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For those striking stripes

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Perhaps all children grow up reading William Blake's beautiful poem *The Tiger*. Not all of them, however, are fortunate enough to sight the tiger in the wild. And if poachers have their way, who knows the future generations may forever be denied the heart stopping moment — a look at those fiery eyes.

India holds over half the world's tiger population. The current tiger population in the country is estimated to be around 1,706. But the wild cat is one of the most vulnerable species; if the statistics of Wildlife Protection Society of India are any indication, over 930 tigers have been killed in India from 1994 to 2011. These figures, however, are reported cases and hence represent only a fraction of the actual poaching activities in the country. The illicit demand for tiger bones and skin in the international market continues to be the main reason for unrelenting poaching practices.

In such a situation, mass awareness and mobilisation holds the key to creating a



THE BIG CAT: Ranthambhore has a population of 27 adults and 23 cubs. PHOTO: NIVEDITA GANGULY

safe habitat for tigers. Children, too, need to imbibe love for nature and learn the value

of wildlife early in life. That's what 'Kids for Tigers' Express aims to do — action-

based environmental education in natural ambience. A joint venture of telecom

company Aircel and Sanctuary Asia magazine, the 'Kids for Tigers' (KFT) programme

has been functional for the past two years. The 'KFT' Express van has already reached out to more than one million children in 399 schools across 15 cities. The programme seeks to build a constituency of young Tiger Ambassadors who will be well enlightened to spread the message of tiger conservation in their immediate environment. Now it has been reintroduced with the van heading for the Ranthambhore National Park in Sawai Madhopur district of Rajasthan.

Fully equipped with a projector, sound system, generator, library and conservation movies, the van will travel in the 70 odd villages surrounding the national park.

The State's Minister of Tourism, Art and Culture and Forest & Environment, Beena Kak, who flagged off the van from Jaipur, said, "It is their heritage. Yet not many children know what a national park is. They ought to know the worth of all species and the importance of wildlife protection."

By focusing on the tiger as a symbol of the environmental health, the KFT aims to explain how the survival of the tiger in the wild is linked to the survival of the diverse natural richness of India and how it can help mitigate cli-

The 'Kids for Tiger' Express project's Rajasthan phase aims at sensitising Ranthambhore villagers about how tiger conservation is linked to the survival of biodiversity

mate change. The theme for 2010-2011 was 'Save Our Tigers' and for 2011-2012 was 'Before it's too late'.

Recalling a similar educational initiative nearly 15 years ago organised by Britannia, Ms. Kak said the children loved the experience. They learnt a lot about the habits, nature and sounds of different species as veteran wildlife expert Fateh Singh

and the guides and forest wardens educated them about different calls in the wild through mimicry.

"With such initiatives, we aim at increasing awareness amongst young children and sensitise them to the fact that saving tigers and their forests is vital, which in turn will protect the environment as a whole," says Brinda Malhotra, Head-Corporate Social Responsibility, Aircel.

The Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve has a healthy tiger population (27 adults and 23 cubs) but this is one among the high human-animal conflict zones. The situation is similar in Sariska tiger sanctuary in Rajasthan. The teachers in the van will go to villages educating the children and the villagers/communities about the importance of tiger conservation. This will be done through screening wildlife-related films, holding village meetings and photo exhibitions along with talks by famous conservationists and naturalists and lending conservation related material.

The objective is to create awareness amongst the villagers and thereby mitigate man-animal conflict. The Forest Department has been involved in this project by leveraging their expertise in the field as well as building a bond with the villagers.