pradesh

Killed by poachers

**Suresh
Prajapati**

Forest Guard

Panna TR,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured by timber fellers

**Jagan Mayaram
Meshram**

Daily Wage

Labourer

Forest Development

Corporation, Bhandara,

Maharashtra

Died in a fire-fighting
operation

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Malti Devi, wife of the late Sitaram Mahadeo Wadhwe, a Permanent Labourer at Bor WLS, Pench TR, Maharashtra, who died in a tiger attack



Rekhachand and two other daily wagers, Rakesh Hiwraj Madavi and Vijay Tijab Maraskolhe, were **killed in the blaze**.

Sachin, 22 years old, hailed from Kosamtondi village and had worked as a forest fire prevention labourer for the last two summers. Rekhachand, 45 years old, was a resident of Dhanori village and had worked in the Kosamtondi Round for a decade. Rakesh and Vijay were residents of Thatezari village. In addition to WTI's ex-gratia support, sums of Rs 5 lakh and Rs 1 lakh were provided to the labourers' families by the state government and the Forest Rangers' Association respectively.

Chhattisgarh

Ram Rath Patel

Range Officer

Indravati Tiger Reserve



Ram Rath was **murdered by Naxalites** when he went to a local village near Bhairamgarh Wildlife Sanctuary on **September 11, 2020**. He had joined the service as a Forest Guard in 1995; his dedication saw him rise through the ranks as Forester, Deputy Ranger and Range Officer. Ram is survived by wife and two sons, Deepak and Sumeet. In addition to WTI's ex-gratia, the family received Rs 2.5 lakh from the Ranger Association. 

2021-25 (contd)

Dhaniram Raikwar

Casual Labourer

Panna TR,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured in an accidental fall

Ram Yadav

Watchman

South Betul FD,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured in an attack by illegal cattle grazers

Tilak Singh

Forest Guard

South Betul FD,

Madhya Pradesh

Injured by poachers

Rajesh Meravi

Forest Watcher

Kanha TR,

Madhya Pradesh

Accidental drowning

Madan Hirapure

Casual Labourer

Bhandara FD,

Maharashtra

Injured in a tiger attack

Yadunandan Yadav

Forester

South Betul FD, Madhya
Pradesh

Injured by teak fellers

Mahesh Soni Forester

South Betul FD, Madhya
Pradesh

Injured by teak fellers

Rajendra Singh Kusre

Forester

Dindori Forest division,
Madhya Pradesh

Died in a forest fire

Sheetal Singh Forest Guard

Singrauli FD, Madhya
Pradesh

Killed in an accident on
duty

Vinod Kumar Maurya

Beat Guard

North Panna Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Injured by local herders

Ravi Kumar Beat Guard

North Panna Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Injured by local herders

Brajendra Kumar Kasar

Forest Guard

North Panna Forest
Division, Madhya

Pradesh

Injured after falling from
height

Kalam Singh Markar

Kanha Tiger Force Worker

Kanha Tiger Reserve,
Madhya Pradesh

Killed in an accident on
duty

Ex-gratia cheques being handed over to (left) the brother of the late Diwan Gond, Forest Guard, Kanha TR, Madhya Pradesh, and (right) Balchand Gond, Forest Watcher, Udanti-Sitanadi TR, Chhattisgarh



4.2 Conservation Heroes

4.2.4 North-East India

Assam

Golap Bori

Forest Guard

Kaziranga National Park, Assam

On **October 27, 2003**, Golap Bori was conducting a search operation on elephant back for armed poachers in Pathalikathani under the Dimoubhil Camp area of Kaziranga National Park. A **female rhino charged the camp elephant**, causing it to hurriedly retreat through the woodland. Golap was hit by branches and **fell from the elephant, sustaining severe injuries**. Although he received treatment, he passed away on November 23.

Golap had been posted at Agaratoli in the Eastern Range of Kaziranga for eleven

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to the wife of the late Gautam Baruah, a Forest Guard who was killed in a rhino attack in Kaziranga National Park

years. He is survived by his wife, son and daughter. WTI provided timely ex-gratia support to his family to aid them in their hour of need.

Satyaban Pegu

Casual Labour -
Mahout

Kaziranga National Park, Assam

Satyaban was taking part in an **operation to tranquilise and rescue an adult tigress** in the area near Tamuli Pathar village, adjacent to Kaziranga National Park, on **May 19, 2004**. Agitated by a missed tranquilisation attempt, the **tigress leaped 12 feet in the air and swiped at Satyaban** atop Joymala, the forest department elephant he was driving.

Satyaban **lost three fingers of his left hand** in the attack and was immediately taken to a hospital in Dibrugarh. WTI provided him much-needed support, covering the entire cost of his hospitalisation and treatment.



Thuluka Pegu

Forest Guard

Kaziranga National Park, Assam

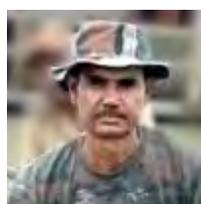


On **March 14, 2019**, Thuluka was patrolling the Tilaidubi Anti-Poaching Camp area under the Kohora Range of Kaziranga National Park, when he was **attacked and severely injured by a wild buffalo**. He was immediately taken to Bokakhat Civil Hospital but was referred to the Jorhat Medical College & Hospital for specialised treatment. Sadly, he succumbed to his injuries en route. He is survived by his wife, two sons and a daughter. WTI's ex-gratia aided his family in their hour of need.

Tipusaran Sahu

Forest Guard

Kaziranga National Park, Assam



Tipusaran was on duty in the Pohubeel Anti-poaching Camp in Kaziranga on **February 17, 2021**, when he was **attacked by a female rhino** who was browsing near the camp with her calf. He was taken to the Kohora Model Hospital in Golaghat, but unfortunately **did not survive** his injuries. WTI's ex-gratia helped his family in this difficult time.

>>2001-10

Babul Baruah

Grass Cutter

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed by a captive elephant

Patiram Das

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Died in road accident on duty

Bhudev Chakravarty

Forest Guard

Orang NP, Assam

Killed in a tiger attack

Rajen Hazarika

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Died in road accident on duty

Kanbap Dutta

Driver

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Died in road accident on duty

Prabhat Saikia

Casual Worker

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed in a wild elephant attack

Arunachal Pradesh

**Dharmeswar
Saikia**

**Mahout
Niranjan Boro
Watcher
Pali Nabom
Helper**

Pakke Tiger Reserve,
Arunachal Pradesh

On **February 18, 2006**, members of a Tiger Census Team were camped near the Nameri River in the Tippi Range of Pakke Tiger Reserve, when they were **attacked by a wild elephant**.

In the ensuing melee, Niranjan Boro, who had joined Pakke as a Watcher in 1993, suffered a **fractured eye socket and a serious head injury** that required 20 stitches. Dharmeswar Saikia, who had joined the forest service in 1983, sustained an **injury to his left rib cage and dislocated his left leg**. Pali Nabom, who had been working as a Helper since 1996, suffered **fractures in his right shoulder and arm**, and an internal injury that caused chronic bleeding from his right ear.

