

CAT



THE HUNTED & THE HUNTER A female tiger peers at tourists in India's Ranthambhore National Park. Opposite: Poacher Dashrath Moghiya looks out from behind bars.

A man with a beard and intense gaze, looking through vertical bars. He is wearing a light-colored shirt and has his hands clasped in front of him. The background is a blurred, light-colored wall.

FIGHT

Squeezed for space and targeted by poachers, India's tigers have reached a tipping point. But deep in the world's most celebrated tiger sanctuary, an unlikely hero has emerged. He's smart. He's driven. He's a God-fearing vegetarian with Jack Bauer tendencies. Too bad wildlife officials hate his guts.

BY PAUL KVINTA PHOTOGRAPHY BY TOM PIETRASIK

ON THE MORNING of his planned raid on the illegal gunmaker, Dharmendra Khandal wakes well before sunrise, purifies himself with a ritual bath, and then studies several verses of the Durga Saptashati, one of Hinduism's holiest books. Given the nature of the war Khandal is waging, it seems an appropriate text. In it, the radiant goddess Durga—"the One who can redeem in situations of utmost distress"—rides on the back of a tiger, her ten arms brandishing weapons and a lotus flower as she hunts down and destroys the demon Mahisasura. • If Khandal's past raids are any indication,

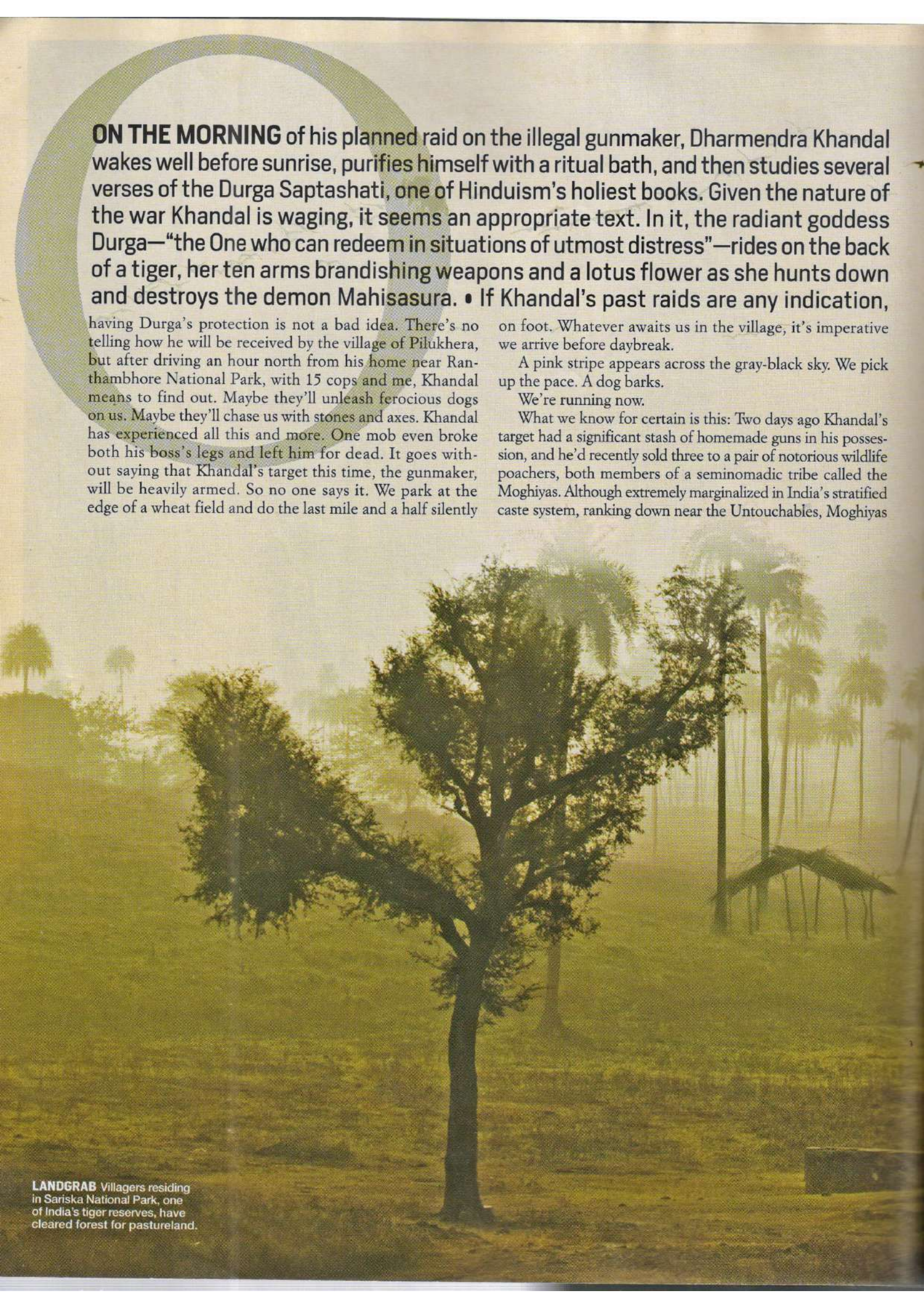
having Durga's protection is not a bad idea. There's no telling how he will be received by the village of Pilukhera, but after driving an hour north from his home near Ranthambhore National Park, with 15 cops and me, Khandal means to find out. Maybe they'll unleash ferocious dogs on us. Maybe they'll chase us with stones and axes. Khandal has experienced all this and more. One mob even broke both his boss's legs and left him for dead. It goes without saying that Khandal's target this time, the gunmaker, will be heavily armed. So no one says it. We park at the edge of a wheat field and do the last mile and a half silently

on foot. Whatever awaits us in the village, it's imperative we arrive before daybreak.

