

# Village Wildlife Volunteer Program

A lesson in how local participation aided by technology is setting new benchmarks in conservation efforts at Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve

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NGO WATCH



In the summer of 2013, a young male Tiger named T-56 strayed out of the park, crossed the Chambal river and went on an unprecedented 240 km long journey into the heart of neighboring Madhya Pradesh, eventually stopping in the forests of Datia. A young and intrepid villager named Hanuman Gurjer followed him on his 240 km long migration for 50 days in the rough, bandit-infested Chambal terrain and did so without the assistance of a radio collar. Things became more challenging for him as T-56 consistently avoided the camera traps that were set up every night to monitor his movements. Hanuman belongs to one of the pastoral communities that live on Ranthambhore National Park's boundaries. His fascination for the wildlife with which he shares his home and his innate knowledge of surrounding landscapes and local communities made him an invaluable part of a ground breaking initiative at Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve.



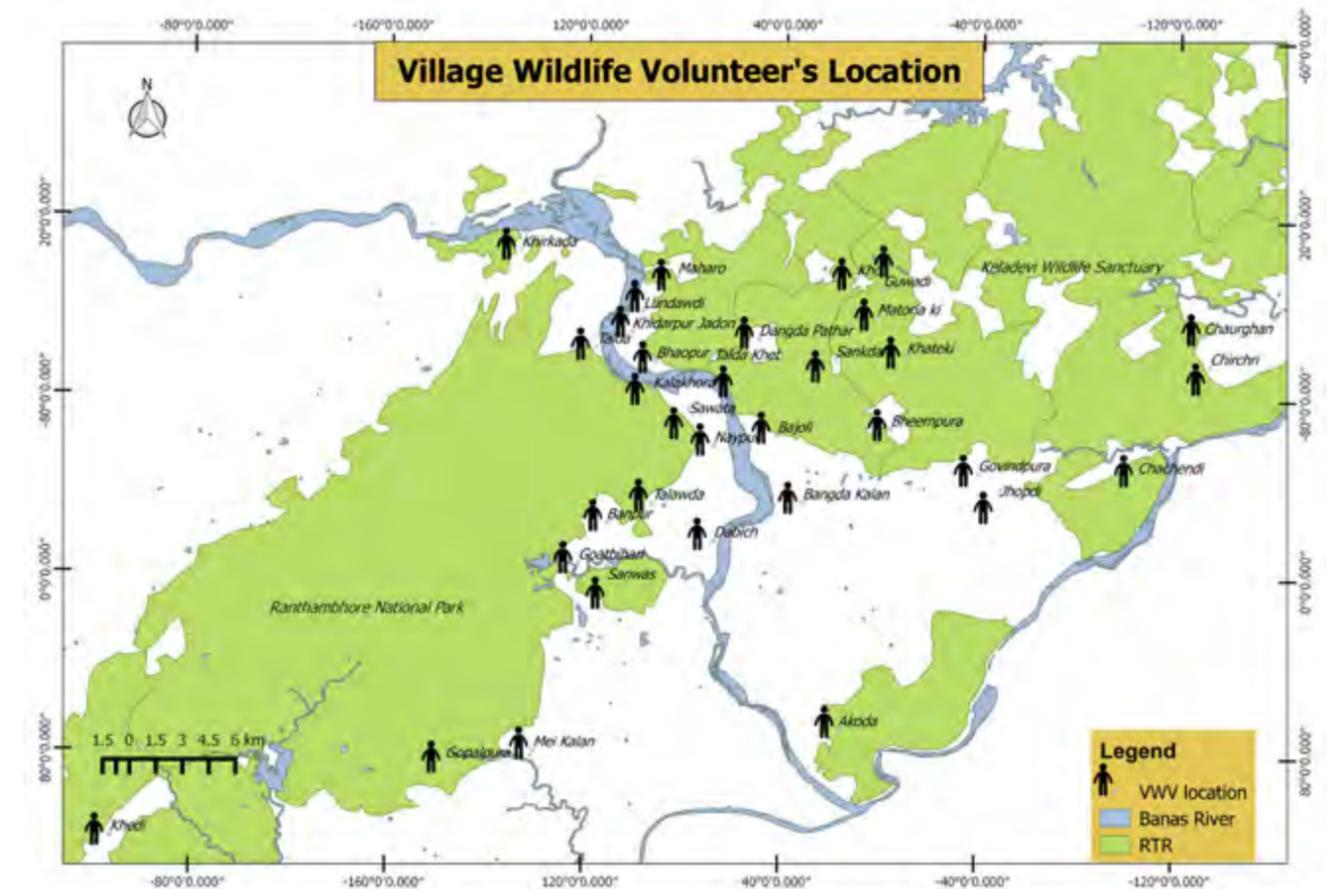
## TRACKING TIGERS

Hanuman's pursuit of T56 revealed that several tigers (mostly young males) roamed at least 70 km outside of the park's boundaries and that monitoring these tigers regularly was going to be a huge challenge. It was then that the Village Wildlife Volunteer program came into existence. Hanuman is now the leader of a group of 30 Village Wildlife Volunteers under the stewardship of the Ranthambhore Forest Department and the NGO, Tiger Watch. These villagers include goat herders, subsistence farmers and many others who are employed part-time in this programme. Organizations

like TOFT, hotels like Sher Bagh and individual philanthropy provide for their salaries. As on date, the Village Wildlife Volunteers have contributed to 20 per cent of the Forest Department's database on tigers in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve.

## AIDING LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Armed with camera traps and mobile phones, they monitor the wilderness around them and report their daily findings to Tiger Watch. What initially started out as an exercise to monitor tigers, quickly took on a much larger role when the





Village Wildlife Volunteers began to act as natural liaisons between the forest department and communities living on the parks fringes. With the Village Wildlife Volunteers enabling cooperation between the forest department and local communities, previously nightmarish scenarios such as nabbing poachers or rescuing a straying tiger in a densely populated area suddenly became a lot easier.

As more and more tigers leave the park and move through pastoral and agricultural lands in search of new territories, the likelihood of human wildlife conflict increases exponentially. The Village Wildlife Watchers have mitigated human wildlife conflict in several villages bordering the park where the movement of tigers is now consistent and have also been instrumental in providing medical assistance to attacked local community members.