All three survived their injuries. Since they were the sole earning members of their family, WTI's timely ex-gratia support aided them in their hour of need.

2001-10 (contd)

**Bipin Nath
Game watcher**

Sonai Rupai WLS, Assam
Injured by poachers

**Bhumidhar
Deka**

Casual Worker

Pobitora WLS, Assam
Injured in an accidental fall

**Sukleswar Deka
Casual Worker**

Burachapori WLS, Assam
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

**Atul Chandra
Bora**

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a rhino attack

**Dilip Borah
Dak Runner**

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in a motorcycle
accident on duty

**Hassan Ali
Forest Guard**

Orang NP, Assam
Killed by rhino poachers

Debi Ram Deka
Home Guard

Orang NP, Assam
Killed in a rhino attack

Bhupen Paul
Boatman

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in road accident
on duty

>>2011-20

Bharat Gogoi
Boatman

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a wild buffalo
attack

Karuna Das
Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in a vehicular
accident in the PA

Bakul Nath
Boatman

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Manikanta Das
Casual Worker

Nameri NP, Assam
Accidental drowning

Bogai Saikia
Game Watcher

Pobitora WLS, Assam
Killed in a rhino attack

Ohed Ali
Mahout

Orang NP, Assam
Killed in a tiger attack

Kalyangiri
Adhikary
Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a wild buffalo
attack

Dibyajyoti
Bordoloi
Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Accidental drowning

Karo Tayem
Forest Guard

Pakke TR,
Arunachal Pradesh
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Bharat Das
Forester

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a rhino attack

Junu Tirkey
Grass Cutter

Pakke TR,
Arunachal Pradesh
Killed by a captive elephant

Naba Mahanta
Forester

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in road accident
on duty

Ananta Ray
Forester

Manas NP, Assam
Injured in a wild elephant
attack

Nilamoni Bora
Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in accident on duty

Dimbeswar
Bora
Casual Labourer

Karbi Anglong, Assam
Killed by accidental
discharge of weapon

Liladhar Gogoi
Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in accident on duty

Kim Mizi

Casual Labourer

Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary,
Arunachal Pradesh



A casual labourer working in the forest protection squad at Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Kim Mizi

contracted **Japanese Encephalitis** (a mosquito-borne flavivirus related to dengue, yellow fever and West Nile viruses) while living and working in the sanctuary. He became severely ill and was admitted to hospital, but **didn't recover and passed away on July 17, 2019**. He is survived by his wife and two daughters.

Bikash Gowala

Mahout

Pakke Tiger Reserve,
Arunachal Pradesh



On **April 6, 2021** Bikash, a Mahout at Pakke Tiger Reserve, was bathing his captive elephant, Tayseng, at the river

adjoining his anti-poaching camp. While doing so, he **slipped and fell off the elephant**. Though he survived he **suffered severe internal injuries** and was hospitalised for three weeks. WTI's ex-gratia helped him meet the costs of his treatment.

2011-20 (contd)

Someswar Borah

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Accidental drowning

Anil Deka

Mahout

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in accident on duty

Milai Das

AFPF Personnel

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in a road accident caused by an animal attack

Thaneswar Das

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in accident on duty

Gautam Baruah

Forest Guard

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Killed in a rhino attack

Rajen Nag

Forest Guard

Pakke Tiger Reserve,
Arunachal Pradesh
Died in accident on duty

Lankeswar Lahkar

Forest Guard

Manas NP, Assam

Killed in a rhino attack

Tilak Boro

Game Watcher

Mangaldoi WLD, Assam

Killed in a rhino
attack

Ganesh Bahadur Newar

Casual Labourer

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Hemanta Talukdar

Forest Ranger

Guwahati WLD, Assam

Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Liladhar Sharma

Forester

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Injured in a sloth bear
attack

Bipul Hazarika

Forest Guard

Sivasagar FD, Assam

Died in accident on duty

Prasanta Dutta

Game watcher

Sivasagar FD, Assam

Died in accident on duty

Nizamuddin Ahmed

Fixed Pay Worker

Sivasagar FD, Assam

Died in road accident on
duty

Babul Choudhary

Game Watcher

Guwahati WLD, Assam

Died in a motorcycle
accident on duty

Priyom Mech

Daily Wage Driver

Sivasagar FD, Assam

Died in road accident on
duty

Joy Sharma

Forest Guard

Pakke TR,

Arunachal Pradesh

Injured in accidental fall

Bridukar Bora

Game Watcher

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed in a rhino attack

Bishnu Mandal

Casual Labourer

Nagaon WLD, Assam

Injured in a wild elephant
attack

An ex-gratia cheque being handed over to Rekha Borah, wife of the late Someshwar Borah, a Forest Guard who drowned while on duty in Kaziranga National Park in November 2015



Bharat Chiri

Beat Guard

Pakke Tiger Reserve,
Arunachal Pradesh



Bharat was patrolling his range on his motorbike on **November 19, 2022**, when a branch got stuck in the spokes of one of the wheels and he **sustained a fracture to his toe**. Despite receiving the required medical treatment, the **wound became gangrenous and the toe had to be amputated**. The incident left Bharat in grave financial distress and he was extremely grateful for WTI's ex-gratia support.

Mizoram

Lokhon Joy

Forest Guard

Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram

On **June 22, 2003**, Lokhon received information about the presence of some trespassers in Dampa Tiger Reserve. As he was leaving his house to investigate, **a man accosted him at his doorstep and stabbed him to death**. The killer was closely related to an illegal timber logger whom he had apprehended recently. The 55-yr-old Lokhon had worked as a Wildlife Guard at the Terei Range in Dampa for over 15 years. 🐾

>>2021-25

Moheshwar

Hazarika

Game Watcher

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed in a rhino attack

Sundhan Patgiri

Casual Labourer

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Killed in accident on duty

A Sangkhuma

Forest Guard

Dampa TR, Mizoram

Injured in a landslide

Ramu Kharia

Mahout

Pakke TR,

Arunachal Pradesh

Killed in an accidental fall

Animesh

Deka

AFPF Constable

Manas NP, Assam

Killed in a rhino attack

Rupjyoti Borah

AFPF Personnel

Kaziranga NP, Assam

Died in accident on duty

Raju Das

Casual Labourer

Guwahati WLD, Assam
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Madhu Deka

AFPF Personnel

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Died in accident on duty

Lalnunzira

Forester

Aizawl FD, Mizoram
Died in road accident on
duty

Mofij Ali

Casual Labourer

Kaziranga NP, Assam
Accidental drowning

Rabin

Basumatary

Forest Guard

Manas TR, Assam
Killed in a wild buffalo
attack

Atul Kalita

Casual Labourer

Gibbon WLS, Assam
Killed in a wild elephant
attack

Pranjal

Talukdar

Deputy Ranger

Chirang FD, Assam
Injured in a retaliatory
attack by poachers

Dwibayan

Debnath

Forester

Chirang FD, Assam
Injured in a retaliatory
attack by poachers

Apurba Momin

Casual Labourer

Kaziranga National Park,
Assam
Killed in a wild buffalo
attack

Pranab Jyoti

Deka

Mahaut

Guwahati WLD, Assam
Died in an accident while
caring for a captive
elephant

Biren Rabha

Forest Guard

Sonitpur West Division,
Assam
Killed in animal attack

Bubul Gogoi

Mahout

Kaziranga National Park,
Assam
Killed in an accident inside
PA

Dhanmani

Deka

Home Guard

Orang National Park,
Assam
Killed in a tiger attack

Kwimalu Boro

Fix pay staff

Raimona NP, Assam
Injured in a wild boar
attack

Dhiraj

Basumatary

Home Guard

Raimona NP, Assam
Injured in a wild boar
attack

Zeherul Islam

AFPF Personnel

Manas Tiger Reserve,
Assam
Killed in a wild buffalo
attack

4.3 The Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund

The COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022 and the associated lockdowns, impacted frontline forest staff and conservationists in many ways, who were still on duty.