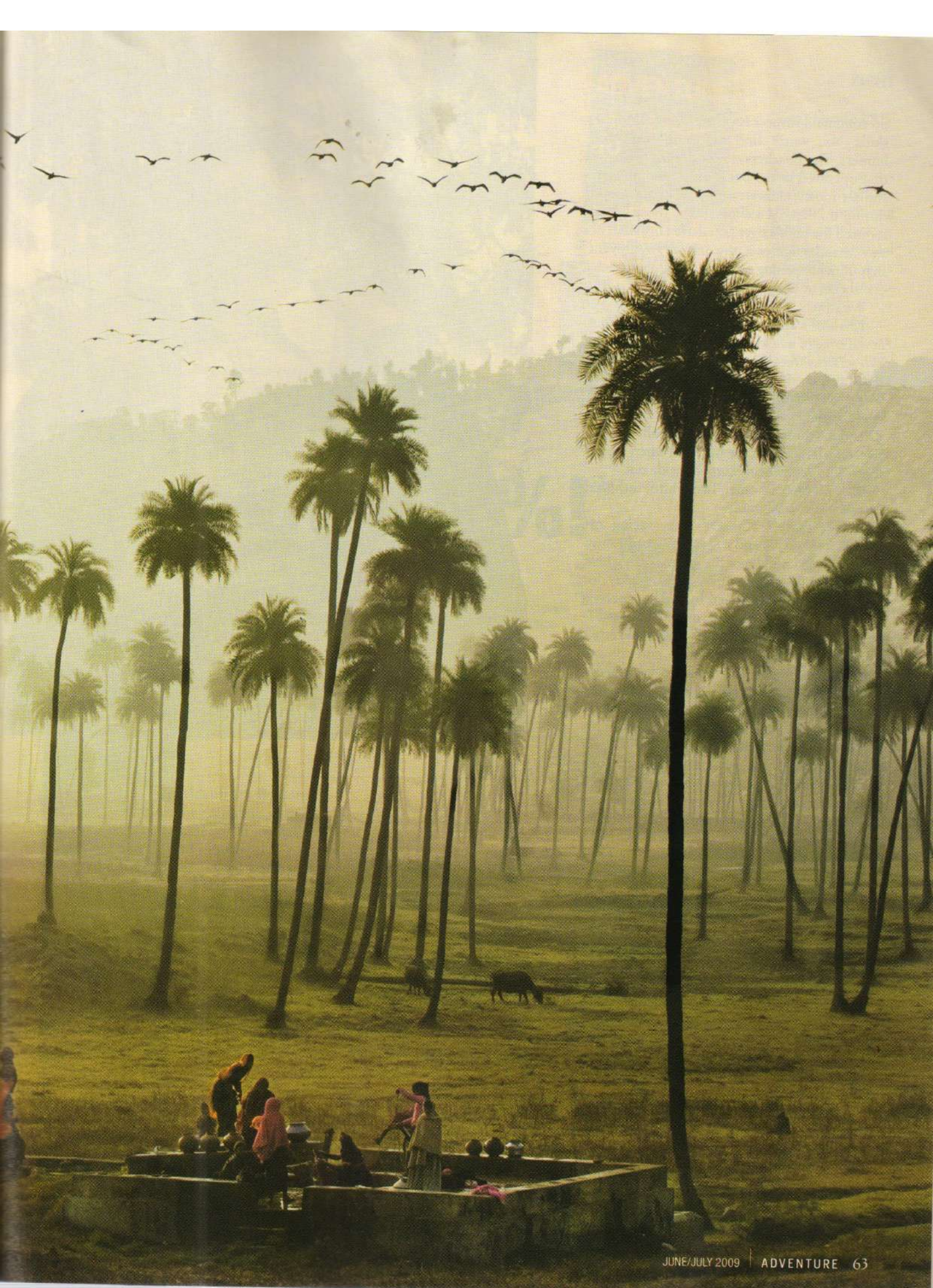
A pink stripe appears across the gray-black sky. We pick up the pace. A dog barks.

We're running now.

What we know for certain is this: Two days ago Khandal's target had a significant stash of homemade guns in his possession, and he'd recently sold three to a pair of notorious wildlife poachers, both members of a seminomadic tribe called the Moghiyas. Although extremely marginalized in India's stratified caste system, ranking down near the Untouchables, Moghiyas



LANDGRAB Villagers residing in Sariska National Park, one of India's tiger reserves, have cleared forest for pastureland.



do command respect for their significant bush skills. You won't find better trackers and hunters. The poachers once belonged to gangs that operated in the heart of Ranthambhore, India's most celebrated tiger sanctuary, and during a 2003–04 killing spree, those gangs reduced the park's tiger population by half. The way Khandal figures it, the only way to prevent that from happening again is to limit the poachers' access to weapons.

We stop.

Khandal's informant points to a solitary hut at the edge of a field outside the village, behind two scrawny trees. Five cops peel off to the left, flanking the workshop from behind. The rest of us stay on the dirt path. It's a footrace now, the cool morning air rushing across our faces, with Khandal, young and tall, sprinting ahead. The fivesome beats us to the hut, and when we get there it's already being turned inside out.

