

Trip to tadoba tiger reserve

[Design](#), [Photography](#)



CITY TIGERS MEETING THEIR COUNTRY COUSIN This meet began with me and my brother proceeding to Mumbai airport for our first flight to the orange city Nagpur. Soon after checking into the flight we caught with team bhpiian and participant in the workshop (sachin. sri) Sachin Shrivastava. He was already in the city on official work and we caught up with our specific interests on the forum. We had a smooth flight and as guided by Dr. Abheek over the phone we met our cab come to pick us up from the airport.

We found that it was drizzling in Nagpur and this dampened our spirits a bit thinking that wildlife spotting would be difficult in incessant rain. We proceeded to the starting point where we were to meet other participants from Nagpur. The point was Hotel Turning Point at Laxmi Chowk. Here Wild Cats member Mr. Sachet and the owner of Turning Point Mr. Amol greeted us warmly. Mr. Amol treated us to a sumptuous breakfast and some interesting tales of wildlife in the outskirts of Nagpur. Very soon another Wild Cat member Mr. Chinmay Deshpande joined us.

Interestingly he was an active snake rescuer for Nagpur and he had a bagful of snakes to be released in the wild during our trip. Sachin was startled and a bit alarmed by the presence of so many venomous and non-venomous snakes around. We were amazed and excited and try to reassure Sachin. We had for the first time such a close encounter with snakes. Under the close guidance of Chinmay we were even able to handle a non-venomous snake the trinket snake easily. It was so beautiful to hold the snake. In our hands the snake seemed like a velvet rope.

It is very sad that even before knowing much about snakes I had a preconceived fear of such beautiful creatures. Chinmay rightly explained that snakes have no emotion and if we humans maintain our distance and exercise caution and adequate precaution while interacting with them there is no reason why we cannot co-exist with the most venomous of snakes. Having said that he also explained that the most experienced of handlers have been bitten only by either their carelessness or overconfidence. In no time Doc. (Dr. Abheek Ghosh) popped in.

As expected he was a bundle of energy and charged up the already excited bunch. Meeting him for the first time I have to say the moustache suits him well, like the whiskers of a wildcat. He had some news. The team from Hyderabad had missed their overnight train and had since proceeded by car. They would be meeting us directly at Tadoba. Another of the coordinator Mr. Akash Kothe also joined us. All of us wrapped up the breakfast meet and proceeded to our coach, which was with us for the entire trip. The coach had a banner of Wild Cats in the front, which was looking very apt for the occasion.

As we were getting into the coach we could see our host Amol also getting into the mood and wanting to join us for the trip. However as had some unavoidable work in the city he could not join us. We bade him good-bye and proceeded to Tadoba. Sachin was getting nervous with so many snakes joining us in the coach although secure in their respective jars. We all joked this would be “ SNAKES IN THE COACH” Indian version of the famous Hollywood movie” SNAKES IN THE PLANE”. This made Sachin all the more

jittery and he tried to make himself comfortable as far away from the snakes as possible.

But at every jerk and every pothole he would plead Chinmay to check if all the snakes were secure. The entire journey of about 5 hours due to bad roads after Jam was hardly felt due the non-stop banter amongst all of us. It was remarkable that inspite of our varying backgrounds and ages we all gelled in no time. This goes to shows that enthusiasm is infectious and knows no barrier. In the coach Doc treated us to a Audio Video documentary by Vidya Atreya on animal human conflict in Western Maharashtra and how it was affecting the leopard in particular.

I had already read up some material on her work and research as mailed to us earlier by Doc. Doc also enlightened us on the work done by her on conservation and human leopard conflict management. We were so engrossed in our discussions and running short of time that we had skipped halting for lunch anywhere enroute. As we neared crossed Chandrapur we were saddened to see quarries for coal mining all around with massive heaps of spent mud lying all around like small hills.

Doc informed us that although Chandrapur was one of the most polluted areas of our country due to the coalmines and thermal plants the tigers were thriving in the forests of Tadoba. We reached the Moharli Gate of Tadoba sanctuary at the stroke of four, which was also the closing time for entry into the sanctuary. At the gate the gypsies were ready waiting for us as arranged by Doc. Here we also met another of Doc's close friends Mr. Indraneel Pal

and his friend Gaurav. Indraneel Pal was by profession a contractor for the Cement Mills around but by heart he was an avid animal lover.