During the lockdowns, frontline forest staff would work tirelessly patrolling forests and protecting wildlife, without having an option to “work from home”. As a result, a large number of conservation professionals were lost to COVID-19 during this period. To support the families of frontline forest staff & wildlife conservationists who lost their lives to COVID-19, the Conservation Heroes COVID Casualty Fund was operated as a “one-off” scheme by WTI to provide immediate ex-gratia support to a dependent family member or next of kin. This appeal

was provided to Vanrakshaks and other conservation professionals, to honor their life committed to conservation and their valuable contributions towards safeguarding the country’s wildlife.

Through the fund, WTI provided a sum of INR 1,00,000 to the families of 173 frontline staff and 8 non-government conservation professionals who lost their lives between 2020 and 2022. Despite best efforts, WTI could not support all the Vanrakshaks who had fallen to COVID-19 due to lack of proper documentation or missing details of the nominated family member. The highest number of COVID related ex-gratia aid were given to the frontline forest staff in Madhya Pradesh. 🐾

WTI provided ration and safety gear to the frontline staff of 7 forest departments during the pandemic.



Conservation Heroes

COVID-19 Casualties (2020-2022)

**Ashok Kumar
Dhurve**

Forester

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Raj Kumar
Kumre**

Forester

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Poonam Chand
Hedau**

Forest Guard

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Champa Lal
Rahangdale**

Labour

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Mukesh Singh
Bhadoriya**

Forest Guard

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Daya Shankar
Tiwari**

Range Officer

Sohagi Barwa WLS, Uttar
Pradesh

M A Nafees

Forester

Amrabad TR, Telangana

Tejral Uikey

Forester

Satpuda TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Shankarlal
Nagar**

Forest Ranger

Satpuda TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Pravin
Sudhakar
Akojwar**

**Daily wage
labourer**

Tadoba Andhari TR,
Maharashtra

**Naresh Naryanji
Gahane**

Clerk

Nawegaon-Nagzira TR,
Maharashtra

**Suresh Kisan
Lanjewar**

Daily wage labourer

Nawegaon-Nagzira TR,
Maharashtra

**Moreshwar Soma
Wolke**

Daily wage labourer

Nawegaon-Nagzira TR,
Maharashtra

**Chandrakant
Adakuji Gajbhe**

Forest Guard

Tadoba Andhari TR,
Maharashtra

Arghyadeep Roy
Range Officer,

Sundarban TR, West
Bengal

**S Balakrishna
Watcher**

Amrabad TR, Telangana

**Patru Tanu
Kinnake**

Forest Labourer

Tadoba Andhari TR,
Maharashtra

**Shivananda
Indi**

Forest Guard

Sirsi Division, Karnataka

**Raghvendra M
Madival**

2nd Division Asst

Sirsi Division, Karnataka

**Rathod Eswar
Forest Section
Officer**

Kawal TR, Telengana

**D Mahendra
Prabu**

Forester

Dindigul FD, Tamil Nadu

**P Bala
krishnan**

Forest Guard

Thiruvarur FD, Tamil
Nadu

**Ram Kishan
Patel**

Labourer

South Panna Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Vijaynarayan
Pathak**

Forest Guard

South Panna Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Pradeep Kumar
Mishra**

Forest Guard

South Panna Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Hemraj
Agnihotri**

Labourer

South Panna Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Satyanarayan
Mali**

Forest Helper

Ranthambore NP,
Rajasthan

A commemorative scroll being handed over to the wife of the late Rajesh Pille, Draughtsman, PCCF (HoFF) Office, Chhattisgarh



**Prabhu Dayal
Security Guard**

Pench TR,
Madhya Pradesh

**D Gnanasekar
Forest Guard**

Chennai FD,
Tamil Nadu

**Julius Piplad
Range Officer**

Jhabua FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Gulab Singh
Meda**

Forester

Jhabua FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Kishore Rokde
Office Assistant**

Dhar FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dilip Kanel
Forest Guard**

Indore Social Forestry
Division (ISFD), Madhya
Pradesh

**Mahesh
Chandra
Panwar**

Forest Guard

ISFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Mangal Singh
Waskel**

Forest Guard

ISFD, Madhya Pradesh

Mishrilal Kanel

Forest Guard

ISFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Pravenshu
Singh**

Forester

Indore FD, Jhabua
Social Forestry Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Prem Chand
Kadam**

Watchman

Indore Social Forestry
Division, Dhar FD,
Madhya Pradesh

**Ramesh
Chandra
Lobaniya**

Forester

Indore FD, Jhabua
Social Forestry Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Sushil
Ganawa**

Forest Guard

Indore FD, Jhabua
Social Forestry Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Yusuf Pathan
Forest Guard**

Indore FD, Jhabua Social
Forestry Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Chirwan
Dhurve**

Forest Guard

Dhindori FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Ganesh Dubey
Forester**

Jabalpur FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Pratap Singh
Rajput**

Forest Guard

Katni FD, Madhya Pradesh

**Mukesh Kunday
Forest Guard**

Katni FD, Madhya Pradesh

**Chitrakumar
Ghormaare**

Forest Guard

West Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Vinod Kulste
Forest Guard**

West Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Kamlesh
Kumar Dhurve**

Forest Guard

West Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Surendra
Singh
Kandil**

Forester

Gwalior Social Forestry
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Santosh Kulesh
Forest Guard**

West Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Rishi Kumar
Shukla**

Forester

East Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Lokesh Kumar
Uikey**

Forest Guard

East Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dulichand
Deshmukh**

Forest Guard

East Mandla FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Krishna Kumar
Kaul**

Forest Guard

Sanjay TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Deenanath
Khare**

Forest Guard

Sagar Social Forestry
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Harprasad Gaur
Driver**

South Sagar Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Shobha Rani
Forest Watcher**

Bandipur TR, Karnataka

**Pujari
Venkateswarlu**

**Former Deputy
Conservator of
Forests**

GHMC, Hyderabad
Telangana

P.K. Sen

**Former Director
for Project Tiger**

Delhi

**Jagjeet Ahirwar
Forest Guard**

Chhatarpur Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Ram Kumar
Pathak**

Forest Guard

Chhatarpur Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Man Mohan Lal
Khare**

**Deputy Range
Officer**

Tikamgarh Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Om Prakash
Pathak**