But no one is home. Two white, tethered cows stare at us dumbly.

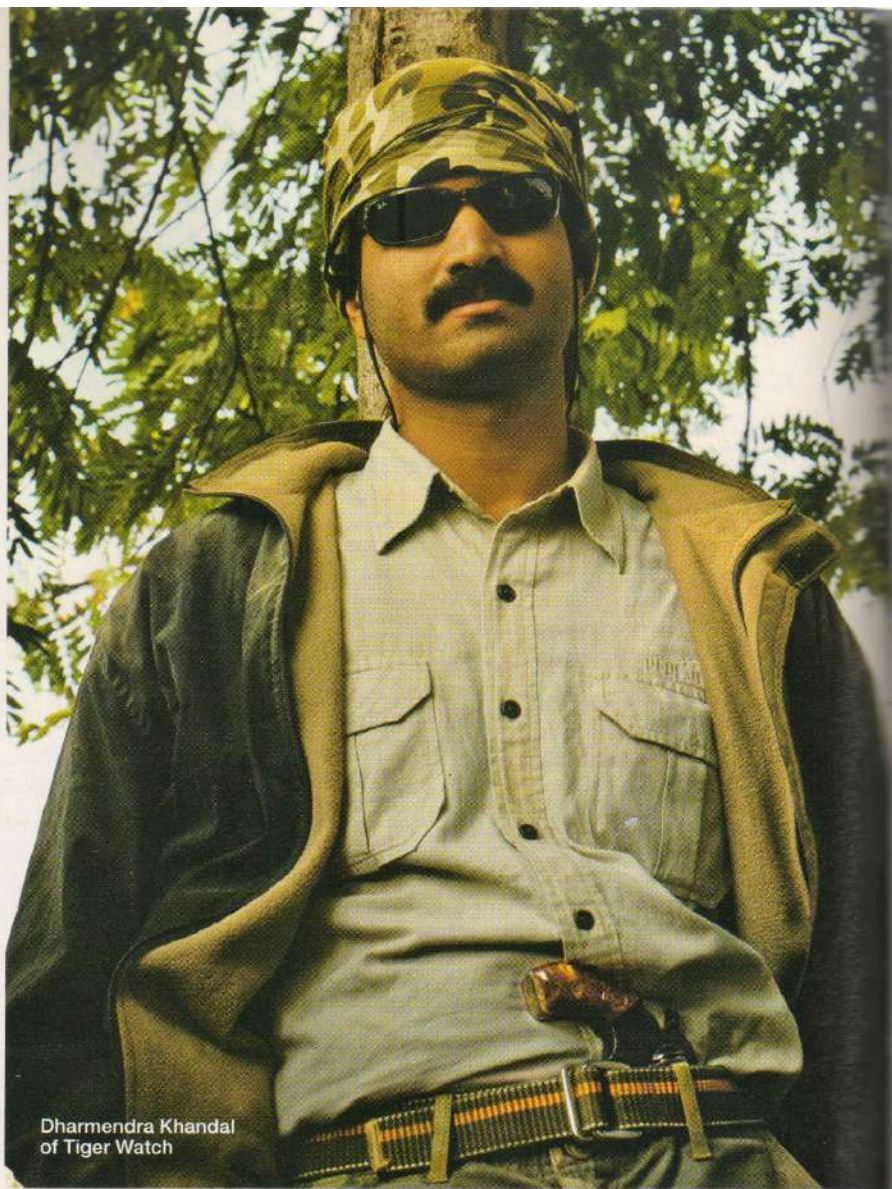
"Over there," Khandal says, racing off toward a single cot and a fire pit 50 yards away, located in the middle of the gunmaker's wheat field. When I get there Khandal has already discovered a muzzle-loading rifle, and he proceeds to empty a bag of rusty tools onto the ground—mallets, files, wrenches, a hand drill, a makeshift forge, along with all manner of gun components, everything from hammer locks, triggers, springs, and barrels to green plastic bags of gunpowder. But no gunmaker.

Khandal scans the horizon and shakes his head. In the early morning glow, you'd never figure him for the religiously devout, soft-spoken scientist that he is. He's wearing dark shades, a camouflage bandanna, fatigues, and a black jacket, with a pistol protruding from his waistband. "He has to surrender," Khandal mumbles, to no one in particular. "He has a house here. He has land, a family. Maybe not today. Maybe tomorrow."

It's easy to understand Khandal's disappointment. Over the past five years he has successfully busted dozens of poachers, many connected to an illegal international wildlife trade that generates some \$20 billion a year. His efforts even helped trigger the most significant change in Indian tiger policy in a generation. You'd think that, given everything Khandal has done for Ranthambhore and its endangered cats, the Indian Forest Service would be pinning medals all over the guy.

You'd be wrong.

A FEW DAYS BEFORE joining Khandal and his anti-poaching crusade, I had experienced Ranthambhore's tiger magic firsthand. The park is one of two tiger reserves in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan, and I'd been admiring the crocodiles along one of the park's big lakes, Raj Bagh, when my guide noticed several monkeys raising hell in some trees lining a boggy inlet. We



Dharmendra Khandal
of Tiger Watch

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THEY WON'T."**

turned off the doubletrack, inched toward the trees, and that's when she emerged, glistening wet in the midmorning sun, a two-and-a-half-year-old female known as T-17. She parted the tall grass, gave her coat a good shake, and then nearly brushed the jeep as she strolled past, ignoring us altogether.