His in depth knowledge of animal behavior in general and the tiger in particular was astounding. We learnt that he was a regular visitor to Tadoba, sometimes 2-3 times a week. He was to Tadoba what Doc is to Pench. Doc had an excellent rapport with him and he too welcomed us with open arms. I was struck by his humility and passion towards the forest and its inhabitants. It was a great pleasure and privilege to spend two days in his company. By this time we also learnt that the Hyderabad group had run into heavy rains and bad weather leading to slow progress.

Enroute a section of the highway was washed away and they were facing a roadblock in the detour due to some vehicle breakdown. At this rate they would not be able to make it to Tadoba before nightfall. The rest of us decided to proceed for the evening Safari. The sights and sounds of the forest pleasantly surprised city dwellers like us. Tadoba is known to all, for the healthy population of tigers within it but it was also very interesting to observe the wide variety of birds and insects within the reserve. Photos will tell the story here. We immediately spotted a small herd of sambar deer and a solitary wild boar.

In some time we reached the middle (hattori) gate. As required entry formalities were being done, Doc asked his man Friday (Sanjay) to serve poha packets to all of us. By now our stomachs had begun rumbling due to hunger having skipped lunch earlier. The poha was delicious and warm in the foil pack. Apparently Doc had made some phone calls from the coach as we

were nearing Tadoba. Indraneel happened to tell us that in the morning just as he entered the reserve he spotted a leopard very close to the entrance gate. This heightened the excitement for us.

He and doc explained to us that large predators like the tiger regularly mark the boundaries of their territory to highlight their presence to their rivals and reassure the females. And during monsoon due to washing away of their scent markings by the rain, they have to keep marking more frequently and as a result of which the chances of spotting the tiger is better. Both he and doc were very tuned to the various sounds of the jungle and could immediately alert us to calls made by the sambar and some birds as they communicated to convey the movement of the tiger/leopard.

This gave us some indication of the movement of these predators at a distance. It also gave us an idea as to how difficult it was for these predators to hunt when their presence could be easily given away by the alarm call of the langur, a bird or some deer. In these surroundings we easily lost sense of time. Very soon it was getting dark and the guide informed us that it was time to head back to the exit. We were beginning to enjoy the experience and started to head back with a heavy heart. At that moment the gypsy we were traveling suddenly broke down.

We got delighted thinking that this gave us a perfect excuse to justify our delay to the exit gate and experience the dusk in the forest. But this happiness did not last long as very soon another gypsy of our group that came along gave us a lift to the middle (Hattori) gate. At this point Doc "insisted" on staying with the broken down gypsy and its driver till it could be

brought till the exit point. All of us wished to take Doc's place so that we could also experience some part of the night in the jungle, but it was not to be. We wished Doc luck and proceeded to the Hattori Gate.

There the officials were miffed with us for the delay. On learning of the breakdown they offered a makeshift towrope and sent this gypsy back to tow our broken down gypsy. Doc must have cursed his luck to see help coming so fast. As soon as the gypsy was towed into the Hattori gate we proceeded to the Moharli exit gate. Enroute we were hoping that the towrope snaps and we get delayed further. But alas none of that happened. In some time we reached the exit gate. The officials here were very upset, as we had arrived way beyond the closing time.

Luckily Doc and Indraneel being regulars there somehow managed to pacify them, but had to offer some written explanation and pay some fine. We went to the MTDC resort with so many stories to tell each other. On the way Chinmay told us that once we settle into our rooms we need to feed the cobra on a frog, which could be easily seen croaking around, as it might be hungry. We settled in our rooms freshened up and soon got out to catch a frog using our flashlights. Sachin as expected refused to have anything to do with the snakes. Understanding his fear we left him alone. Luckily we managed to catch one very close to our room.

Chinmay carefully opened the lid of the jar holding the cobra and swiftly dropped the frog down the jar and closed the lid. All this was a different experience for us. Stuff we had been seeing on Animal Planet and Discovery channels on TV back home was unfolding live in front of our eyes. Within the

confines of the jar the frog started puffing itself and avoiding the cobra. The cobra was seeming to be dazed and not striking at the frog. Suddenly Bhanu observed that the snake was badly infected with maggots, which was not easily visible in the plastic jar earlier. It had raised its hood but not was striking the frog.