Forester

Tikamgarh Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Rajesh Navdya
Forest Guard**

Tikamgarh Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Ashok Kumar
Khare**

Office Assistant

Gwalior Working Plan
Unit, Madhya Pradesh

**Brajmohan
Chidar**

Forest Guard

Gwalior Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

Dinesh Yadav

Peon

North Sagar Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dwarka Prasad
Sharma**

Forest Guard

Dewas Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Santosh
Bhagore**

**Deputy Range
Officer**

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Milan Singh
Meravi**

Forester

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Ramganesha
Patel**

Forest Guard

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Sukhman
Tekam**

Permanent

Labourer

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Vaidhnath
Tembhre**

Permanent

Labourer

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Mahendra
Rajak**

Peon

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Narayan Singh
Meravi**

Driver

(Labourer)

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Sunil
Sirsam**

Casual

Labourer

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

Dinesh Maravi

Casual Labourer

Kanha TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Mukesh Kumar
Tripathi**

Forester

Jabalpur Social Forestry
Division (CCF Office),
Madhya Pradesh

**Sumit Kumar
Bose**

Forester

Jabalpur Social Forestry
Division (CCF Office),
Madhya Pradesh

**Laxman
Khandaale**

**Deputy Range
Officer**

Burhanpur Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Vishnu Sonekar

Labourer

Burhanpur Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Shyam
Khandvekar**

Forest Guard

Burhanpur Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Pyarsingh
Thakur**
**Assistant
Conservator of
Forests**

Sendhwa Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Rajendrapuri
Gowswami**
Forester

Bedhwani Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Sangeeta
Vishwakarma**
Forest Guard

North Seoni Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Neelesh
Namurte**
Forest Guard

North Seoni Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Mahendra
Singh
Maravi**
Forest Guard

North Seoni Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

Ravi Uikey
Forest Guard

South Seoni Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Ranjeet Kumre
Forest Guard

Seoni Social Forestry
Division (CCF Office),
Madhya Pradesh

Sushmita Ali
Clerk

South Balaghat FD,
Madhya Pradesh

Pawan Chawle
Forest Guard

South Balaghat FD,
Madhya Pradesh

A commemorative scroll being handed over to Richa Prasant,
daughter of the late PK Sen, former director, Project Tiger



**Chandra
shekhar
Chauhan**

Forest Guard

South Balaghat FD
(SBFD), Madhya Pradesh

**Rajendra
Chandane**

Forest Guard

South Balaghat FD,
Madhya Pradesh

**Yashwant
Dixit**

Forest Guard

South Balaghat FD,
Madhya Pradesh

**Jamna Prasad
Masram**

Forest Guard

South Balaghat
Production Division
(SBPD), Madhya Pradesh

**Anil Kumar
Srivastav**

Forest Guard

North Balaghat
Production Division
(NBPD), Madhya Pradesh

**Maangyalal
Khare**

Forest Guard

NBPD, Madhya Pradesh

**Lalsingh
Maravi**

Forest Guard

NBPD, Madhya Pradesh

**Shyamsingh
Maravi**

Labourer

NBPD, Madhya Pradesh

**Shikhar Chand
Yadav**

Labourer

North Balaghat Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dinesh Kumar
Bhagat**

Forest Guard

Madhav National Park,
Madhya Pradesh

**Kishan
Rathore**

Forest Guard

Shivpuri Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Raghuveer
Bhargava**

Driver

Shivpuri Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dhaniram
Kushwah**

Labourer

Shivpuri Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

Sunil Khare

**Range Forest
Officer**

Guna Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Pehalwan
Singh**

Forest Guard

Ashoknagar Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Rafiq Khan

**Deputy Range
Officer**

Ashoknagar Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Dheerendra
Maachiya**

Forest Guard

Hoshangabad Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Kailash
Chandra Gaur**

Assistant Grade III

Hoshangabad Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Sushil
Uikey**
Forest Guard
Harda Production
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Hemant
Korey**
Forest Guard
Harda Production
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Jitendra Singh
Chundawat**
Driver
Udaipur WLD, Rajasthan

Bhayalal Naapit
Forest Guard
North Shahdol Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

Rambodh Kevat
**Permanent
Worker**
North Shahdol Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Lakshman
Singh**
Forest Guard
Umariya Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Mukesh Kumar
Singh Maravi**
Forest Guard
Umariya Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Jagat Singh
Dhurve**
Forest Guard
Anuppur Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Phool Singh
Maravi**
Forest Guard
Anuppur Forest Division,
Madhya Pradesh

WTI'S CONSERVATION HEROES



***Dr K Ramkumar
Manager and
Project Head
Mudahalli
Elephant Corridor
Project, WTI***

Dr K Ramkumar, a highly experienced wildlife and landscape biologist heading the Right of Passage project at Wildlife Trust of India, was instrumental in revisiting, identifying, and mapping elephant corridors in India. He was also instrumental in securing the Thirunelli-Kudrakote elephant corridor in Kerala and Mudahalli corridor in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, making invaluable contributions towards elephant

conservation in the country. Dr Ramkumar was also involved in undertaking a study on the impact of linear infrastructure in the Western Ghats.

With a PhD on elephants from AVC College, Mayiladuthurai, Tamil Nadu, Dr Ramkumar worked with WTI for about 13 years, after spending over a decade in wildlife research and conservation of wildlife species, especially elephants in Southern India. Unfortunately, we lost this dedicated landscape conservationist due to COVID-19 on 1st June, 2021 at the age of 43. He is survived by his wife and two children. The conservation fraternity lost a great conservationist and friend of elephants.

**Ramkumar
Suryavanshi**

Forest Guard

West Chhindwara Forest
Division (WCFD), Madhya
Pradesh

**Mohpal Singh
Chauhan**

Forest Guard

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Santlal
Ivnati**

Forester

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Jitendra
Uikey**

Forest Guard

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Sharad
Soni**

Driver

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Akhilesh
Saryam**

Forest Guard

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Ishwarchandra
Dhurve**

Forest Guard

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Wajaya
Phalke**

Permanent

Worker

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Bhupati
Raju**

Permanent

Worker

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Uttamrao
Ingle**

Permanent

Worker

WCFD, Madhya Pradesh

**Abbas
Mansuri**

Forester

Dewas Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Ram Bharose
Bhargav**

Deputy

Ranger

Dewas Division, Madhya
Pradesh

**Mohammad
Akhter Uddin**

Forest Beat

Officer

Khanapur FD, Telangana

**Rathod
Sathyapal**

Forest Beat Officer

Khanapur Forest Division,
Telangana

Bibom Kamdak

**Range Forest
Officer**

Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary,
Arunachal Pradesh

Millo Doilyang

**Anti-poaching
camp attendant**

Hapoli Forest
Division, Arunachal
Pradesh

**Arun Pratap
Singh**

**Asst Conservator
of Forests**

Bhopal Division,
Madhya Pradesh

**Santosh
Sharma**

Driver

Valmiki TR, Bihar

Vishal Dhurve

Security Guard

Pench TR, Madhya
Pradesh

**Dinesh
Paswan**
**Range Forest
Officer**
Bettiah FD, Bihar

**Ravi Shankar
Prajapati**
**Sub-beat
Officer**
Porahat FD, Jharkhand

N Devendran
Forester
Anamalai TR, Tamil
Nadu

**RS Bala
subramaniyan**
Forest Guard
Virudhunagar Circle,
Tamil Nadu

**Santosh
Mawase**
**Dy Range
Officer**
South Betul FD, Madhya
Pradesh

**Narayandas
Warkade**
Forester
South Betul Forest
Division, Madhya
Pradesh

Basant Pawar
Forester
South Betul Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Rajen
Hembram**
Forest Guard
South Kangsabati Division,
West Bengal