**NABBING POACHERS**

The camera traps used by the Village Wildlife Volunteers to identify and monitor tigers have also been instrumental in identifying poachers, resulting in their arrest. Poaching for bush meat and illegal fishing, which are problems in areas outside of the park, have also been taken on by the Village Wildlife Volunteers. The critical intelligence they provide allows the Forest Department to take corrective action against wildlife criminals before damage can be done by them. They have reported 30 cases this year as of June and for the first time ever, anti-poaching has become preventative in nature rather than an

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exercise of containment by the forest authorities.

**COMMUNITY SAFETY AND SECURITY**

The Village Wildlife Volunteers have also interestingly contributed significantly to the safety and security of their own communities by dismantling several homemade explosive devices. These homemade explosives are unfortunately common in these areas and are used by poachers to kill animals like wild boar for bush meat but have been killed and maimed villagers as well. Recurring timely intervention by the



Village Wildlife Volunteers continues to save innocent human and animal lives from these murderous devices.

**MANAGING CATTLE KILLS**

The increase of tigers habitually frequenting pastoral land means an increase in cattle kills. Retaliation by livestock herders is often swift and ruthless, the outcome being a poisoned tiger. Compensation for cattle kills by the Forest Department is more generous than market rates for livestock. The Village Wildlife Volunteers make sure that cattle kills do not go unreported as they did in remote areas in the past and that there is no abuse of this generous system. As of April of this year, they have reported a total of 64 cattle kills and last year the number was about 200.

**HELPING HAND FROM INTERNS**

This program needs no specialist intervention in managing daily operations and interns like Meenu Dhakkad & Kashish Madan from Delhi and Aristo Mendis from Mumbai coming from various colleges take the role of coordinators for the data collection. The volunteers are given good quality camera traps which are placed at strategic locations in areas of operation in the evening and the data is collected at the crack of dawn the next day. They are also equipped with smart phones that allow them to quickly relay data in real time to their coordinator who then forwards it to the forest department for necessary action. This unique program has clear well defined roles for its

collaborators, with the villager executing work on the ground, tourism funding the entire operation, the forest department acting on the information received and the NGO planning the operations themselves. Technology, participation and the determination to act are the pillars that make this program a source of emulation in new age conservation methodology.

This unique program has clearly defined roles for its collaborators with the villager executing the ground level work, the tourism department funding the operation, the forest department acting on the information received and the NGO planning and deciding on the operations. Technology, participation and determination to execute are the pillars of this program which has set an example to emulate in new age conservation methodology.