Chinmay explained that this cobra had been rescued from a grain godown in Nagpur and the labourers might have attacked and injured the snake before calling him for the rescue. After a long time the cobra finally struck the frog and injected venom, but was not showing any signs of eating it. Chinmay immediately stated that we need to release the cobra in some safe area outside. By now Doc joined all of us. He had been meeting up with the Hyderabad group who had just arrived. He informed us that two members of they group Mel and Shiv were avid snake lovers and handlers and we could take their opinion on this subject.

On seeing the condition of the cobra and in the absence of any facility to treat the snake they also suggested immediate release of the snake from captivity. They too joined us in our short walk outside the resort boundary to release the cobra. As soon as the cobra was brought out of the jar into the open it became very alert and agile and started moving swiftly to the foliage around. Before releasing the snake Mel gave us a short talk on various types of cobra found and mechanism to handle them. We all felt glad to be releasing the snake into its natural habitat.

We went back to the rooms along with the Hyderabad group comprising of Rashmi, Alex, Mel and Shiv. They briefly related their ordeal to get here

encountering washed away roads, roadblocks, bad roads and all. We had our brief introductions and learnt that all of them were avid trekkers and "fanatic" nature lovers. Here I wish to thank Doc again, as without his initiative we would never have met such an ensemble of participants. Over the days we were stunned with their knowledge of birds, insects and reptiles given their relatively young age.

During our trip we could not find any insect or bird that they could not identify. Once back the room Mel was shocked to find the snakes stored in plastic containers. He sadly remarked that inspite of noble intentions many a times " SNAKES NEED RESCUING FROM RESCUERS ". He asked Chinmay to keep some cloth bags handy whenever he proceeds for a rescue. Chinmay informed Mel that there have been some cases of snakes biting some handlers through the bags however he was not sure whether they were jute bags or the plastic woven cement bags.

Mel suggested him to use canvas-lined bags. Mel was also not happy with the type of stick with the semicircle hook used for snake handling. He insisted on a lighter stick with a hook flattened and smoothed near the tip while handling snakes especially while going for the head catch. Mel offered to send a snake handling stick as described above within the next two weeks through somebody travelling to Nagpur. Chinmay was very receptive to all their ideas. He explained that inspite of all his efforts he was unable to get any formal training on handling snakes in NAGPUR.

Whatever he learnt had been by watching some other handlers rescuing snakes and learning on the job while rescuing snakes because of his love for

snakes. Mel opened the jar having the trinket snake and explained that the snake was molting (shedding its skin). This could be seen by the cloudy nature of its eyes. We had seen it many nature channels on TV but seeing this so close was an altogether different experience. He explained that the peculiar ornamental pattern (like a necklace) on its scales gave it the name of trinket snake. It was a fast snake but non venomous.

The next snake he removed was the sand boa. He explained that it was a constrictor similar to the python which kill they prey by constriction and are non venomous. It was closely related to the red sand boa, which is also called, a two-headed snake as its tail also resembles it head in shape and texture. Sadly these are being hunted by poachers for their skin, which commands a price of nearly a lac of rupees in the black market. The next snake was the checkered keel back which Mel explained spends most of its time in or near fresh water lakes or rivers and feeds mainly on small fishes and water frogs.

It is a non venomous but very aggressive snake and will not hesitate to strike at the slightest provocation. As it was an extremely fast moving snake Mel wisely did not open it within the room. The next snake was the Russells Viper. This too was handled from within the jar as it was one of the most deadly and fast striking snake found in India, with a strike speed of two bites per second and which along with the saw scaled viper was responsible for most of the snake bite related deaths in India. We were glad that this too was observed from the confines of the jar and not in the open.

The next were the three rat snakes which were confined in a 20 lit. Bisleri jar. Struggling to get them out Mel explained that it was not advisable to store them in plastic containers as they were not suitable for the snakes and snakes at times inadvertently hurt themselves while struggling in them. Using a swiss knife he cut open the neck of the jar and got one of them out. The rat snake though non-venomous was visibly irritated and started swinging wildly. Shiv and Chinmay were helping Mel all through. They asked the resort staff to get some gunny bags for these snakes.

The resort staff managed to get some bags but they were torn in places. Mel and Chinmay selected one of the bags, which appeared reasonably better than the rest and slowly got the rat snake into the bag. For the second snake Mel demonstrated the technique of placing the bag with a round PVC pipe at the neck close to the snake. The snake immediately darted into this opening believing it to be a dark hole or burrow. When all the three rat snakes were securely bagged Alex and Chinmay decided to release the snakes the next day during daylight further away from the resort near the buffer zone.