T-17 was all attitude. Her mother, Machali, had ruled this territory for a decade, starring in multiple wildlife documentaries and becoming possibly the most photographed tiger on the planet. She had blessed the park with five litters, the first sired by Bamboo Ram, the big male that

President Bill Clinton saw during his visit in 2000. But Machali was more than 11 years old now and had lost all her canines. T-17 was slowly displacing her.

We followed her up the jeep path. When she reached the top of a small rise she turned to stare back at us, posing travel-brochure-like. Almost an adult, T-17 was nearly the length of a living room sofa and would likely grow to well over 300 pounds. Ranthambhore had everything she needed. The Aravalli and Vindhya mountain ranges had collided here eons ago, creating undulating peaks, sharp ravines, and narrow valleys, a land teeming with

tiger food. Earlier we'd seen herds of spotted deer and elk-like sambars grazing, wild boars snorting about the undergrowth, and langurs swinging from dhak trees. Most of the park's 155 square miles are dry deciduous forest, which offers ample cover for the cats, as well as great sight lines for wildlife viewing. With Delhi just seven hours away, Ranthambhore is considered the best place on the planet to see a tiger, and as we watched T-17 saunter past an ancient Hindu shrine, a truckload of tourists roared up screaming, "Tiger! Tiger!" T-17 ignored them, but it was getting crowded. She slipped into the bushes and was gone.

Indians love their tigers, so when Khandal discovered in 2004 that poachers had decimated the population here, and news leaked that Rajasthan's other tiger reserve, Sariska, had suffered an even worse fate—the loss of every single cat—it triggered national convulsions. Until that point, Project Tiger, a system of 27 reserves established in 1973, had represented one of the world's great conservation stories. While tigers lost ground to humans in other countries, their numbers in India increased from about 1,200 to 3,600, transforming the nation into a proud bulwark against the threat of species extinction. But the Sariska and Ranthambhore meltdowns changed everything. If tigers could vanish from India, what chance did they have in less developed countries like Nepal and Cambodia?

India's prime minister was so disturbed by the Sariska case that he turned the matter over to the Central Bureau of Investigation, India's FBI, an agency typically concerned with hunting terrorists. The CBI crushed a poaching ring in Sariska linked to international criminal kingpins. It also blasted the forest service's management of the park, reporting that the "negligence of the staff is evident and overwhelming." The crisis deepened when a task force reported similar negligence permeating the country's entire tiger reserve system, and the coup de grâce came when a census later revealed that India had only 1,411 tigers. "India is letting the tiger slip through its fingers," declared Belinda Wright, director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India. "It's going to be one of the biggest conservation debacles the world has ever known."

The silver lining, if there was one, was that officials had no choice but to double-down on tiger conservation. In 2007 the government pledged \$125 million to create 12 new reserves and to improve existing ones. Sariska and Ranthambhore were beefed up with hundreds of ex-military personnel, and in time Ranthambhore's tiger population rebounded. Last summer wildlife officials used a military helicopter to relocate a male and female from Ranthambhore to Sariska, to much media fanfare. Tigers once again roam Sariska, and Ramesh Mehrotra, chief wildlife warden of Rajasthan, now insists the future looks bright for India's big cats. "We

have arrested the poachers, and security has been enhanced," he says. "Everything is under control."

BUT SOME PEOPLE disagree with Mehrotra's rosy assessment, Khandal maybe most of all. He's heard it all before. The day after our raid on the illegal gunmaker, he and I are driving to a village south of Ranthambhore, where with luck an infamous poacher named Dashrath Moghiya will surrender to us. Khandal recalls that back in 2004 the forest service also denied there was a poaching problem in the park, which explains why the CBI was never sent here. In a turn of events that tells you everything you need to know about the Indian Forest Service, the job of infiltrating and busting the gangs had fallen to Khandal, the only employee of a penniless local environmental organization called Tiger Watch. The story of Khandal's unlikely transformation into a crime fighter is, in many ways, the story of modern tiger conservation in India. It's the tale of an individual stepping up, against all odds, when the system designed to protect tigers falls apart completely.

Still, you'd be hard-pressed to find a more reluctant tiger hero than Dharmendra Khandal. The man isn't even what you'd call a huge tiger lover. Sure, he admires them.