Sushila Soni
Peon
PCCF Office, Chhattisgarh

Ramesh Kumar
Forester
Kaimoor Wildlife Division,
Uttar Pradesh

Triveni Prasad
**Range Forest
Officer**
Kaimoor Wildlife Division,
Uttar Pradesh

Krishna Dhuri
Electrician
Sanjay Gandhi National
Park, Maharashtra

**Satyendra
Malviya**
Forester
North Betul Forest
Division, Madhya Pradesh

**Meghnath
Lohar**
Forest Guard
Sundarban Tiger Reserve,
West Bengal

**Subhas
Chandra
Pramanik**
Serang
Sundarban Tiger Reserve,
West Bengal

**Partha
Protim
Sengupta**
Head Clerk
Malda Division, West
Bengal

Manik Saha
Labourer
Cooch Behar Division,
West Bengal

Abdul Lateif
Casual Labourer
Chenab Division, Jammu
& Kashmir

Bhabi Chand
Watcher
Chenab Division,
Jammu & Kashmir

**Virendra
Uraon**

**Daily Wage
Labourer**

Valmiki TR, Bihar

**Kanhaiya
Lal**

Forest Guard

Gorakhpur Forest
Division, Uttar Pradesh

Vijay Gond

Driver

Gorakhpur Forest
Division, Uttar Pradesh

**K Noor
Mohammed**

**Dy Range Forest
Officer**

MM Hills division,
Karnataka

**Basavaraju
MJ**

**Deputy Range
Forest Officer**

Tumkur division,
Karnataka

Somashekar J

**Deputy Range
Forest Officer**

Tumkur Division,
Karnataka

Shivaiah M
Wireless Operator

BRT TR, Karnataka

BP Mishra

Accountant

Chhattisgarh Forest
Development Corporation
(FDC), Chhattisgarh

Shilpi Sharma

**Range Forest
Officer**

Chhattisgarh FDC,
Chhattisgarh

Rajesh Pille
Draughtsman

PCCF (HoFF) Office,
Chhattisgarh

**Ramcharan
Nirmalkar**

Office Assistant

PCCF (HoFF) Office,
Chhattisgarh

**Balakrishna
Tokal**

Forest Guard

Indravati TR, Chhattisgarh

Bhojraj Yadav

Warehouse keeper

Rajnandgaon division,
Chhattisgarh

**Venkatraman
Dvaya Naik**

**Daily Wage
Watcher**

Sirsi Division, Karnataka

SG Ravi

**Daily Wage
Watcher**

Sirsi Division, Karnataka

Haroon Rashid

Sub-beat Officer

Ramgarh Division,
Jharkhand

**Naresh
Kachchap**

Beat Officer

Chaibasa Division,
Jharkhand

Views from the Field

“Out in the field, what defines hierarchy is a combination of grit and knowledge.”

James Zacharias

Rtd. Deputy Conservator of Forest, Kerala Forest Department

West Germany, 1974 FIFA Cup: The whole world watched in awe and admiration when the mercurial genius Johan Cruyff took Netherlands into the finals through ‘total football’, where all players kept changing their positions. *Italy 1990:* The ‘mad’ Columbian goalkeeper Rene Higuita mesmerised the crowds by repeatedly charging into the frontline. Though romantically appealing and visibly heroic, both models could not sustain.

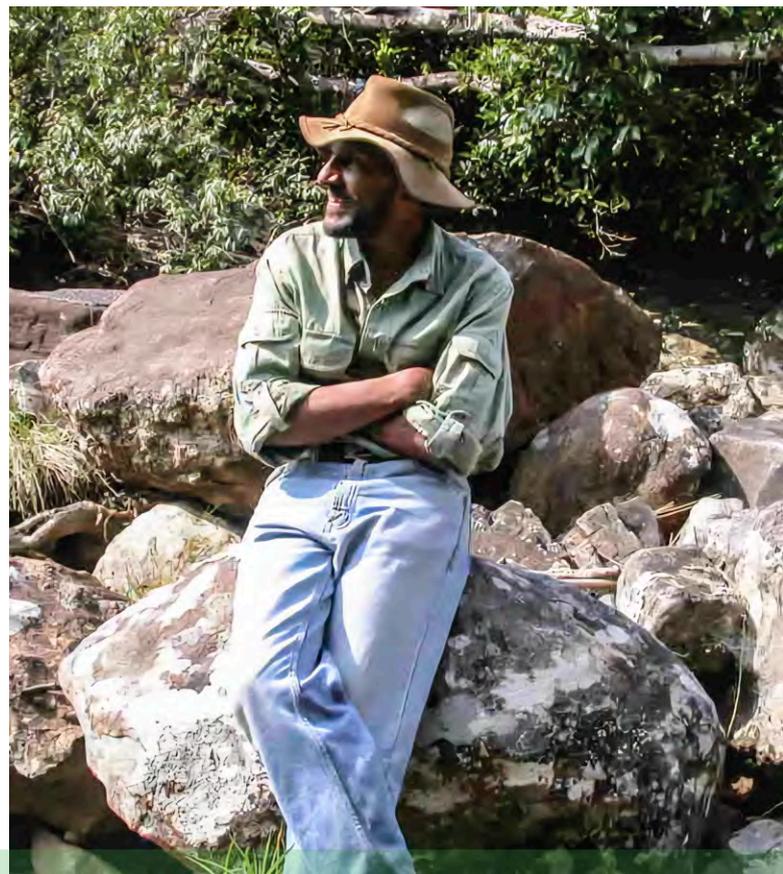
In the playing field of wildlife conservation, though the word ‘frontline’ is an amorphous shape-shifter often involving Chief Conservators charging from the front and shooting from the hip, closely followed by office clerks and local community members, the bottom line consists of the uniformed cadre from range officers to watchers (collectively known as rangers in other countries). This line is the bedrock of conservation, where boots on the ground and leeches inside boots matter more than everything else put together.

Out in the field, what defines hierarchy is a combination of grit and knowledge. Often one sees *adivasis*, who normally seem extremely shy and reticent, assuming leadership roles deep inside the forest with

envious displays of courage. I have worked with exceptionally talented forest guards from the plains and extremely committed ones from coastal areas, often making me wonder as to what motivated them.