After this the Hyderabad group took leave to freshen up and relax for a short while before meeting up for dinner at 10: 00. Rest of us assembled at the other room, where Doc requested Akash to set up the projector and laptop for the audiovisual presentation on photography. Akash who is also a professor in an engineering college in Nagpur handled this session. His command over the subject and the simplicity in explanation of various terms used in photography had us bowled over. Every basic terminology right from

Aperture, Shutter Speed and ISO to Advanced image processing techniques was explained to us with live examples.

Photos clicked by him and others were discussed and flaws analyzed and remedies discussed. Just as a doctor goes through an X-ray or Ecg report, Akash explained on how to study a photo through its histogram. The basics like composition of image and focusing of the image were explained in detail. Akash then went on to explain further how the processing of images is done using advanced software like photoshop elements and lightroom. "Cloning" of a different kind for image correction especially backgrounds was shown by live examples by Akash working on his laptop on images as he was giving the presentation.

Akash made an important remark that only after clicking thousands of photographs does a photographer realize his shortcomings as he goes through them. He asked us to develop strong basic concepts and hone and polish our skills by clicking many pictures and analyzing them with above points in mind. We all mentally made up our minds to save up for a decent camera and gradually invest in good lenses to help us pursue this hobby in earnest. All those of us who have followed Doc's threads in various forums know him to be an excellent photographer and he too interspersed this session with his valuable insights from time to time.

I would not be wrong if I said that this one session opened my eyes to photography more than ever before. Again thanks to Doc we were able to experience the "Akash Effect." Here again we wanted to continue forever but were getting repeated calls from the restaurant staff calling us for

dinner. We reluctantly took a break for Dinner with Akash promising to continue the next day after the morning Safari. We all assembled in the dining area for dinner. Dinner obviously was of limited variety but excellent quality. With our bellies full we lazily ambled to our rooms.

Sachet lazily unlocked the door to the room and gave a sudden gasp. Akash who was blindly following him was startled and started rubbing his eyes. The snakes, which were so securely kept a little while back, were roaming freely in the room. Chinmay immediately took charge and grabbed one of the rat snakes and observed that the gunny bag was not very strong and that the rat snakes had made a way out through them. By now Alex and Shiv also joined Chinmay to locate the missing snakes. They found the second one in the bathroom with no signs of the third.

The third one was missing. This made all of nervous and Sachin who was at a distance all this while became all the more jittery. Alex, Shiv and Chinmay made a thorough search of the entire room and declared it to be “ snake free”. The two snakes were placed in the relatively clean and empty dustbin provided in the room with some weight on the lid to prevent them getting away again. The third rat snake was a juvenile and Chinmay and Alex opined that it might have slipped through the narrow opening below the door and the floor or slid out as Sachet nonchalantly opened the door.

Doc asked us to wind up and go to bed, as we were booked for any early morning 6 am Safari and we would have to get up at 5 am to be at the gate on time. Doc also informed us three more WildCat members Sanket, Rahul and our host Amol at Turning Point had left Nagpur for Tadoba in Doc's

gypsy and they too would be joining us for the morning Safari. All of us had our own theories on the missing snake and Akash and Sachet were not comfortable to sleep in the room with the missing snake. So Akash, Chinmay and Sachet trooped into our room. With a snake loose Sachin declared that he would not be sleeping on the floor.

We laughingly conceded and made ourselves comfortable on the extra beds and were fast asleep in no time. As soon as the alarm bell went off at 5 am Sachin started calling out to all to get up. After a light banter of “ Pehle Aap” we quickly got to our feet and freshened up quickly. By now we caught up with Amol, Rahul and Sanket who had reached at 1: 30 in the night with the gypsy giving some problem on the way and continuous rain all through the route. They couldn't believe it when they learnt they learnt that they had been sleeping in the room with the missing snake.

On seeing the video of the recapture of the escaped snakes shot by Akash and seeing the two rat snakes in the dustbin they started rubbing their eyes in disbelief. They were shocked that they had slept so peacefully in the room with a missing snake and two snakes lying the dustbin. Pulling their legs we walked to the resort gate where Indraneel Pal and his friend Gaurav were waiting for us. Here we got to the gypsy being tastefully rebuilt by Doc with sound advice from forum members. The middle and last row of seats were adequately pushed back giving ample legroom and maneuverability to people seated in them with their cameras.