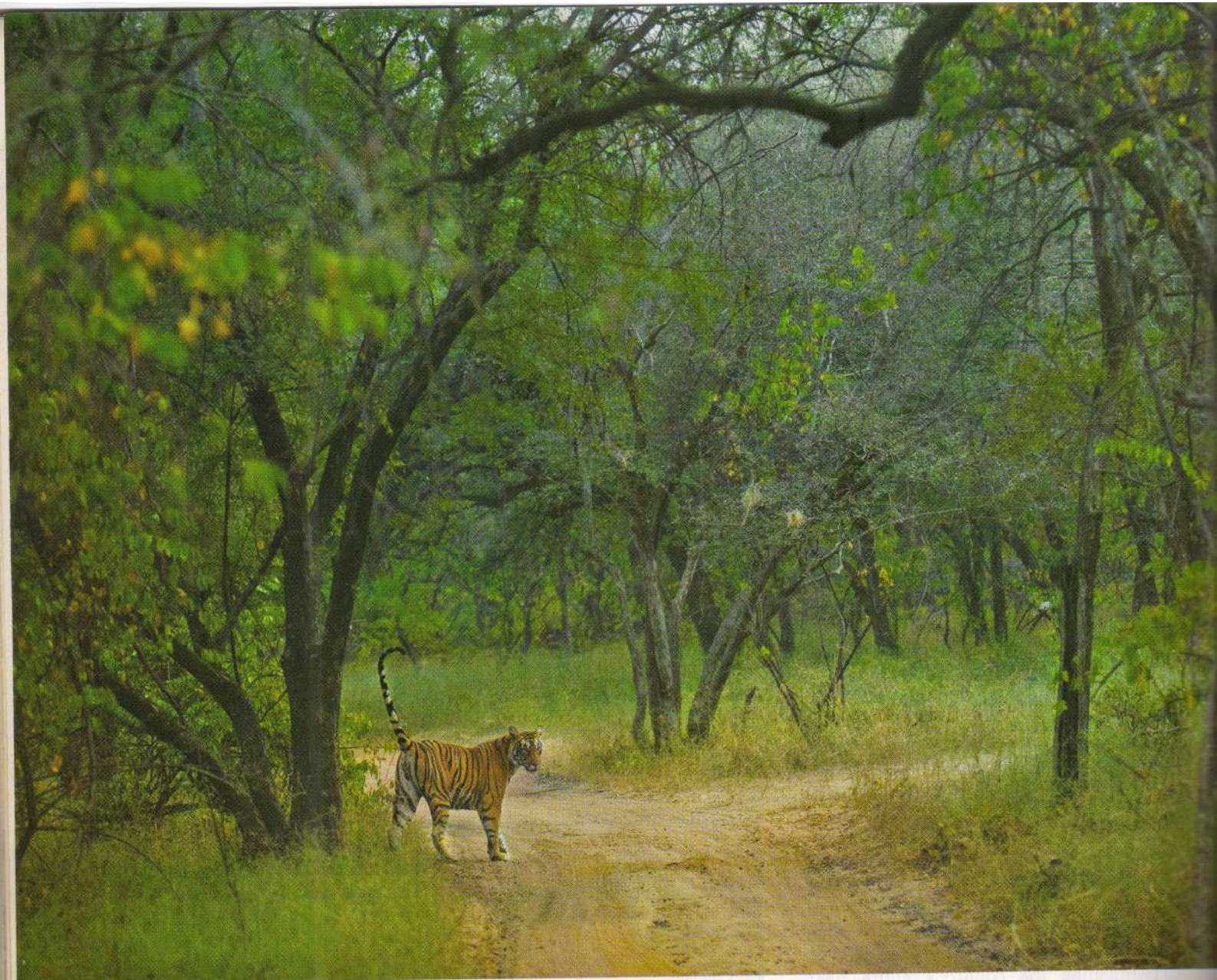
India's ten-foot-long Bengal tigers are arguably the mightiest terrestrial predators on the planet. But Khandal has a penchant for decidedly meeker forms of wildlife, like the three-inch-long Persian sand dwarf gecko, a termite-eating reptile he found in 2007, the first ever documented sighting in India. Khandal is an academic, and as he drives he ticks off the other species he has discovered, like the spiders *Poltys rebmanii* and *Poltys godrejii*. Khandal would rather be hunting for new creepy-crawlies under rocks, yet here he is, playing cops and robbers with dangerous poachers. "I do not like doing this," he confesses. "I don't mind gathering the information, but the forest service should do the raids. They won't."

Khandal's motivation is not what you usually hear from environmental activists. "God sent me to Ranthambhore to work for tigers," he explains, with complete sincerity. "If I do something else, He won't support me." Some of this belief no doubt stems from his birthright as one of India's high-caste Brahmans, traditionally a community of priests, scholars, and reformers. Khandal grew up viewing money and power as bad things, and today he lives an ascetic lifestyle, shunning alcohol, tobacco, and anything from a kitchen that prepares meat, reading his Durga Saptashati, and residing in a small, no-frills apartment near the park.

We arrive at the Moghiya village and enter one of the huts. The surrender of Dashrath, a well-known skin trader, is a big deal, and the place is packed. For two years, the poacher has been running from Khandal, but according to an informant, he's ready to turn himself in. We seat ourselves, and after a few minutes Dashrath

TO CATCH A TIGER In 2008 Indian officials relocated two tigers from Ranthambhore N.P., home of Tiger Watch, to Sariska N.P., where poachers had rendered the species extinct. Below, park rangers identify the relocated cats by plaster molds of paw prints and track them via radio.





shuffles in, somewhat sheepishly. Like many Moghiyas, he's dark skinned, and he wears a white dhoti and dusty slippers. He squats before us, touches Khandal's feet, and presses his hands together in a show of deference.

"Dashrath," Khandal says warmly. "What's it been, two years? Do you remember when I went to buy that leopard skin and you gave me the slip?"

Dashrath grins.

"You turned out to be pretty smart!" Khandal exclaims. The crowd bursts into laughter.

"So," Khandal continues, "you want to surrender."

"I was assured I would not be beaten," Dashrath mumbles.

Khandal places a hand on the Moghiya's shoulder. "You have nothing to worry about," he tells him.

Dashrath's concern is no small thing. Khandal will be turning him over to the forest service, and given the way Indian officials generally treat prisoners, and the fact that the department largely despises Khandal, Dashrath should be worried.