I remember Raju, a swimmer par excellence, risking his life to save a stranded group of colleagues by swimming across the treacherous Periyar Lake at least 10 times during the great cyclonic storm

Photograph: Suresh Elamon



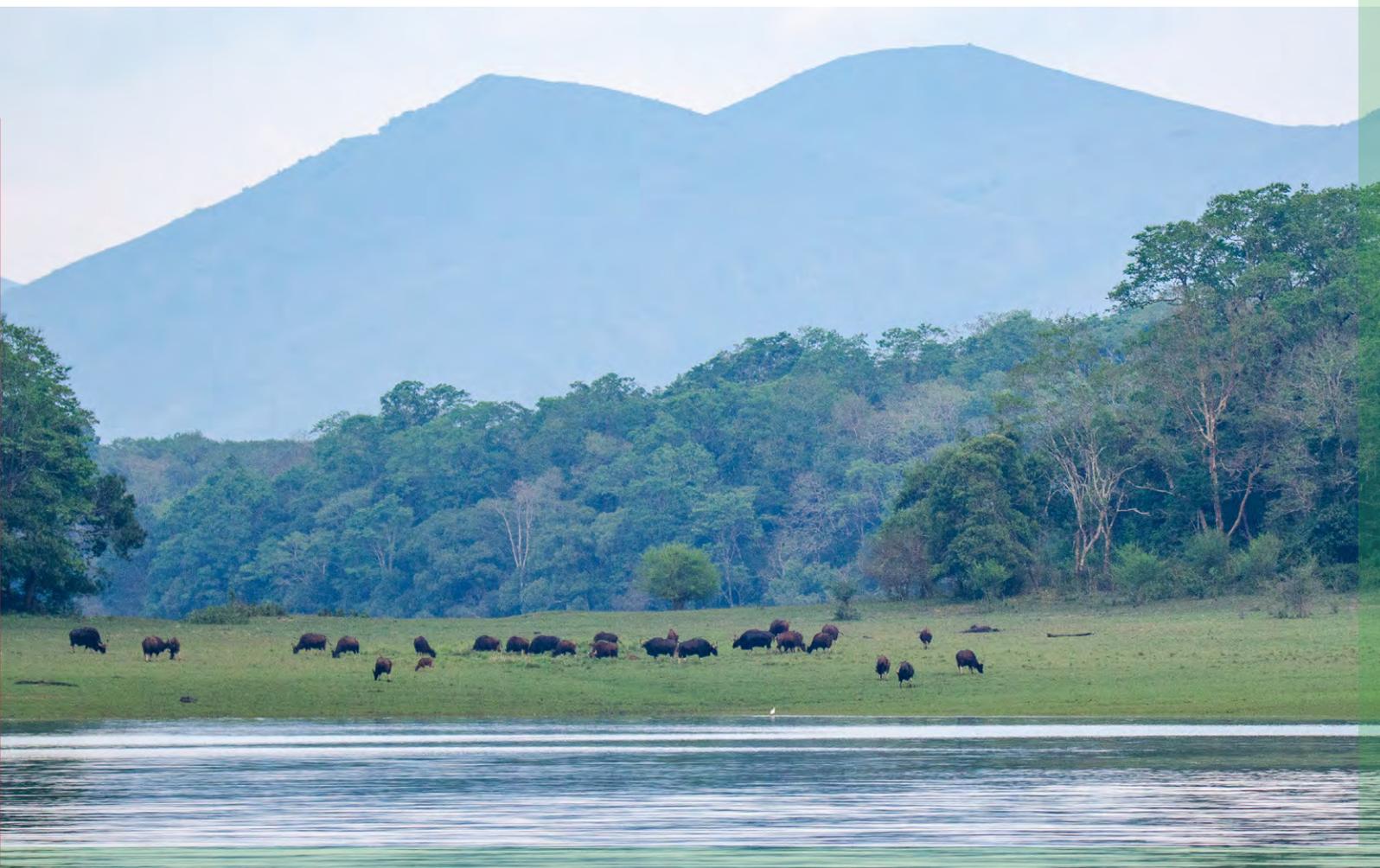
of 1992 (100cm of rain in a day!), which caused not only a massive shift in the topography of the river but also killed off many of the traditional NTFP collectors by flooding the caves they had used as shelter for decades. And the inimitable Kannan, whose portmanteau of skills included not only singing, cooking, mahseer fishing, natural history, driving and shooting at poachers, but also the art of making fire in the forest during heavy monsoon downpours, and driving a speedboat in pitch dark through the stump laden waters of Periyar Lake. I have watched Vellayan, a puny little man doggedly fighting a 20kg mahseer and winning. Occasionally we used to have friendly angling competitions and invariably he won. Krishnan, the headman of the Muduvans traditionally associated with the protection of Eravikulam National Park,

is a study in wisdom, poise and strategy. The Management Plan of the Park is mostly a written document of their collective wisdom.

Over the years, the constitution of frontline staff has a different profile in Kerala. There are a large number of women among the new recruits, attending to different functions ranging from patrolling interior forests to handling human-wildlife conflict issues. Tribes constitute almost 80% of forest watchers, the front of frontline staff.

Now, when I reminisce about the decades spent in the field, I yearn for a return to my old buddies. But many of them are no more. I salute them and reserve a prominent space for them in the history of conservation. 🐾

A vista in Periyar Tiger Reserve (Photograph: Madhumay Mallik)





Frontline Portraits

Rajaji National Park September 2010

DDEVENDER SINGH IS ON THE UPPER DECK of the machaan at Mundal, slashing at the rain with the edge of his hand. The rain is unrelenting and so, for a time, is he. Then he stops, stares out over the riverbed to the west, checks his cellphone – again, one last time – gives up and climbs down.

Mundal chowki is some fifty metres to the southeast, across a swatch of elephant grass and a dry moat. It is a squat structure, boxy, distempered that sickly government-housing yellow, with four small rooms and a woodshed and outhouse around the back. A radio mast leans its peeling shoulder on the far wall. Raghubir Singh sits on a charpai on the porch, watching his young colleague's pantomime. He clears his throat awkwardly as Devender wades towards the chowki through the tall grass: "*Abhi yeh phir bhi naya hai yahan...* He's still quite new here, that's why... It takes years to get used to living in the jungle. Now I– it feels like I've spent my whole life here."

*



The Mundal forest outpost lies in the Chilla Range of Rajaji National Park, Uttarakhand.
(Photograph: Pranav Capila)

Devender, age 31, a Forest Guard, and Raghbir, age 62, a contract worker or 'daily wager' employed as patrolling staff, are stationed in Rajaji National Park, an 820 sq km protected area in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand.

It is September 2010, the last draught of a particularly lush monsoon. Jeep tracks into Rajaji have turned to sludge and much of the forest is impassable even on foot. Mundal chowki is located in the Chilla Range; to reach it in this season you have to trek up an ancient riverbed flanked by impenetrable forest and zig-zagged, crosscut bank to bank, by a seasonal creek that ribbons off the Shivalik hills down to Haridwar. You enter the forest near the power station at Chilla, then take a south-easterly heading towards the hills, squelching through water and reedbeds and elephant grass. About two hours in, six kilometres from Chilla, there is a small plateau. The riverbed sickle-curves around it before forking through a grassland on the other side, but clamber up the slope and you find yourself at Mundal.