Doc informed that some work on providing proper vibration free camera mounts was still to be done. Once completed no doubt this would be an ideal

vehicle for the jungle photographer. In the steady drizzle we got into the gypsies and proceeded to the Moharli gate. Due to the rains our cameras were packed up and we were wary to expose them to moisture. We entered the gates to be once again greeted by the early morning sights and smell of rain soil foliage and forest floor. As the gypsy drove into the forest the rain and the cold wind was beating against our faces. It was an experience to look out for sightings in these circumstances.

As we were driving past at a steady speed our guide suddenly motioned to the driver to stop and head back for a few metres. On coming back a few metres he pointed to his right about 50 yards away and all we could see was a brown termite mound or anthill. But the guide insisted that he has never observed a mound at this place all these days. So to clear matters Doc and Indraneel took out their cameras with high power lenses to zoom and get a sharper view. They both softly remarked that it was a “ tiger”. They motioned us to be dead calm and we quietly removed our cameras and focused on the tiger.

On zooming it was clear that we were privileged to witness a tiger so well camouflaged in the Indian forest. In a few moments the tiger raised its head and started licking its hind legs. By this time the second gypsy in our group joined us and they too enjoyed the spectacle. The third vehicle had gone ahead and due to no mobile network we were unable to inform them of the sighting. Indraneel informed us that this tiger was the “ Baghdo Male” who was very active in this part of the reserve. Indraneel was also the first person to have photographically captured this particular tiger some time back.

Indraneel recounted the incident of having clicked this particular after it had a heavy meal of a gaur. In Indraneel's words as the tiger got up after a heavy meal its belly was so full that it was almost scraping the floor as it walked. We were in awe as he spoke of the experience. In the meantime the tiger got up and reversed its position and nonchalantly surveyed the clearing around it. In a short while the tiger got up once again and started walking diagonally behind us towards the road. In no time we lost sight of the tiger as it disappeared into the thick foliage.

We backed up our vehicles a couple of metres behind hoping to catch the tiger as it steps onto the road. We waited at that spot trying to gauge the movement of the tiger, looking anxiously in all directions in perfect silence. Suddenly Indraneel spotted the tiger about thirty feet behind emerging out of the bushes. Due to the rain we had packed the cameras and scrambled to get them in position. But Doc and Indraneel managed to capture some amazing photographs of the tiger looking directly at us. This sight of the tiger turning to look towards us will remain with me forever. The majestic head on broad shoulders was a sight to behold.

At this very moment the driver of the second gypsy eager to give its occupants a better shot with the camera backed up suddenly and with a loud roar of the engine. This sudden noise and movement disturbed the tiger, which swiftly crossed the road behind us and entered into the foliage on the other side. We reprimanded the driver for his stupidity but it was too late. Doc and Indraneel remarked that they were pretty sure that if the tiger was not disturbed so abruptly it would have calmly walked down the road for

some distance before slipping back into the forest giving us ample opportunity to observe and photograph this magnificent animal.

We waited at this spot for some time reminiscing on the events that had unfolded some moments before us. Soon we heard the sambar call at some distance indicating that the tiger was steadily moving deeper into the forest. Doc informed us that during the monsoon only central tarred road was open for the safari and the mud roads going into the forest at intermittent distances were closed for the safari. This was done to minimize disturbance to animals and prevent vehicles getting stuck in the slush on these mud roads inside the forest.

We backed up further across a small bridge over a stream in the forest hoping to catch some signs of the tiger if it returned back to the road. As there was no indications whatsoever we proceeded ahead to observe the rest of the forest. As we were on our way Bhanu suddenly exclaimed “ tiger”. Our driver quickly backed up again but Bhanu just managed to see the tiger slip into the dense forest before the rest of us could spot it. We learnt that unless the tiger is in the open or moving in the forest along the road it was next to impossible to spot a tiger lying motionless in the bamboo clusters for an untrained eye.

The tiger can spot you as you pass through its territory but there is no guarantee that you can spot it if it does not want its presence to be felt. With this lesson learnt we proceeded to explore the remainder of the forest enjoying the other flora and fauna. At the hattori gate Doc and Indraneel were mobbed by other tourists visiting the forest asking for the glimpse of

the elusive king of the jungle captured by their lenses. We were basking in the adulation and envy of other tourists for having such a close sighting of the tiger, while the real hero had disappeared deep in to the jungle oblivious to the excitement caused by his sighting.

