

PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING ON

Tiger conservation

Exploring potential collaboration between Myanmar and India

9 October 2020 | Microsoft Teams

SECTION 1

Background

The Landscape Initiative for the Far Eastern Himalaya (HI-LIFE) is a transboundary conservation and development initiative implemented by the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and its partners in China, India, and Myanmar. It also engages in bilateral work, mainly to strengthen conservation efforts between India and Myanmar, and between China and Myanmar, by promoting the exchange of knowledge and best practices from across the Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region. This Initiative recognizes the importance of going ‘beyond borders’ and building regional cooperation and solidarity to address global climate and environmental change.

India and Myanmar have deep historical, ethnic, cultural, and religious ties. The geographical proximity between the two countries has helped them maintain cordial relations and uphold a number of agreements, enhancing bilateral cooperation. Regional and sub-regional platforms like the Association of South East Asian Nations

(ASEAN), Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and the Mekong Ganga Cooperation have strengthened cooperation between the two countries and offer unique opportunities for stronger regional and bilateral collaborations.

Bilateral collaboration between India and Myanmar has received a strong boost with the recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation on “Combating timber trafficking and conservation of tigers and other wildlife” in February 2020.

Transboundary collaboration is necessary for the conservation – especially of flagship species such as tigers and elephants, which require wider habitats. Such collaboration helps improve conservation outcomes, reduces daily management costs, improves delivery of ecosystem services and economic development, and promotes international peace and cooperation.

The current COVID-19 pandemic, with its linkages to environmental degradation and human-wildlife relationships, has further underlined the importance of regional and international collaboration for biodiversity conservation

and management. Inter-country and regional transboundary collaboration is essential for the conservation of megafauna as their natural habitat is spread across many countries.

A functional habitat corridor that links source populations in India and Myanmar is essential for long-term viability of tiger populations. With this in view, ICIMOD, through HI-LIFE, organized a virtual meeting on 9 October 2020 to explore potential collaboration between Myanmar and India for tiger conservation within the framework of the recently signed MoU between the two countries. Altogether 35 experts from Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Nepal attended the meeting. They represented different organizations such as WWF, IUCN, WCS, GTF, and NTCA.

Presentations and discussions focused on how India and Myanmar could strengthen cooperation between them and take collective action for tiger conservation. The two protected areas in the Far Eastern Himalaya – Namdapha National Park and Tiger Reserve in India, and adjoining Hukuang Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Myanmar – are key to the conservation of tigers in the landscape.

SECTION 2

Objectives

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- Share regional knowledge and best practices from the region, including efforts in India and Myanmar.
- Explore possible means and mechanisms for cooperation between India and Myanmar to strengthen actions within the broader framework of the MoU.
- Identify ICIMOD's role in further strengthening bilateral collaborations for tiger conservation.

SECTION 3

Highlights

- About 35 participants from ICIMOD, IUCN, GTF, NTCA, WCS, and WWF including high-level government officials from India and Myanmar participated in the online meeting.
- Opening remarks were delivered by representatives of ICIMOD and high-level government officials from India and Myanmar.
- Technical presentations were made by members of the Global Tiger Forum, WWF-Nepal, Bhutan Tiger Centre, NTCA-India, NWNC-Myanmar. They shared experiences and lessons learned from their work on tiger conservation in the region.
- There was a moderated panel discussion on potential future collaboration for tiger monitoring between India and Myanmar.
- A way forward to enhance regional cooperation for tiger monitoring between the two countries was discussed.

SECTION 4

Opening session

The meeting began with opening remarks from David Molden, Director General, ICIMOD; Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Director General, Department of Forests, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Government of Myanmar; and Soumitra Dasgupta, Additional Director General, Wildlife, Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change (MoFCC), Government of India.

Participants discussed tiger conservation efforts from across the globe including the HKH region, with examples from Bhutan and Nepal. They also discussed efforts made by India and Myanmar as well as prospective bilateral efforts between the two countries and a way forward.

