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WILDLIFE-UP-SUGAR BELT-TIGERS

Dwindling forest area turning UP tigers into man-eaters: Study

Lucknow, Feb 22 (UNI) The soaring demand for sugarcane fields and the consequent encroachment of forest area is turning tigers in Uttar Pradesh into man-eaters, which have already taken several people in their jaws in Lakhimpur district of the state.

More than 12 people had so far been killed by the big cats, which have been forced to come out of their reserved forest area by human intervention. Altogether nine people were alone from Kaaptanda village of Lakhimpur Kheri, adjoining the Dudhwa National Park.

The Terai belt, once known as the rice bowl of UP, witnessed a silent revolution during the last decade with some private entrepreneurs setting up sugar mills in the region.

Farmers were paid to switch over to sugarcane from sowing paddy and this change in cropping pattern, brought tigers to the door steps of human habitats.

Around a dozen sugar mills, big and small, have come up in the Terai region during the last decade. With the increase in demand of sugarcane, mill owners prompted the paddy farmers to grow sugarcane.

The lure of lucre forced the farmers to switch over and that was the beginning of the problem.

Cane fields came up around the protected forest areas sometimes even in the core forest region of the wildlife sanctuaries. Slowly the area expanded as farmers manipulated the forest rangers to overlook the encroachment of the forest land by the cane growers, claimed Convener of Terai Nature Conservation Society Dr V P Singh adding as a result, the wild cats started making forays into the human habitation".

"The big cats get their food in grasslands on which the cattle and other herbivorous animals graze. These cats cannot differentiate between grassland and the sugarcane fields. They enter the sugarcane fields ignorant of threat from humans," he said.

"It is natural for the wild boar to rear its piglets in cane fields as it relishes the roots of the crop. These wild boars also attract tigers which enter the cane fields in search of their kill shunning the protected forest regions," Dr Singh added.

"This dangerous trend of the big cats straying into the sugarcane fields makes them vulnerable to the man-animal conflict in which the ultimate sufferers are the wild species," he added.

The threat is so high that World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has taken up a study to find out as exactly how many tigers have strayed from reserve forests and are living in the cane fields.

According to a survey conducted by Centre for Science and Environment(CSE) fellowship awardee Bishwajeet Banerjee , nearly half-a-dozen tigers and leopards have lost their lives in 2008 either in accidents or after being killed by men in the human habitats.

A young leopard strayed into a cane field in Dhaurehra forest range and later proceeded to the populated areas. It killed a dozen

of pets besides mauling five people one after another.

The enraged villagers trapped the leopard in a thatched roofed hut by bolting the door from outside and later burnt it alive in Belihar village on May 8, last year.

Almost two years back, an old tigress ventured out from Kishanpur sanctuary and took shelter in a cane field near Kaap-Tanda, killing three people in quick succession. The tigress was later declared a man-eater and shot dead.

Cane fields lured a young tiger in November 2008. The animal strayed into open fields in Kheri, Sitapur, Barabanki, Lucknow and later crossed over to Faizabad.

Forest officials, armed with the orders to kill the stray tiger, are still trailing it.

Another tiger entered Kaap-Tanda in Kheri and killed three people during last one month.

"Inadequate habitat management and depleting prey base in the protected areas have forced the big cats to come out in search of food and shelter. Dense sugarcane crops in the close vicinity of the protected areas have served as biggest allurements to the big cats," said Manoj Singh, a wildlife conservationist.

Divisional Forest Officer (North Kheri) K K Singh said majority of cases of tiger attacks were reported only during the harvesting of sugarcane crop.

"The animal lies cowed down in cane fields but on being confronted by the human beings, it attacks in self-defence. Rarely, tiger attacks to kill for food," the DFO said.

"The situation was not so profound when farmers used to grow paddy or wheat. Cane crops have intensified the man-animal conflict in this case," he said.

Meanwhile, the tiger which is at large in Basti region continues to dodge 50-strong forest official team. The tiger which was sneaked into residential areas from Dudhwa, was spotted last night near Semaharia village in Basti district.

The Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) J K Singh said there was panic among the villagers even as the Z A Warsi, an expert from Dudhwa National Park, is engaged in catching the wild cat to be sent back to forest.

They have appealed to the locals to support the wild life team in catching the tiger.

Tigers, possibly more than one, have created a panic among the villagers in several districts of the state since last two months. They travelled from Lakhimpur Kheri to Shahjahanpur, Sitapur, Lucknow, Barabanki, Faizabad, Barabanki and Basti and continued to play traunt killing many human beings and cattle in the process.