

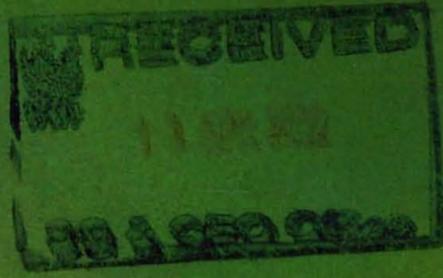
Call of the wild

Sanctuary

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Vol. XXXII No.2, April 2012



Conservation Biology in India

A Traditional Hunt

Vishal Santra witnesses *Santhal* tribals stalking wildlife.



VISHAL SANTRA

This graphic account of a tribal hunt is not a pretty story. In fact it is downright disturbing, particularly to those who understand that 'traditions' based on the existence of virtually endless forests are now adding to the press of extinction for species whose habitats have been whittled down by urban demands, including mines, dams, roads and altered land use.

The call came in on December 16, 2011, at 2:45 p.m. A group of *Santhal* tribals from the Hooghly district of West Bengal were about to embark on a wild cat hunt. I had long heard of these hunts and was curious to know why they hunted and what their *modus operandi* was.

On joining them I realised that my mental picture of 'tribals' was completely outdated. Yes, they were *Santhals*, classified as a Scheduled Tribe in India. Yet their attire was no different from most of us. By the time I caught up with them, the group had already identified the burrow of an animal, which was being closely inspected for clues. Three young boys were part of the hunting team, but they said that they were not really there to learn how to hunt, rather they just wanted to experience the thrill of the chase.

Once they established that the burrow was actually occupied by an animal, they began piling up dry leaves and other vegetation on the entrance. The idea was to smoke the animal out into the open and identify other emergency exits.

Sure enough, the tell-tale smoke revealed another strategic exit, which was promptly guarded by men armed with sharp sticks.

In addition to sticks, *Santhali* hunters use unique bows and arrows with the string drawn from bamboo strips, not the intestine



VISHAL SANTRA

of an animal. The arrow tips are crafted from cheap cast iron.

The hunt, I noticed, was all about patience. The men had no option but to wait for the animal to emerge. In between, they would thrust a spear deep inside the burrow in all directions and then inspect the metal tip for signs of blood, or fur. To confirm that the burrow was actually occupied, a thin stick was inserted into the hideout and if it moved, the animal was clearly 'at home'.

In this case the animal refused to be flushed out, so the group began to dig into the burrow, with eyes trained on all possible escape exits. Soon the hapless animal could be seen moving desperately about below the soil, and its head and face were visible. It was a jungle cat *Felis chaus*! The group made way for their best 'spear man' while another wielded an axe as 'back up'. The cat bit on the metal shaft of the spear in a vain bid to escape. But it had no chance at all. The spear did its job ruthlessly, quickly. And a magnificent creature was lost in the name of tradition and festivity.

With the spear still embedded in its belly, swift blows to the head with a bamboo pole were administered 'to make sure it was dead'.

I had gone willingly to witness the whole process, but was shattered by the casual ease and was left wondering how many such 'traditional hunts' across our country continued to take a daily toll on our vanishing wildlife.

What can be done?

I run a wildlife conservation NGO, Simultala Conservationists, which seeks to create awareness on the issue of snake bites, wild animal rescues and to offer education to rural communities on conservation. We also try to engage and dissuade tribal communities from indulging in such hunts.

In 2008, I had confronted a large hunting party of *Santhals* at the Nalikul Railway Station, in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. Six adult wild jungle cats, three less-than-one-month old jungle cat cubs and one mongoose were confiscated from them. The problem of

ABOVE The hunting party of *Santhals* first identified the burrow of an animal and closely inspected it for clues and prepared their game plan. These three boys who came with the hunting group claimed to have joined just for fun. Hunting, they say, is all about patience and the thrill of the chase. The goal is no longer sustenance; it is only for the adrenaline rush of a successful hunt.

FACING PAGE Machetes and spears are thrust into the burrows of unsuspecting animals until the animal has no choice but to leave its hideout. The hunting team crowds around the burrow, ensuring that there is no escape route for the animal. From their vantage point, they can see the hapless cat thrashing about in its burrow and can anticipate its next move.