Bandana Shakya, ICIMOD, welcomed all the participants and mentioned the MoU signed between Myanmar and India to combat timber trafficking and promote wildlife conservation. She highlighted the relevance of the meeting and the role of HI-LIFE in bringing together global,

regional and national level knowledge to strengthen cooperation between the two countries.

Brij Mohan Singh Rathore, ICIMOD, moderated the technical session. He reiterated that the workshop would allow participants to share best practices in transboundary cooperation, explore specific ways to implement the MoU and discuss the role of intergovernmental organizations like ICIMOD. He emphasized the importance of corridors and landscapes and their links to tiger conservation.

Welcome remarks

David Molden, Director General, ICIMOD, gave the opening remarks. He said that the broad aim of the meeting was to advance the tiger conservation agenda and also link it with livelihood issues in order to strengthen ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation. ICIMOD works to build transboundary cooperation to sustainably manage ecosystems and biodiversity. He said the meeting would serve as a platform for sharing knowledge and experiences, and for exploring avenues to work together for conservation in the Far Eastern Himalaya Landscape.

Nyi Nyi Kyaw, Director General, Department of Forests, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Government of Myanmar, gave the opening remarks on behalf of Myanmar. He said that Myanmar and India have longstanding social and cultural ties and that the two countries share a border through which wildlife moves back and forth between the two countries. As tiger is a very important species, both countries have protected areas for tiger conservation and nodal points for controlling wildlife crime including illegal cross-border trade in wildlife. He said that the tiger population in Myanmar has declined in recent decades.

The National Tiger Action Plan (NTAP) is being revised with the contribution of partners and organizations like WWF-Myanmar and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)-Myanmar. There are 11 objectives and 31 action points to control tiger poaching and trading and support habitat conservation and research. He reiterated that on 27 February 2020, India and Myanmar signed a five-year MoU to combat timber trafficking and promote conservation of wildlife like tigers. He indicated that Myanmar is making efforts to protect tigers, and that the meeting would be a good opportunity to explore avenues of collaboration with India for tiger conservation.

Soumitra Dasgupta, Additional Director General, Wildlife, Ministry of Environment Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India, gave opening remarks on behalf of India. He recalled that in February 2020 India hosted the 13th Conference of Parties (COP) to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP13), which led to the Gandhinagar Declaration on the CMS for the next three years. The most important outcome of the declaration was ecological connectivity. As the chair of the standing committee of the CMS, India is determined to work with its neighbouring countries and pursue the philosophy of joint conservation of migratory wild animals. He indicated that Bhutan, India, Myanmar, and Nepal have pristine and connected biodiversity, and therefore a collective platform or environment for collaboration is essential for effective conservation of wildlife species.

Referring to the protected areas in northeast India, which shares a border with Myanmar, he stressed the importance of ecological bonding between the two countries for species conservation and their free movement. He remarked that the government of India attaches high importance to biodiversity conservation. He expressed his hope that the MoU between India and Myanmar would strengthen cooperation and enable them to carry out their shared responsibility to take forward migratory species conservation in a big way.

SECTION 5

Technical sessions

Global efforts for tiger conservation

Mohnish Kapoor, Head of Programs and Partnerships, Global Tiger Forum (GTF), highlighted global experiences in tiger research and monitoring in the transboundary context and discussed the way forward. He also talked about the work GTF is doing across the globe for tiger conservation.

Key points

- GTF is the only intergovernmental platform exclusively dedicated to tiger conservation. It also supports bilateral dialogue and facilitation

between India's neighbouring countries. It recently facilitated an MoU between Malaysia and Thailand on a transboundary protected area.