* * *

THERE'S AN INVISIBLE MAN at Mundal chowki: his shirts hang on a peg in Raghbir's room, his soap dish lies on the windowsill, his trousers are folded on his bed, his trunk is under it. But he isn't there.

Bikram Singh Negi, age 55, is another forest guard posted here. A 22-year veteran of the forest service, he has been sent off to Dehradun for basic training. ("*Itne saal baad*", Raghbir laughs; "after this much time in the service he should be giving basic training not receiving it!")

Devender, a young man who might actually benefit from some formal training in his

career, has had very little. Whatever he knows of jungle craft he has learned from Raghbir (the old man declares proudly). "*Isko load aur fire karna sikhaya thha mujhe*", Devender says, displaying his .315 rifle: "I was shown how I could load and fire this when it was issued to me, but I've never practiced it since." His relationship with his rifle is telling: he treats it as an ornament, a symbol of his tenured status in the profession. He ties a polythene bag over the muzzle to protect it from the rain when he is out on patrol, but wouldn't know how to oil it or clean it or otherwise ensure its efficient functioning as a firearm. It is doubtful he seriously considers it as such.

*

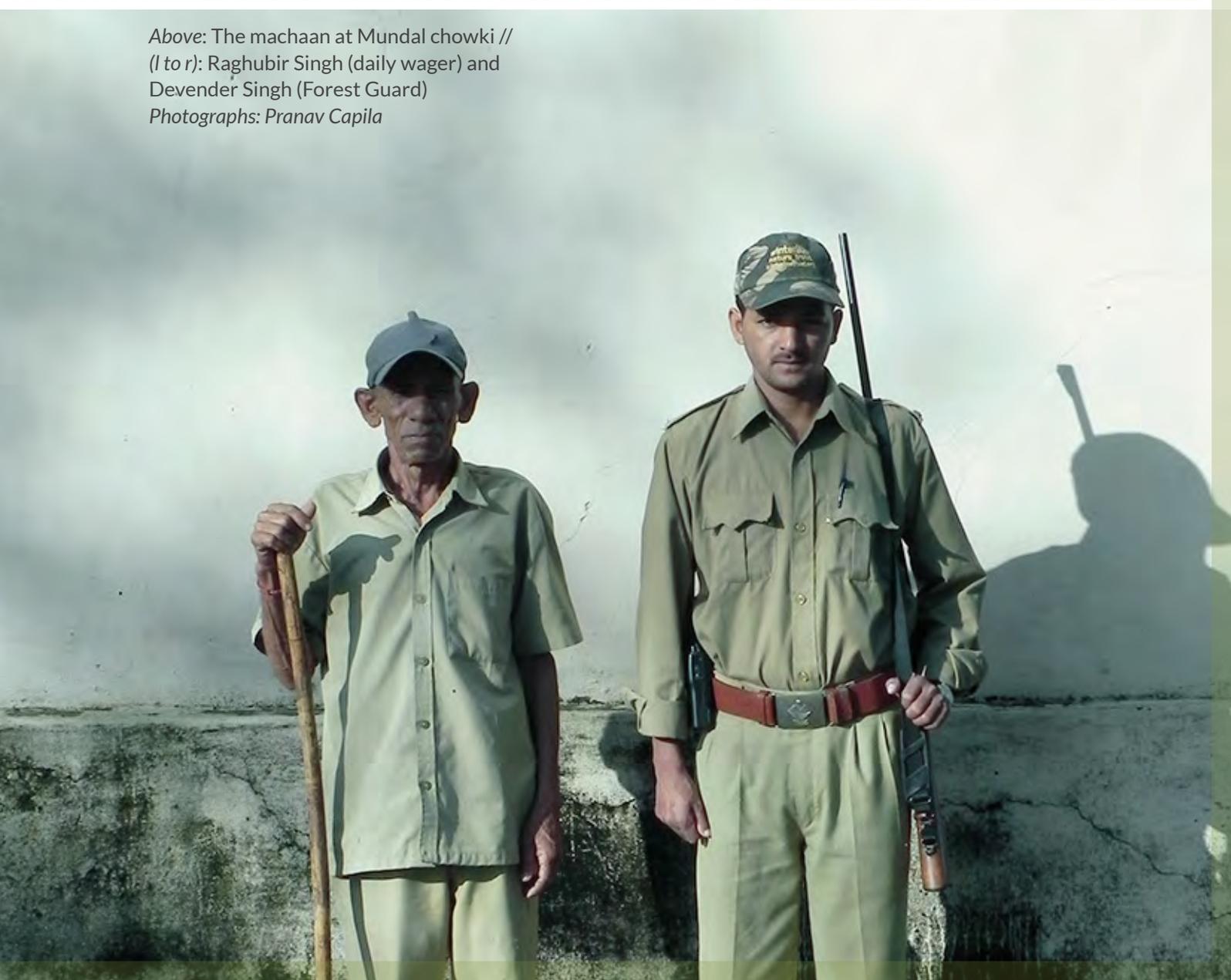
It is 7 a.m. and Devender and Raghbir are out on patrol, heading towards the Ghorri Range. Along the left fork of the creek, through the white-tipped grass and up into the hills: Garesrot to Mahender Ghati, Mundal Compartment I.

This is the bones of what frontline forest staff do. For most of the year they head out in the mornings with a tiffin lunch, returning late in the afternoon to note their observations in the patrol register – pugmarks, animals seen and when, in which 'compartment' (patrol ranges are divided into compartments). Tiger sightings, animal injuries or deaths, the unusual movements of people are noted and radioed to Chilla. Now, in the monsoon, the rounds are shorter, near half the normal circuit. The forest grows thicker, the streams are more urgent, the trails are paved with mulch. The Shivaliks, mere footstools to the Himalayas, aspire to the treachery of taller peaks.

Yet daily the men go forth, since that is



Above: The machaan at Mundal chowki //
(l to r): Raghubir Singh (daily wager) and
Devender Singh (Forest Guard)
Photographs: Pranav Capila



the nature of their work. East-southeast from Angarisrot to Hilltop one day, 11.5km, three-and-a-half hours. Northeast the next, Garesrot to Bhuthiavad via Sidori, returning by the Mahender Ghati track: 12km. Each day, one swathe of the dial that constitutes their range, then again and over again.

They walk the forest that no one else knows. Brooks that flow clear or muddled as if by caprice. Trails that snap spontaneously out of existence, where the undergrowth is so thick that one feels disembodied, as if the sensation of feet on ground belongs to someone else. “We know how beautiful this place is, but it is normal for us”, Raghbir says as the two men huddle under their umbrellas on a hill top. “When you see a tiger for the hundredth time, it’s just a tiger. You respect it but that’s all. When you’re on foot patrol and you see a tiger or elephant, you want to get away without disturbing it – stopping to admire it is for people in jeeps. Living in the jungle like we do, if you hurt yourself or get sick, no one will come to help you.”

*

Fear is an easy enough concept to understand in the jungle. The many hazards of daily patrol – treacherous terrain, encounters with wildlife, summer battles with forest fires, conflict with villagers who live on the park fringes, potentially deadly face-offs with armed poachers, illegal miners or the timber mafia – frontline staff around the country know these as threats that they have, in a sense, signed up for. They accept these because they are men without too many opportunities, and a government job is worth a lifetime’s employment.

