

Tiger sentinels cope with 6 guns

112-Strong Special Tiger Protection Force Has 6 Jeeps And Mans 1,020sqkm

Pavan M V | TNN

Bandipur: Bissegowda (name changed) was pulled out of his bed one night about two years ago. He was part of a six-member team of forest guards and officers told to head straight to Bheeman Bidu, 10km from Bandipur, to nab poachers.

It was pitch dark but these men of the Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) at Bandipur Tiger Reserve (BTR), didn't even a single torch. Yet, the guards managed to spot the poachers but before they could pounce on them, the poachers unleashed machetes at them. Sadly, the guards were not armed with guns.

With machetes swishing a hair's breadth away, the guards managed to repel the poachers who fled in panic. Two years later, Bissegowda breaks out in sweat as he recalls the incident. But he adds that these things have become commonplace as his force continues to remain poorly equipped and yet is expected to brave adversities in the wild.

The 112-member strong STPF patrols the Bandipur Tiger Reserve (BTR) spread over 1,020 sqkm. It has been divided into three platoons, with each platoon having only two rifles and two four-wheelers.

"Every member of our team pa-

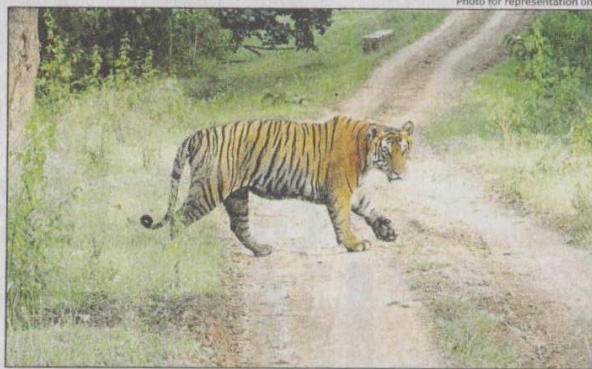


Photo for representation only

EASY TARGET: These majestic creatures at Bandipur Tiger Reserve would be gone without brave STPF personnel protecting them from poachers

trols over 15kms every day either walking or travelling in jeeps with insufficient equipment. Apart from poachers, sometimes there's every chance of wild animals attacking us. How can a man patrol the forest without a gun and a torch?" Bissegowda said.

A senior forest officer admitted that lack of modern weapons and maintenance of wireless sets and weapons are burning issues. When contacted, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (PCCF) Vinay Luthra said seven months ago a proposal has been sent to the state government to provide

weapons, torches and other necessary equipment to STPF.

A deputy range forest officer (DRFO) pointed that because of STPF's efforts, BTR is home to 105 tigers of the 300 tigers in the state. BTR has one of the highest number of tigers in the country. "Bandipur is known for tiger sightings among tourists and wildlife, but sadly no one understands our difficulties," the officer said.

Despite lack of equipment, STPF has managed to prevent poaching of tigers. It has removed over 400 snares set up by poachers.

TIMES VIEW

The government must expedite the supply of weapons and equipment to the tiger protection force. It's rather cruel, and impractical, to expect these forest guards to tackle poachers with limited resources. It's a measure of their commitment to the job that they have stuck to the task despite all the problems. The success of Project Tiger rests largely on the sterling efforts of these foot soldiers. The least the government can do is to ensure they're well armed and ready to take on poachers. Private initiatives to support them are also welcome and should be encouraged and duly acknowledged.

FIRST TO GET STPF

Karnataka was the first state to get an STPF set up by in 2010 by the National Tiger Conservation Authority. Every platoon has one range forest officer, six DRFOs, 21 forest guards and nine forest watchers.

Recently, Aircel donated raincoat sets to all STPF personnel and also 10 mobile phone sets. Brinda Malhotra, head, corporate social responsibility, Aircel, said, "We've been working for tiger conservation since 2008 in the country through the campaign, Save our Tigers. We'll continue our support to STPF employees in Bandipur."