- Following the St. Petersburg Declaration of 2010, scientific assessment started across the globe to obtain a realistic estimate of the tiger population.
- In Myanmar, GTF is working to collect field data, share best practices and promote transboundary cooperation.
- Nepal, India, and Bhutan have launched a study on the status of higher-altitude tigers to protect potential tiger habitat. GTF can work with HI-LIFE to carry out such studies in these countries.
- Transboundary protected areas are crucial for the conservation of natural heritage and for protecting wildlife. Tigers are considered functionally extinct in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, which are amongst the 13 countries that committed to TX2 at the St. Petersburg summit in 2010. As a conservation goal, TX2 aims at doubling wild tiger numbers by 2022. The remaining Tiger Range Countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, and Thailand – have had varying degrees of conservation success.
- Countries like Malaysia offer hope for tiger revival in Southeast Asia.
- GTF has signed technical MoUs and formed partnerships with several agencies across the globe and recently formed a partnership with the US Tiger University Consortium to promote research and knowledge sharing.

Regional examples for tiger conservation

Bhutan: In his presentation, Tshering Tempa, Programme Director of Bhutan Tiger Centre, discussed the status of tigers in the mountains of Bhutan, tiger monitoring and conservation, and India-Bhutan collaboration.

Key points

- In Bhutan, tigers are found at elevations ranging from 100 to 4500 masl. A camera trap survey showed that tigers are found in 10 national parks, and in 13 out of the 14 forest divisions. Tigers are also successfully breeding in higher altitudes of Bhutan.

- Along with tigers, different wild animals like sambar deer, barking deer, ghoral, wild pigs, leopards, Himalayan black bear, golden cat were also recorded at the altitude of 2300 masl.
- Bhutan started long-term tiger monitoring in 2010 in Royal Manas National Park and has been expanding to different regions. The tiger population was found to have doubled in Royal Manas National Park in the last 10 years.
- In 2010, there were about nine tigers in Manas Tiger Reserve, India; the number has increased to 40 (6 cubs) in 2020. Similarly, in Royal Manas National Park, Bhutan, 14 tigers were recorded in 2010 whereas 28 tigers were recorded in 2020. This shows the importance of transboundary partnership.
- In 2010, India's Manas Tiger National Park and the Royal Manas National Park of Bhutan signed a declaration to work in cooperation for tiger monitoring, data sharing, joint meetings, publication and patrolling for wildlife conservation. The two countries have since been working together for tiger conservation. As poaching is more common in the border areas, such cooperation is very important.
- The vast area where tigers are distributed, or the "Tigerscape", covers over 24 million hectares of forest land with a very low population density. It has the potential to harbour nearly 1000–2000 tigers and can be a huge carbon sink.

Nepal: Shiv Raj Bhatta, Head of Conservation Programs, WWF-Nepal, highlighted the India-Nepal Terai Arc collaboration in tiger monitoring and conservation along with efforts made by the government of Nepal and other conservation partners in the country.

Key points

- Nepal has a very good institutional framework for tiger conservation that includes a range of institutions, from the prime minister's office to the National Tiger Conservation Committee to community institutions on the ground.
- Nepal is very close to achieving its goal of doubling the tiger population (235 tigers according to the national tiger survey, 2018) to 250 by 2020.
- The youngest protected area in Nepal – Banke National Park – had no tiger population till 2009, but 21 tigers are recorded now.

- Since 1997 various initiatives for promoting trans-border cooperation have been undertaken at the national, landscape and local level.
- India and Nepal launched two joint projects: one in Chitwan-Valmiki complex and the other in Suklaphanta, Dudhuwa and Kishanpuri.
- Information sharing between Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) – India and Central Investigation Bureau (CIB) – Nepal helped to catch many poachers, setting an example of successful trans-border collaboration.
- Restoration of the Khata corridor linking Bardia National Park (Nepal) and Katarniaghat Wildlife Sanctuary (India) started in 2000. The corridor was restored in 10 years, which is another good example of transboundary cooperation.
- Studies have been carried out to assess the role of the corridor in rhino movement between Nepal and India.
- WWF is now coordinating with the road department for green infrastructure for wildlife crossing the area (a 2019 camera trap survey captured 41 tigers crossing this area).