Sure enough, less than 24 hours later, those suspicions are confirmed. We're in the middle of touring the two schools Khandal runs for the children of Moghiya ex-poachers, as well as the

ROOM TO ROAM

From left: A Ranthambhore feline; Khandal (right) with Fateh Singh Rathore, head of Tiger Watch and founder of Ranthambhore; warden Ramesh Mehrotra.

handicrafts cooperative for their wives (Khandal believes in the stick-and-carrot approach to antipoaching), when he gets a phone call. An informant tells him that Dashrath has been beaten by his forest service captors, despite their promises to go easy on him.

Khandal is livid. At the range office where Dashrath is being held, he lays into the forest official, who admits to "slapping around" his captive. "I've got three big poachers who are considering surrendering!" Khandal yells. "They're waiting to see how you handle people who surrender. It doesn't help if you're beating them! These people are reforming. We should respect them."

Khandal then blurts out something more. "I have beaten poachers too," he says. "But you don't beat people who turn themselves in."

It's a startling admission—especially in an age of torture memos—and one that raises all sorts of ethical issues. In the course of my reporting, I had heard one wildlife NGO official question Khandal's approach to human rights and even refer to him as a "cowboy." When I ask Khandal pointedly about this he

admits that, yes, he roughed up poachers during his first couple of raids. "But we were new to antipoaching," he says. "And we had no idea about the rehabilitation process." Maybe more importantly, he stresses the climate of fear and mystery that gripped Ranthambhore in 2004. The park was losing its tigers, and no one knew why. Worse, the forest service wasn't doing anything about it. "We were completely scared, and we were trying to stop whatever was going on," Khandal says. "We wanted to send a message to the poachers that we were not going to tolerate them. We were not aware that this was organized crime."

WHEN KHANDAL CAME to Ranthambhore in 2003 to work for Tiger Watch, he knew nothing about Moghiyas, poaching, or even tigers. He'd just completed a successful spider study in Mumbai's Sanjay Gandhi National Park, where he lived for six months with no electricity or potable water. Spiders and sparse living. Khandal was in heaven.

At Ranthambhore his first order of business was to conduct a tiger survey. Ranthambhore is the kind of place where the locals feel a certain intimacy with the tigers and often refer to them like neighbors on the block. Someone could always tell you if Bamboo Ram had killed a sambar, or if they'd seen Machali's new litter, or if Broken Tail was lounging in a jeep path. But by late 2003 there were whispers that some cats had vanished, and Khandal's boss wanted him to look into it. Khandal's methodology was simple. From January through June 2004 he took hundreds of photographs of tigers in the park and gathered countless more from photographers who had spent serious time in Ranthambhore. He then compared those with the camera trap images taken during the last tiger survey here, in 1993.

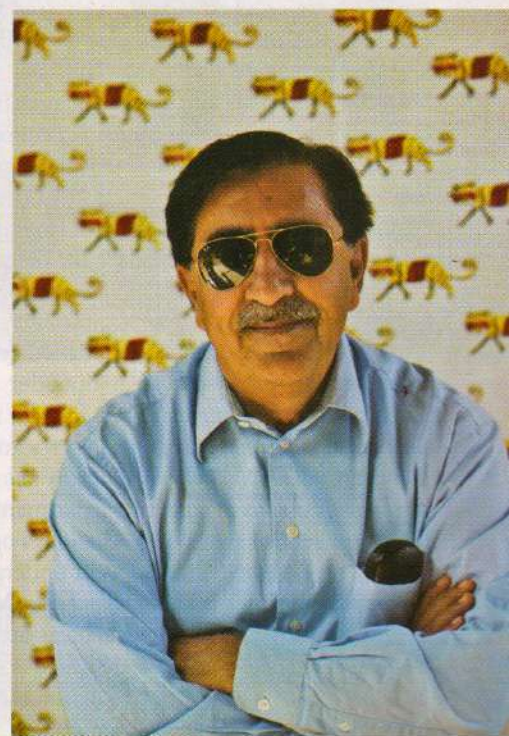
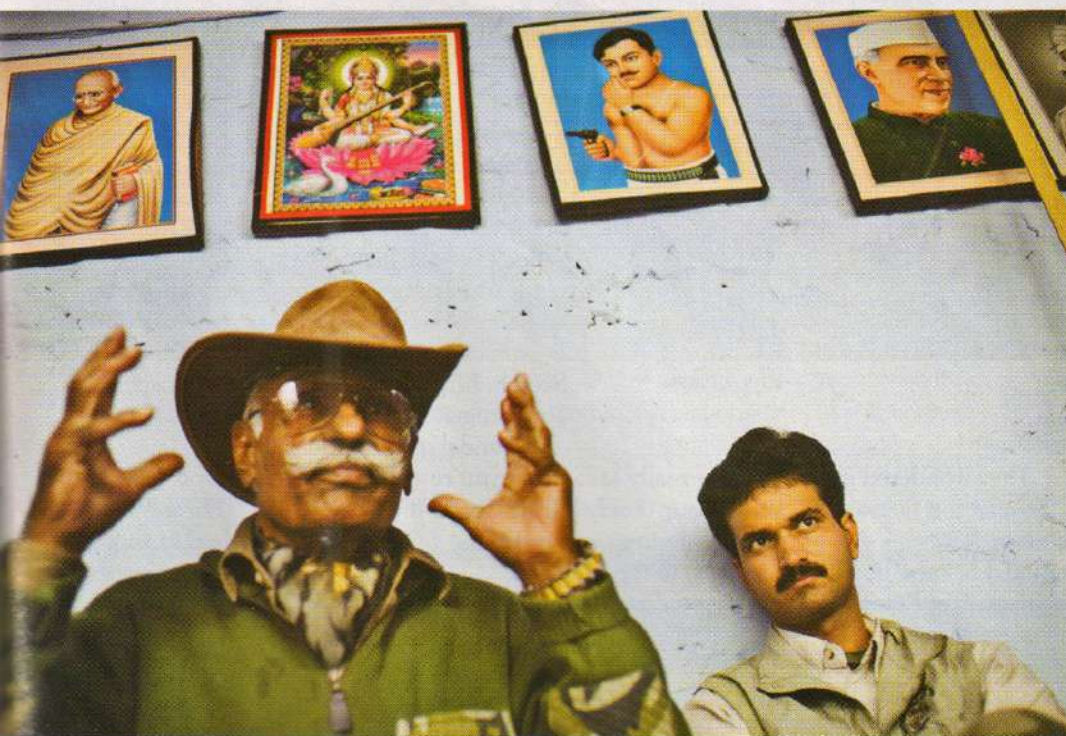
IN A FRONT-PAGE EXPOSÉ, ONE OF INDIA'S LEADING NEWSPAPERS REPORTED THAT THE SARISKA TIGER RESERVE HAD NO MORE CATS. ZERO.