We slowly observed the rest of the forest spotting some birds on the way. The snaps shared here will tell the rest of the story. But for me the sighting of the tiger overshadowed everything else. Even now if I close my eyes I can see the tiger looking right at me. I envied Doc and Indraneel for having so many sightings of the tiger. I for one can only marvel at its being and cannot imagine how another human can think of poaching the tiger. Do their hands not tremble as they perpetrate this dastardly act. During this trip Bhanu remarked that the human being is the most dangerous animal on the planet.

This short sentence summed up everything that needs to be done for conservation. With this experience we headed back to the resort. While exiting we learnt that in the evenings we could opt for a one hour Safari over elephant back in the evening. However there was place for only 3 on the elephant back. Doc explained that no bookings for evening jeep safari had been made owing to the interactive session on tiger conservation planned in the schedule and so some of us opt for this. To make matters interesting Doc suggested drawing of lots after lunch to decide on the lucky three.

Suddenly Amol remarked that if chicken was made available and if he were given access to the kitchen he would love prepare the main dish for the evening. All those who had tasted food at his hands began vouching on his skill and we all were enthused by his offer. Luckily Doc informed that another

of his friend Monali from Nagpur joining us for a day. And as we spoke a vehicle was on its way to Chandrapur bus stand where she would be reaching from Nagpur anytime. Doc immediately arranged for the driver to get the required quantity of chicken from Chandrapur.

After a light breakfast and tea we headed back to the rooms. We shared our experiences and relaxed for a while. In some time we proceeded for lunch and decided to release the snakes with us a little while later. While having lunch we all met up with Monali who had just reached some time back. But she was looking fresh and enthusiastic. We had our round of introductions once again and she joined us for lunch. After lunch some of us had a light nap. While leaving Nagpur we noticed that Doc had loaded some Solar Lamps into the coach.

Doc had explained that these solar lamps were to be distributed to the villagers living inside the reserve. While we had a nap, Doc distributed these lamps and returned. Fresh after a short nap we assembled for the next agenda “ release of snakes” into the wild. We were looking forward to this once in a lifetime experience with great excitement. In a group we trooped towards the buffer area of the forest to release these snakes. The interesting part was that Shiv, Chinmay and Mel delicately handled these snakes and practically showed us how to handle these snakes.

One by one we gained confidence and started handling the non-venomous snakes like the trinket, rat snake and the sand boa. In the daylight we could easily observe and marvel at the distinct patterns and colorations of the snakes. Though visually the snakes appeared to be slimy and greasy it was

the texture of their skin/scales that gave that effect. On the contrary these snakes were very smooth to hold. Mel, Chinmay and Shiv demonstrated on how to handle the snake so that it does not feel threatened or alarmed. Most of us used the time available to click snaps and videos of this entire exercise.

These snakes were released into the trees and tall grasses around. In no time these snakes vanished out of our eyesight. Next Mel got the checkered keel back out of the jar. No wonder he called it fast snake. This snake sped away in literally leaps and bounds. Mel, who tried to hold it momentarily to show us the snake before letting it free, got bitten in the little finger. No danger as the snake was non venomous. We all were amazed at the speed of this snake. Finally we all stepped back as Chinmay cautiously got the most dreaded russel's viper out.

Mel explained that luckily for us the viper was in a docile mood and was not agitated at all. The head of this viper was flattened, triangular and distinct from the neck. The snout was blunt, rounded and raised. The body was stout, the cross-section of which was rounded to cylindrical. Mel explained that this was a snake to be really fearful of due to its unusually large fangs that deliver copious amounts of venom leading to extreme swelling at the site of the bite, terrible damage to the tissue and severe internal bleeding within minutes of the bite.

It was one of the species responsible for causing the most snakebite cases and deaths in the India due to various factors such as its frequent occurrence in places where humans are occupied and the potency of its venom.

Chinmay further explained that the Russel's viper was generally very slow

and sluggish unless pushed beyond a certain limit, after which they become aggressive and when threatened they form a series of S-loops, raise the first third of the body and produce a hiss that is supposedly louder than that of any other snake resembling the sound of the pressure cooker.