India and Myanmar for tiger conservation

India: SP Yadav, Additional Director General (Project Tiger) and Member Secretary, and Vaibhav Mathur, Assistant Inspector General of Forest, National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Government of India, gave presentations on tiger conservation and monitoring in India.

Key points

- More than 70% of global wild tiger population is in India and the number of tigers has been increasing by 6% annually.
- India, Nepal, Russia and Bhutan have seen an increase in their tiger populations while countries like Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos have either already lost their tiger populations or do not have functional populations in the wild.
- India conducts regular monitoring of tigers and carries out corridor management activities.
- India has bilateral arrangements with different countries like Bhutan, Bangladesh, China,

Myanmar, and Russia for transboundary collaboration for tiger conservation.

- The MoU between India and Myanmar primarily focuses on four objectives: joint protection in the field; establishing a working group to maintain data on the protection aspects; sharing experience including trainings; and collaboration on research on habitat and tiger monitoring.
- Project Tiger in India started in 1973 in 9 tiger reserves and now India has 50 tiger reserves spreading through 18 tiger states (covering 2.21% of the country area).
- Habitat fragmentation and a historical lack of proper law enforcement led to a decline in tiger populations in the tiger landscape.
- In 2006 the landscape approach was introduced; it brought a paradigm shift in tiger conservation.
- The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) is providing technical assistance for tiger monitoring to all the tiger range states of India. The independent management effectiveness of tiger reserves is evaluated every four years. A set of basic guidelines has been developed for a security plan; and security auditing has been conducted for all tiger reserves. An ongoing collaboration with WII focuses on species recovery – including the recovery of the tiger's prey population – and on consolidating information from across tiger reserves in the country to record and share best practices in conservation.
- 32 important corridors were mapped and guidelines for safeguarding the corridors have been prepared.
- The Tiger Conservation Plan provides a legal basis for the NTCA to carry out proposed activities.

Myanmar: Pyi Soe Aung, Assistant Director, Nature Wildlife Conservation Division, Forest Department, Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation, Government of Myanmar, highlighted Myanmar's efforts for tiger conservation and monitoring and the challenges.

Key points

- In Myanmar tigers have a strong ecological and cultural significance. The country had a great number of tigers in the past.
- The tiger is now listed among critically endangered species in the draft National Red List of Myanmar. The Biodiversity Conservation and Protected Area Law of Myanmar (2018) only allows commercial breeding of tigers for public zoos.
- There are two major tiger landscapes in Myanmar: Upper Chindwin Tiger Landscape and Dawna-Tenasserim Tiger Landscape.
- A National Tiger Survey (1992–2002) was carried out in 17 sites of the two tiger landscapes where 150 individuals were recorded in Hukaung Valley Wildlife Sanctuary, Htamanthi Wildlife Sanctuary, and Tenasserim Range. A recent camera trap survey showed that the tiger population for the period 2014–2018 is 22 individuals, and they are spread in only 10% of the actual tiger habitat area. Myanmar has 49,000 km² of potential tiger habitat.
- Besides camera trap, SMART patrolling system has been used to monitor the tiger population in 19 protected areas in the country.
- Poaching, human-tiger conflict, prey depletion and habitat loss and fragmentation are the major threats to the tiger population in Myanmar.
- Myanmar has revised the National Tiger Action plan–NTAP (2020–2025) with 11 objectives and 31 actions to increase the tiger population to an ecologically and demographically viable level.
- One of the action areas of the NTAP is directly related to bilateral cooperation for improved transboundary collaboration with India, China and Thailand to reduce transboundary wildlife trade and prevent habitat conversion along the boundaries.
- The ten-year “Re-establishing Natural Habitats Programme (2019–2029)” has been implemented in 19 protected areas and this includes annual monitoring and population estimation of tiger and prey species, SMART patrolling and awareness campaign.
- Different plans and projects such as Htamanthi Tiger Conservation Plan (by WCS-Myanmar) and the Conservation of Tenasserim Forest Landscape project (by WWF-Myanmar) have been implemented in Myanmar.

