

## Tiger in the Kailash Sacred Landscape: Good news for some, not so good for others

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Chhipla Kedar (3400 m) and Najurikot (4200m), located in Askot Range of Pithoragarh district, are among the most revered sacred natural sites in Indian part of Kailash Sacred Landscape (KSL). These sites are flanked by dense upper montane broadleaf forests, rich in flora and fauna. Most of these forested tracts fall under Askot Wildlife Sanctuary but surrounded by human habitations and seasonal livestock camps. In March 2016, a team of researchers from WII camera trapped a tiger (*Panthera tigris*) above village Kanar on way to Chhipla Kedar at an altitude of 3214m (Bhattacharyya and Habib, 2016). At that time it was considered to be the highest elevation at which tiger had been photographed in India. Subsequently, this tiger was again photo-captured by the WII Kailash team at much higher altitude (3740m) that beats the earlier records. It is interesting to note that nearest range of current tiger distribution is at least 200 kms from the present location towards downstream of River Sharada (Mahakali) close to Tanakpur both within India and Nepal. Obvious questions which come to mind are: which would be the source population of tiger in Kanar area? what would be the total population of tiger in this area? and what would be the future of this population?

Historically, the tract along lower parts of Gori valley right up to Chhipla Kedar and adjacent area towards Kali valley were teeming with wildlife. Rajah (King) of Askot estate used to invite British officers and Foresters for shoot in these areas. Wild mammals which were common in past and can still be seen occasionally are common leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*), red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), yellow throated marten

(*Martes flavigula*), Himalayan palm civet (*Paguma larvata*), sambar (*Rusa unicolor*), barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), goral (*Naemorhedus goral*), Himalayan musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*), wild pig (*Sus scrofa*) and Himalayan tahr (*Hemitragus jemlahicus*). Charles A. Sherring (1906), in his book 'Western Tibet and the British Borderland: the Sacred Country of Hindus and Buddhists', gives an interesting account of a man-eating tiger which was killed in 1905 by a mob of villagers near Khela in Kali Valley, located on the eastern side of Chhipla Kedar. Further, Sherring stated that tigers were more common in this area during later half of 19th century and their population had declined drastically due to increasing habitation and deforestation. Subsequent decades witnessed more conflicts of this Feline with the humans. Last published account of man-eating tigers in Gori valley can be seen in a book by J.E. CarringtonTurner (1956) from the Imperial Forest Service who shot one of the two man eating tigers in 1956 between Garjia and Baram. The elderly people in Gori valley also recall

the occurrence of Indian wild dog (*Cuon alpinus*) in this area, which has not been sighted since several decades except a stray incidence a few years ago when the famous photographer Shri Anup Shah photographed one individual near Sirkha village in Chaudas Patti of Dharchula.

Occurrence and photo-capture of tiger in KSL is a good news for many but not so good for others. On a positive note, the conservation agencies may feel a sense of relief that the forests and other natural habitats in this landscape are still intact and continue to support adequate prey base and large predators such as tiger. However, with heavy use of humans for collection of non-timber forest produce, fodder and livestock grazing in the area, there is always a risk of tiger accidentally killing a livestock or a human being that may result in serious conflicts. At the same time, there is an acute shortage of trained and motivated field staff in the Forest Department that is necessary to patrol and keep vigilance in the remote





and physically challenging landscape. This makes the sanctuary and surrounds more vulnerable to illegal activities especially poaching. Fortunately, the local people in Kanar and adjacent areas are devotees of Goddess Durga and tiger is revered as vehicle of Durga. They believe that only those persons who are disliked by Goddess would be harmed by tiger. However, the moment there are recurrent conflicts this belief may be changed fast. Already, KSL is facing an increasing intolerance towards wildlife such as common leopard, Rhesus macaque, wild pig and langurs. As a result,

there is a general apathy towards wildlife and participatory management of forests and natural resources.

What can be done to ensure long term co-existence of humans and wildlife in KSL? How to increase harmony and partnership between the local communities and conservation agencies so as to minimize the conflict? These questions do not have simple and straightforward answers. Unless the local communities see direct benefits of protecting the forests and wildlife and unless the conservation agencies

come up with innovative mechanisms such as payment for ecosystem services, there is little hope for harmonious co-existence of people and wildlife. Currently, attempts are being made to prepare site specific mitigation plans for human-wildlife conflicts and participatory natural resource management planning in various parts of KSL. It is hoped that with increased conservation awareness and innovative livelihood approaches, the harmony between the local communities and threatened species of wildlife would be established in the long run.

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## References

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