Satkosia Tiger Reserve under threat

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The failure of the Odisha Government to initiate eco-tourism efforts in and around Satkosia Tiger Reserve of Odisha by involving the affected people of the Reserve, has adversely affected its conservation. Situated in close proximity of Angul-Talcher industrial belt comprising 18 coal mines, eight power plants, six sponge iron plants and aluminium company, the Reserve is under severe eco pressure. After declaration of Tiger Reserve and subsequent imposition of restrictions, people of 116 villages of the Reserve have almost lost their livelihood which has added more pressure on it. The forests surrounding the Satkosia gorge of Mahanadi River including the stretch of river flowing through the gorge were notified as Satkosia Gorge sanctuary in the year 1976. The contiguous area to the south of this sanctuary in Nayagarh district was notified as the Baiaspali sanctuary in the year 1981.

Later, these two sanctuaries together were notified as Satkosia Tiger Reserve in the year 2007. The Reserve houses various wild animals like tigers, leopards, elephants, gaurs, sloth bears, sambar, spotted deer, barking deer, mouse deer, pangolin, giant squirrel, Malabar pied hornbill, Gharial and Mugger crocodiles, fresh water turtles, freshwater rays, etc. The Reserve has a tremendous genetic and ecological importance as it is the wet portion of Desean Zone. Apart from significant elephant population in deciduous forests, the 22.4 km-long stretch of Satkosia gorge of Mahanadi River harbours a large population of varied fish and aquatic fauna. Temples of Goddess Basanti and Kankai, Baijanagar, Bhumia, waterfall and Crocodile Rescue & Rehabilitation Centre at Tikrampa and picturesque view of the gorge attract tourists to the Reserve round the clock. Satkosia is famous for its unique gorges eco-system and it serves also as a major watershed for the entire region. The magnificent Hirajala, Dharaura, Kochila, Arjuna and Phasi forests on the banks of river Mahanadi are typical elements of riverine forests.

Wild animals are frequently sighted in Raigoda, Kuakoli, Halua Nullah, Nandini Nullah, Hatigirija, Tukla, Baghmunda, Kattanga, Purunakote, Chhotimunda, Kur, Labangi, Karamapada, and Mahanapara blocks of the reserve. Most of the animals are sighted in game tank areas like Kantiarenghe, Hatigirija, Kandhia, Kadalikhol, Tikarsingha, Buchbirubhonga, Nadapathar, Ranbandha, Paintir and Khujzimalia. The Tiger Reserve is now under heavy pressure due to intermittent forest fires, frequent livestock grazing, shifting cultivation, poaching, collection of fuel wood, timber and other forest produce. The Reserve with its adjoining areas is surrounded by human habitation that depends on forest for its daily requirements of fuel wood, fodder and timber. This apart, timber mafia have also accounted for large-scale felling of timber. Unless the dependency of the people is reduced by providing them alternative livelihoods, the Reserve will sustain tremendous biotic pressures. People living in the adjoining Industrial region mostly depend on this unique biosphere for picketing and allied tourism activities. The livelihoods of the local people will improve if more eco tourist spots are developed in the peripheral area of the Reserve. This will give way to community development and conservation of biodiversity. Community based eco tourism with proper training and skill development will reduce the dependence of local communities on forest resources. There is a need for participatory, consensus building approaches with communities. It will enable communities to improve their livelihoods in ways that reduce their dependence on forest resources.