SECTION 6

Bilateral collaboration

Brij Mohan Singh Rathore mentioned that concrete strategies and action plans are necessary to increase the tiger population. India has made considerable progress in tiger conservation. The last tiger census made its way into the Guinness Book of World Records, as 26,000 camera traps were installed for the census and they captured more than 30 million images. The joint efforts of the governments of India and Myanmar, along with the initiatives of organizations such as the NTCA, GTF, WII, WCCB, WCS, and WWF, have played a big role in promoting biodiversity conservation.

Strengthening national commitment

Tiger conservation is a priority for all four countries – Bhutan, India, Myanmar and Nepal. India has made a lot of progress in terms of developing tiger conservation action plans and strategies. According to S. P. Yadav, the government of India is investing about USD 50–60 million annually on tiger conservation. In Myanmar, the tiger is a legally protected species, and the government and external development partners are highly committed to tiger conservation.

Facilitation of the landscape approach

The landscape approach relies on regional cooperation for tiger conservation, which encompasses a range of activities such as habitat protection, connectivity establishment, population maintenance and revival in small areas, prey base maintenance, poaching and illegal trade mitigation, and community engagement.

Focused attention on securing the source population

The tiger population across Northeast India likely shares its gene pool with the tiger population in Myanmar, and it is important to conserve this source population. This would entail focusing on smaller habitats and making targeted efforts to restore the source population. As the source population increases, the conservation effort can be widened through landscape level cooperation, especially to maintain habitat connectivity.

Joint learning and knowledge exchange

An MoU is a mechanism that enables collaboration between two governments. The MoU between India and Myanmar could help initiate dialogue – specifically on convening a bilateral meeting of national-level working committees to draw a feasible, long-term work plan that incorporates elements of joint monitoring, joint patrolling, joint research and knowledge production, capacity strengthening and other transboundary interventions.

Both the countries have made commendable efforts for tiger conservation. Organizations like ICIMOD can help them leverage their efforts by contributing regional knowledge and experience.

Closing remarks

Eklabya Sharma, Deputy Director General, ICIMOD, gave the closing remarks. He mentioned that different countries have made significant efforts for tiger conservation, and bilateral cooperation for biodiversity conservation has grown strong. ICIMOD can bring together conservation organizations, experts, government departments and academics from across the region and beyond to boost tiger conservation across wider landscapes. A regional perspective also helps countries address threats such as climate change, and wildlife trade and trafficking.

SECTION 7

Way forward

- Set up an ‘inter disciplinary working group’ consisting of officials and experts from both India and Myanmar to take forward the bilateral MoU between India and Myanmar.
- Identify possible areas where ICIMOD, through HI-LIFE, can support the implementation of this bilateral mechanism.

Additional event information and materials are available at:

[https://www.icimod.org/event/tiger-conservation-exploring-potential-collaboration-between-myanmar-and-india/#:~:text=HI%2DLIFE%20%E2%80%93%20a%20transboundary%20conservation,the%20Hindu%20Kush%20Himalayan%20\(HKH\)](https://www.icimod.org/event/tiger-conservation-exploring-potential-collaboration-between-myanmar-and-india/#:~:text=HI%2DLIFE%20%E2%80%93%20a%20transboundary%20conservation,the%20Hindu%20Kush%20Himalayan%20(HKH))

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Edited and laid out by the Production Team, Knowledge Management and Communication Unit, ICIMOD



ICIMOD gratefully acknowledges the support of its core donors: the Governments of Afghanistan, Australia, Austria, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, Sweden, and Switzerland.

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