Khandal's analysis concluded ultimately that Ranthambhore had 25 tigers—but it should have had 43. Eighteen were missing.

In one respect, 18 cats wouldn't seem so significant. People have been killing tigers on the subcontinent since at least 3000 B.C., with cave paintings in central India depicting them surrounded by spear-toting stick men. Indian nobility for centuries staged elaborate tiger hunts, but it wasn't until the British arrived in the 1800s that the full-on slaughter began. In *Tiger: The Ultimate Guide*, naturalist Valmik Thapar describes a trophy race that lasted well into the 20th century: "New records continually replaced old ones. A Colonel Rice killed and wounded 93 tigers between 1850 and 1859. Lieutenant Colonel Gordon Cummings killed 173 tigers in 1863 alone." Not to be outdone by the Brits, Indian royals chased outrageous bag numbers themselves. The maharaja of Nepal nabbed 295 tigers between 1933 and 1939, including 120 during one ten-week stretch. The maharaja of Gwalior killed 700 in his lifetime.

If estimates of 100,000 tigers in India at the turn of the 20th century are accurate, then the population had plummeted to nearly one percent of that by 1970 when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi outlawed tiger hunting. By the time Khandal conducted his count in 2004, 18 missing tigers was huge. Something was seriously wrong, and Khandal knew it.

He typed up his report and submitted copies to the head of the park, deputy field director G. S. Bhardwaj, as well as to forest service higher-ups. The next day, Khandal was denied entrance into Ranthambhore. According to Khandal, Bhardwaj told him that, in no uncertain terms, there were exactly 43 tigers here, and that unless he backed off his report, the forest service would make life



difficult for him. "I was new," Khandal says. "I was scared. I began to doubt my own report." Shortly after, Bhardwaj made good on his promise. He accused Khandal of killing and removing a rare snake from the forest, then banned him from the park.

Calling Khandal a snake killer was definitely *not* the way to go. He immediately contacted journalists around the country, and they ran stories about his report on the 18 missing tigers in Ranthambhore. "Species discovery is my passion," he says, "and these people blame me for killing snakes? Bhardwaj made it personal. Until then the fight had been for truth, but when it got personal, that's when I got energized."

BY EARLY 2005 India's tiger-poaching crisis had taken on a life of its own. A front-page exposé in one of the country's leading newspapers, *The Indian Express*, claimed that Rajasthan's other tiger sanctuary, Sariska, had no more tigers at all. Zero. Forest service officials vociferously denied this, but the article sparked a national firestorm, and India's prime minister demanded answers. A blue-ribbon task force also confirmed what Khandal had been saying about Ranthambhore, and then some—the park was missing not 18 cats but 22. The tiger, a national symbol of India, was disappearing from its most high-profile sanctuaries, and no one knew why.

The commotion unnerved Ranthambhore officials, and they agreed to work with Khandal to stop the poachers. Khandal rounded up a motley group of volunteers—one drank too much, another had done jail time for stabbing someone—none of whom knew anything about intelligence gathering. But they had boundless enthusiasm. When one notorious tiger killer named Rajmal Moghiya refused to talk, they beat him severely. They also discovered 65 pounds of fresh sambar meat that he had poached from the park, and his subsequent arrest received splashy local media coverage. Soon thereafter, poaching began to decline in Ranthambhore. Unfortunately, Khandal's success ultimately produced grumbling among park staff. "An outsider was working with the government for the first time, and it was so effective," says a forest service officer. "My colleagues didn't like it. They wondered if it was being done to defame the department." So after just five raids, the forest service shut down Khandal's operation.

Left on his own, Khandal went underground. He knew he had to penetrate the murky world of the Moghiyas. But how? He needed money. And time. Moghiyas aren't exactly a welcoming bunch. Ever since their warrior ancestors were routed and chased into the forest by Akbar the Great in the 16th century, Moghiyas have lived outside mainstream Indian society, perfecting their



[ADVENTURE GUIDE]

TIGERLAND

India is home to at least a third of the world's tigers—1,411 cats inhabiting 27 reserves. Ranthambhore National Park, in the north, and Bandhavgarh National Park, in the center of the country, offer perhaps the best feline spotting. Travel Operators for Tigers provides a thorough list of responsible outfitters (toftigers.org).