This particular snake was moving very slowly and gave ample time for all of us to click snaps and videos. After satisfying our curiosity and anxiety Chinmay carefully released the snake into some thick bushes. After completing this exercise we proceeded back to the room. Before proceeding with the draw of lots for the elephant safari Doc suggested we have the interactive session on tiger-human conflict areas and forest conservation in general. The session began with the audio-visual presentation on tiger conservation in India. The documentary was very well made and all of us were glued to this presentation.

After the sighting the grandeur of the tiger roaming freely in the forest in the morning we were really pained to see the plight of the tiger in the various forests of the country. The efforts being made towards conservation were feeble in the face of rapid deforestation and rampant habitat destruction by us humans. Whatever was left thereafter was being wiped out by sustained pressure of influential poachers. While Akash was handling the presentation Doc used to interject whenever he recollected a related incident or had something relevant to add to the presentation. As an attentive audience we too had our share of questions and remarks.

Doc informed that very recently even in Tadoba the forest officials had found metal clamps and wire traps carefully laid out by poachers to trap the tiger.

He also remarked that the tourist movement in the monsoon however restricted was a deterrent to these poachers who would otherwise have had a free run in the forest. He cited the recent case of the mysterious death of a popular tiger named circuit in the Moharli area of the reserve. Akash sadly remarked that during his earlier visit to Tadoba he had happened to spot Circuit active and healthy close to the buffer area just one day prior to his mysterious death.

Doc informed us that wildlife enthusiasts like him were trying to use the RTI tool to find the actual cause of death of Circuit. They were trying to keep up sustained pressure so that any more tigers do not meet the same fate. Doc informed us that very recently the local DFO who was an avid wildlife enthusiast and photographer was abruptly transferred due to pressures from his superiors. Slowly we could understand the trying circumstances in which Doc and his friends were operating. Shiv and Mel also highlighted the plight of the Srisailem tiger reserve in Andhra Pradesh with a total area of 3, 600 sq. ms. In 1983 there were 40 tigers and the habitat suffered severely thereafter due to high frequency of poaching, grazing, fires, tree and bamboo exploitation. Today they remarked that the tiger is almost extinct from this reserve. The presence of armed extremists in this forest is a serious problem to the effective management of this area and the tigers. The subordinate staffs are scared to move freely in the interior and little communication exists. Doc also highlighted the frequent disregard and violations of the forest act by officials under pressure from superiors and politicians.

Doc cited having himself sighted such instances in Pench when politicians with their red beacon official vehicles entering the reserve in the dead of the night in gross violation of the wildlife act. When Doc tried to investigate the matter further he received an official letter from the forest officials of Pench threatening his entry into the reserve in future on flimsy grounds. Further he cited the case of the accidental death of the jhurjhura tigress in the famous Bandhavgarh reserve in Madhya Pradesh. The tigress was a resident, breeding animal at ' Jhurjhura' (Tala Range), which forms part of the core/ critical tiger habitat.

The tigress, alongwith its 3 cubs (around 6 months old) had been intensively photographed/ seen/ monitored by the park management and visitors. The research team from the Wildlife Institute of India in its data collection process using camera traps has also captured the said tigress. According to preliminary reports from the tiger reserve, a vehicle belonging to the state's PWD minister Nagendra Singh's son hit the tigress. But as always with such incidents in our country cover-up had begun at a frantic case.

However Doc was hopeful of some justice as wildlife activists from around the country were actively following the case. Notable among them was activist Shehla Masood from Bhopal who had filed numerous RTI applications against top forest officers, senior police officials and influential politicians involved in the cover-up. Very sadly today as I write this barely two days after our meet I read the morning papers that this very lady has been shot dead outside her house as she got into the car. As there have been no eye-

witnesses so far the local police have been so callous to even consider it to be a case of suicide.

This incident really brought a lump in my throat just imagining the value of human life to such individuals and we are expecting them to conserve wildlife in the forests. Coming back to our session. Doc then asked us to spread awareness of conservation amongst our friends, relatives and acquaintances. An important idea suggested by him was to ask anyone visiting such reserves to click frontal and side profiles of the tiger whenever possible as seen in the picture. Each tiger has a distinct pattern of stripes and they help in identification of the tiger. If a visitor shares such pictures with dedicated tiger conservationists like

Doc in Pench and Tadoba then an accurate database of tigers and their movement could be maintained more effectively rather than just relying on unreliable pug-marks of the tigers. Doc informed that he had helped to provide a computer with facility of reading memory cards at Pench to the forest officials at the main gate so that they could collect similar data from the tourists' cameras. After the presentation was over Doc informed us that he had got made some T-shirts for sale with the image of the tiger printed and he was using the proceeds of the sale towards procuring essentials like solar lamps for the villagers in the forest.