It is why Devender shrugs off a question

Frontline forest staff accept the many hazards of their work because they are men without too many opportunities, and a government job is worth a lifetime’s employment.

about wrangling a posting elsewhere, outside the forest – “*Naukri yahin ki hai, paisa issi ka milta hai*: this is the job, this is what we’re paid for.”

It is why even Raghbir, a daily wager who like too many others in the forest service has a year’s worth of salary in arrears, stays put. At the age of 62 he has been working with the department for fifteen years (cumulatively, spread over thirty-odd years). He has left the service on several occasions due to wage issues, then returned because as an unskilled worker – and what sort of system brands a man with fifteen years of jungle experience ‘unskilled’ – his choices are limited. He will be paid something of his Rs 3500 a month, even if a year late. He has four married daughters and two unmarried sons. He will not be a burden to his family.

It isn’t just the fear of physical harm, however omnipresent, that fans the guards’ desperation. It is the belief, septic, festering, that they are irrelevant. They feel neglected by the government that employs

them and, for all the noise about the importance of conservation, they believe they are invisible to everyone else.

* * *

“*HUM JANGAL MEIN AISE HAIN MANO HUMEIN BAS CHHOD DIYA HAI*”, says Raghbir; “it is as if we have been dumped here.” He is from village Kasanj (which makes him a local) and has been in Rajaji throughout his service. He knows every range in this part of Rajaji, which paths to walk in the rains and where to dig for water in the summers. He is an expert tracker and knows what Chilla’s four tigers – two full grown females, a mature male and a younger one – are up to at most times. “I know every mood of the jungle,” he says;

“they could employ me as a trainer. But no one here is prepared to think that way.” Now, as he sits on the porch massaging the ache out of his knees, he is more resigned than bitter: “*Ab hamara kuchh nahi ho sakta*. Nothing will happen for me at this stage. I’ve spent my life here but couldn’t become permanent. As a daily wager I don’t even get a pension – if they kick me out tomorrow I will have nothing.”

“But then again, who knows”, he shrugs, “sometimes when I’m in the village, with family, I don’t know how to be with them. Maybe I’ve been here so long I *have* become permanent.”

Devender inherited the coveted ‘permanent’ status when he was admitted to

Devender Singh (l) and Raghbir Singh ford a seasonal stream as they commence their daily patrol in the Chilla Range of Rajaji National Park (Photograph: Pranav Capila)





The view towards the Shivalik
Hills from Mundal Chowki
(*Photograph: Pranav Capila*)



the service in place of his father, who died two years ago. As a tenured employee he gets a monthly salary of around Rs 11,000, usually on time. (It is the daily wagers, forming the bulk of the forest staff, who continue to face wage disbursement issues.)

He is a quiet man, not unfriendly but keeping largely to himself. He prays at the small temple adjoining the chowki every evening and has calendar art posters of several Hindu gods in his room. Placed beneath the posters is a curious tableau: three toothbrushes, each smaller than the other, the last child-sized.

Devender's wife – his face lights up when he speaks of her – is in Jajoli village, Pittoragarh, Uttarakhand. They have been married three years and have an infant son, Milan. She calls him at least thrice a week, except when the weather disrupts the already faint cell signal at Mundal. He spends an hour atop the machaan every evening, looking out at the same view, waiting. Sometimes, when she can't get through, he slashes at the rain.

*

Devender and Raghubir don't talk much. Perhaps they are all talked out - two men living alone in the jungle, one twice as old as the other, infrequent contact with the outside world, how much would they have to talk about? They know about each other's families but it's not like they have to ask what happened at home the night before.

They buy a newspaper on their weekly trips into Chilla, rationing it out between them, reading a little bit every day. The February issue of *Yugvani* (a political journal of Himalayan state governments) or the November 2009 issue of *Parvat Jan*

It isn't just the fear of physical harm that fans the guards' desperation. It is the belief that they are irrelevant. They feel neglected by the government that employs them and believe they are invisible to everyone else.

is dusted off and reread some exanimate afternoons. When the weather permits they tune in to All India Radio, usually while Raghubir is preparing dinner in the tiny kitchen.

They have grown accustomed to the slow melt of time in Rajaji. The concept of hours has blurred. Days and dates mean little, except when they are making an entry in the patrol register. They talk in terms of *haftey* and *mahiney*, weeks and months, and then mostly to indicate a passage back into civilisation – the weekly trek for rations to Chilla, two-and-a-half months since Devender saw his family.

* * *

YET, THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS for frontline staff in the field. Their superior officers – Chilla Range Officer MS Negi and Rajaji Field Director Sargam Singh Rasailly – know the hardships they bear and are



A tiger pugmark on the riverbed near Mundal // Below: Devender and Raghbir patrolling in the monsoon. (Photographs: Pranav Capila)



sympathetic towards them. Mundal is just 30 minutes by jeep from Chilla when the park is open; it is also a range surrounded by other ranges, so the threat of poaching is reduced and they don't have to deal with conflict between wildlife and fringe villagers. And they have each other's company, such as it is: there are chowkis within Rajaji itself that are completely isolated and where sometimes just one person is posted.

What does conservation mean to men in this position?

They understand their role and its importance, though they are certain no one cares. "*Jangal mein naukri to tough hai hi*", Devender says. "People say that the forests need to be protected. That is true; we patrol every day and poachers stay away. But don't you think we should be taken care of when we are protecting the forests?"

Raghubir concurs: "National Park *bannein se phayda to hua hai*. Things have improved for the animals, for the trees and plants. There used to be a problem here particularly with van gujjars (nomadic herdsmen) grazing their cattle, but not anymore. But from what I have seen over the past thirty-odd years, nothing much has changed for us. They have put solar panels on some of the chowkis, that is all."

What the guards want is nothing more than the fulfilment of basic needs: A functioning solar electric fence for better security, so that they don't wake up as often to leopard pugmarks in the yard, or the gouge marks of an elephant tusk on the porch (from a late night visit the previous year). An outhouse that actually works, so they don't have to venture beyond the chowki grounds at night or in the early mornings. Some basic training – on administering a field dressing for instance, or handling snakes

that find their way into the rooms, or firing the ornamental weapon in a pinch. Rain gear – gum boots and raincoats may serve them better on patrol than slippers and umbrellas. And an extra *ahaar bhatta* (food allowance), if a 'hardship allowance' of the sort the army gives to jawans in forward areas is too much to hope for.

Their grassroots view of conservation is simple: We are doing a job here, show us that you know we exist.

There are some good forest officers who care about the welfare of their men, and a handful of NGOs that run training programs and help equip frontline staff. Yet for the most part, India's forest staff are merely receiving lip service. As for the general public, even among those who care about wildlife conservation, few think about the invisible men who bulwark its tenuous successes in India. 

“People say that the forests need to be protected. That is true; we patrol every day and poachers stay away. But don't you think we should also be taken care of while we are protecting the forests?”



Photograph: Pranav Capila

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