

Call of the wild Sanctuary

A S I A

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On the cover

Green Gold in Namdapha, Arunachal Pradesh, just one of the many wildernesses visited and protected by Kailash Sankhala.

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20 A Better Way

India's Protected Areas, Reserved Forests and the rivers that originate therein will be laid waste by private exploitation under the *Forest Rights Act, 2006*. *Sanctuary* examines options for the forest-dwelling poor who should ideally have been treated as trustees of forest lands, not owners. With protection laws now diluted, when the forests go, perpetual poverty is the most likely fate of the intended beneficiaries.



40 Out of the Blue

Elrika D'Souza and Vardhan Patankar, marine researchers from Reefwatch Marine Conservation, travelled to Havelock and Neil Islands in the Andaman and Nicobar to survey and study the mysterious 'mermaids' of the ocean – dugongs. Their trip to the azure seas yielded amazing close encounters with these little-studied, highly-endangered mammals. They write here of their experience and ask that the species and their fragile habitat be protected for posterity.



46 Wild Encounters in the Blue Mountains

Much has been written about the beauty of the Nilgiris and the manner in which this wealth has been squandered to tea estates, commercial projects and exotic weeds. But the protection afforded to the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve has so far managed to offer safe refuge to diverse wild creatures in small pockets, writes A. Christy Williams. Having grown up in these hills, the author revisited old haunts, which rekindled memories and a desire to protect and preserve the wilderness landscapes with all their richness and the myriad species they harbour.

Contributors



Suraj Sankhala

Wife of the late Director of Project Tiger, Kailash Sankhala, this homemaker continues to be a silent supporter of wild India. **32**



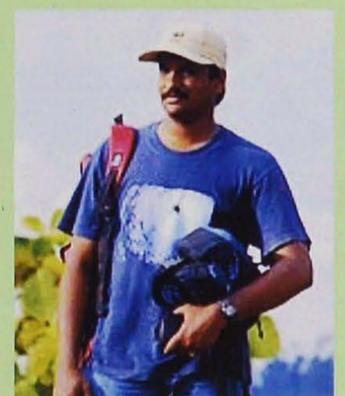
Samsul Huda Patgiri

Conservationist and Guwahati-based photojournalist, he specialises in travel, nature and anthropological photography. **36**



E. D'Souza & V. Patankar

Researchers with Reefwatch, they are pursuing their doctorates on dugongs and coral reefs in the A&N Islands, respectively. **40**



A. Christy Williams

A large mammal biologist, he heads WWF's elephant and rhino conservation programme in eight Asian countries. **46**

NOT THE DAY OF THE JACKAL... OR THE GHARIAL

Carcasses of over 50 jackals have been found in sugarcane fields in the Lakhimpur-Kheri district in Uttar Pradesh. Most of the carcasses were scattered in Keshavpur village, 20 km. from the Dudhwa National Park. The killings are believed to be in retaliation by farmers, who complain of jackals damaging their crops, straying into human habitation and even raiding cane-crusher units. A case has been registered against the absconding owner of one such crusher unit, Santosh Kumar Varma, who, officials believe, may have baited the jackals with poisoned molasses. Jackals are listed under Schedule II of the *Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972*. This follows the deaths of a large number of gharial (the count was 81 as of January 17, 2008), a critically-endangered species, in the National Chambal River Sanctuary, which spans Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. The cause of the deaths is still unknown, though the possibility of the gharial feeding on contaminated fish that may have migrated from the polluted Yamuna river is being suggested. Consumption of rotten fish could lead to a condition called pansteatitis, which causes death.

RHINO POACHING CONTINUES

On January 7, 2008, a rhino was shot dead by poachers in the Kaziranga National Park in Assam. Responding to gunshots in the Bagori or Western Range, the forest department fired blank shots. This could be the reason why the intruders fled, leaving the rhino horn intact. The carcass was found near the Daflang Beel the next morning. Three .303 rifle bullets were recovered from the carcass. According to Ashok Kumar of the Wildlife Trust of India, about 20 rhinos were poached in Kaziranga in 2007. This is the highest in over a decade and also a dramatic rise in comparison to the five rhinos killed in 2006. A single rhino horn, prized as an aphrodisiac in the Far East, could sell for as much as U.S. \$ 40,000. In addition to using guns fitted with silencers or even telescopic rifles to kill from a distance, the poachers dig holes along paths used by rhinos, identified by dung heaps (these pachyderms defaecate at one place continuously for several days). Officials suspect that poachers may also have been helped by local communities, including those from the river islands of the Brahmaputra.

MORE TUNA FISHING IN A&N

The Kochi-based Marine Products Exporters Development Authority (MPEDA), under the Union Commerce Ministry, has identified the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Lakshadweep, Vishakapatnam and Tuticorin as the key centres for expanding tuna fishing. The Central Government plans to increase the tuna export market from its current 0.1 to 12 per cent of its total marine products export market. Under its latest action plan to mine tuna in the biodiversity-rich waters of the A&N Islands, which accounts for one third of India's tuna, MPEDA will make a Rs. 14 crore investment to help convert more than 100 fishing vessels that operate in the region into tuna long-liners. Tuna fishing involves the use of long fishing lines that can reach a depth of up to 50 m. The central government is also considering setting up an international air cargo terminal in Port Blair to enable easy export of tuna to Asian markets such as Japan and China. According to the WWF, which launched a global tuna conservation initiative along with TRAFFIC in 2004, "Tuna fishing alters entire ecosystems: populations of top predators are being depleted and large volumes of bycatch of non-target species are caught, threatening the very survival of species such as leatherback turtles and sharks, which can be caught on long-lines."

SATKOSIA IS A TIGER RESERVE

Orissa's Satkosia Gorge Wildlife Sanctuary and Baisipalli Wildlife Sanctuary have together been declared as the state's second Project Tiger Reserve. The newly-notified Satkosia Tiger Reserve covers 963 sq. km. (core area 532 sq. km.), spanning the districts of Angul, Cuttack, Boudh and Nayagarh. Wild Orissa, an Orissa-based wildlife conservation organisation, recognised the potential of these forests in 1997, and working in coordination with the Orissa State Wildlife Wing, highlighted the area's excellent wildlife density and its viable, breeding tiger population. Leopards, dholes and gaur are also seen here. Through the Satkosia Tiger Conservation Programme, Wild Orissa conducted regular wildlife censuses, documented and monitored the area's wildlife, and put forward a proposal in 2002. Specific focus was laid during the last 'National Symposium on Conservation of Wild Tigers in Orissa' (NSCWTO), organised by Wild Orissa in 2003. One of the recommendations was for including forest patches like Satkosia-Baisipalli, Sunabeda-Khariar and Ghumusar. under the tiger reserve. The Central Government's Steering Committee gave an 'in principle approval' in 2005 and the State Government finally notified Satkosia as a tiger reserve on December 31, 2007, a day before the *Forest Rights Act* was implemented. Much of the new tiger reserve lies within the Mahanadi Elephant Reserve, home to nearly 500 elephants. The 22 km. long Satkosia Gorge, created by the Mahanadi river, divides the Chhota Nagpur Plateau and the Eastern Ghats bio-geographical zones, making this an area of immense biological distinction. It is the southernmost range of the critically-endangered gharial and is also home to muggers. Many migratory waterfowl take refuge in this unique 'gorge ecosystem' in the winter.

ADITYA PANDA