Appreciating the noble cause we gladly picked up these t-shirts as a souvenir of the trip for our family back home. By now it was already dinnertime. Interestingly in the heat of the presentation and our involvement in the subject everyone forgot the draw of lots for the elephant safari in the

evening. We were so involved in the presentation that none of us missed the elephant safari that evening. We also did not realize that somewhere in between Amol had quietly slipped away to the kitchen to get the dinner ready as promised. As the main course was getting ready he had swiftly managed to get the some starters ready also.

Just as the presentation on conservation got over Amol entered the room with starters in hand. Akash started with the balance of the earlier days photography session. As we were munching on the starters our eyes and mind were imbibing the tips on photography. By the time the photography session was over we were satiated. Doc once again reminded us on the early morning safari the next day. We quickly proceeded for dinner. The dinner prepared by Amol was truly relishing. All of us were left licking our fingers and smacking our lips. We all thanked Amol profusely for this unexpected treat and retreated back to the rooms.

With our bellies full we were fast asleep as soon as we hit the beds and snoring away. We were up again at the crack of dawn and quickly assembled into the gypsies at the gate. Although we were attracted to this programme with the prospect of seeing the tiger there is truly so much more to be seen in the forest. Even some of the trees seen inside the reserve are not regularly seen outside. Although we could not spot the tiger for ourselves this time we learnt that another vehicle entering the forest after us sighted a tiger. We were pleased on the healthy population of tiger in the reserve.

The guide with us also informed us that even the buffer area had a healthy population of tiger. Doc told us that there was a proposal to declare the area

we were presently wandering about as the core and declare out of bounds for tourists and allow the tourists only in the buffer area after proper relocation of villagers was done. We were glad for the animals provided adequate precautions were taken to keep the poachers also at bay. Today we also spotted a troop of langur monkeys and a solitary deer. On our way back we spotted a dead serpent eagle lying by the side of the road with its wings spread out as though just about to fly.

There was a small wound by the side of its neck but we were clueless. We managed to spot the mahouts rounding up the elephants let loose in the forest at night to graze. As Sachin had to leave early Doc had requested us to wind up the morning safari early so that we could all proceed to Nagpur earlier than scheduled. Although not excited with the prospect we grudgingly agreed. Casting our last glances at the expanses of the Tadoba forest for this trip we exited the Moharli gate. Thereafter we wrapped up our breakfast and proceeded to pack our bags for the return to Nagpur.

We bid goodbye to our four friends Rashmi, Alex, Shiv and Mel and hoped to keep in touch with them in future. They were also leaving for Hyderabad by noon. We got into our coaches for the ride back to Nagpur. By now the gelling of the group was complete and there was non stop banter right through. Akash the master photographer was compiling a database of all the images to be consolidated and shared later on. By the time we reached Nagpur our cheeks and stomachs were aching by the nonstop laughter. We dropped Sachin at the airport and bid him bye. The rest of us proceeded to doc's residence.

We all said our goodbyes and promised to keep in touch and went our respective ways. Amol and Rahul had their bikes parked there and left after goodbyes. Doc also changed gear from a nature lover to a cardiologist and proceeded to the hospital with Akash and Monali. As we had some time Sanket offered to accompany us to Nagpur city (market area) where we could spend couple of hours till our flight time. Doc had transferred our bags to his car and asked us to collect the same on the way to the airport. Thanks to Doc we were able to explore Nagpur “handsfree”. At the city centre we bid goodbye to Sanket.

He too was a budding photographer and had shared many tips with us. After spending some time in the city centre we noticed that we hadn't had a shave in the last 2 days so decided to have a decent shave and head massage. In no time we were done and we proceeded to Doc's hospital. We collected our luggage, bid our final goodbyes and proceeded to the airport. As the flight took off we carried with us the sweet smell of the jungle, remarkable sights of the wildlife and fond memories of the people we had met and bonded so well with over the past 3 days. This write-up is dedicated to all these wonderful people and the unforgettable Baghdo.