RANTHAMBHORE: Seven hours south of Delhi, Ranthambhore's dry deciduous forest offers great sight lines across the 155-square-mile park. The Ranthambhore Bagh Resort, near the town of Sawai Madhopur, sits five miles from the park entrance and has a team of naturalists. The owner, Dicky Singh, helped start a volunteer-based antipoaching campaign and coordinates a local initiative called Kids for Tigers (doubles from \$60; ranthambhore.com).

BANDHAVGARH: Less touristed than Ranthambhore, Bandhavgarh National Park is located in the mountains of central India. Skay's Camp owners Satyendra Tiwari and his wife, Kay, have been operating near the park for more than a decade. They know its cats intimately and maintain a remarkable family tree of 70 tigers (doubles from \$30; kaysat.com). And in 2006, Taj Hotels teamed up with &Beyond (formerly CC Africa) to construct a lodge-to-lodge circuit in Bandhavgarh and four neighboring parks (doubles from \$379; andbeyond.com). —KEITH RUTOWSKI

hunting skills and often resorting to banditry. Today most live a marginal existence along the edges of forests, where they're lucky to get work guarding the crops of nearby villages against wild animals. Ultimately, poaching remains their best chance for survival.

By the spring, however, Khandal had scrounged up funds from two unlikely sources. A local health and rural development NGO gave him some money and a jeep. He also received funding from a Delhi schoolteacher who was so outraged by India's tiger crisis that her class raised several hundred dollars selling crafts and cookies.

Armed, then, with little more than middle school bake sale money, Khandal dressed himself in full camo, stuck a fake pistol in his pants, and went looking for the only Moghiya he knew, Rajmal. The infamous poacher was now in jail not only for sambar poaching but also for an unrelated murder. Khandal swaggered into the jailhouse posing not as who he was—a woefully underpaid scientist—but as "a big man from Delhi," a man serious about throttling poachers. He got in Rajmal's face. "When you get out of jail we will follow you," Khandal said. "We will kill you. We're not playing." Khandal needed an inside source, and he demanded that Rajmal hand over his son Ram Singh, who was also an active poacher. Terrified, Rajmal relented. Khandal hauled the young poacher home, and for two months he peppered him with questions. Ram Singh explained everything he knew about the Moghiya community. Everything but poaching. Finally, Khandal decided to throw Ram Singh a little party.

Khandal invited a bunch of friends over, but before they arrived, he secretly cut a small hole in a curtain and placed a video camera behind it. When the time was right, he sat down with Ram Singh near the curtain, opened a beer, and handed the poacher a fifth of whisky. They drank. They chatted. They drank some more. After two hours Khandal, a teetotaler, still had half a beer. Ram Singh's bottle was empty, and he was now on the floor vomiting blood. The young man had hepatitis B, apparently, which doesn't go well with Scotch. Khandal rushed him to the hospital, and fortunately, Ram Singh survived.

Khandal quickly pounced.

"You really talk when you're drunk," he said. "You talked about your family killing tigers. It's all on video." He showed Ram Singh the curtain and the camera. He threatened to show the video to the Moghiyas.

"If you do that they'll kill me," Ram Singh said.

"I know," Khandal replied.

Ram Singh cratered. He proceeded to tell Khandal everything about poaching in Ranthambhore.

There were five gangs working (Continued on page 81)

CAT FIGHT

(Continued from page 68)

specific areas of the park, each with up to a dozen members. These gangs were intricately connected to each other through blood and marriage. All told, the gangs killed more than 20 tigers, using a variety of methods. Some shot them from trees. Others captured tigers with leg traps and then executed them. The gangs sold the skin and bones to several traders, who had the skins tanned in the neighboring state of Madhya Pradesh, a major hub for India's illegal wildlife trade. From there, two bigger traders transported the goods to Delhi.

That's all Ram Singh knew. He didn't know that from Delhi a Tibetan kingpin named Neema Kampa was moving the tiger parts east and over the border into Nepal and Tibet. An even more notorious player, Sansar Chand, had been doing the same with the tigers from Sariska. Both men were part of a multibillion-dollar wildlife trade that trails only drug and arms smuggling as a global criminal activity. (A 2008 report by the U.S. House Committee on Natural Resources revealed that crime syndicates are often involved in all three dealings; the report also cited evidence linking terrorist activity to the illegal

animal trade.) An investigation by Belinda Wright of the Wildlife Protection Society of India would later prove that many of the country's tigers ended up in Lhasa, Tibet, where Khampa Tibetan Buddhists buy scores of skins each year to decorate

OVER TWO WEEKS, KHANDAL AND THE COPS CONDUCTED THREE RAIDS THAT WOULD BREAK THE BACK OF THE POACHING NETWORK.

their traditional costumes. Beyond Tibet, China's expanding affluent classes are buying tiger skins as status symbols, while the bones end up in the booming traditional medicine market. A tiger skin sold in China can fetch \$50,000, almost 50 times the amount paid to poachers.

Khandal created flowcharts and Venn

diagrams. He cross-referenced and triple-checked everything, and once he'd sucked Ram Singh dry regarding every poacher and trader connected to Ranthambhore, he met with Alok Vashisth, the police superintendent in a district just south of Ranthambhore. "Dharm did such a thorough job," says Vashisth. "It's amazing because he received no help or acknowledgment from the forest service whatsoever."

Over a two-week period in the fall of 2005, Khandal and Vashisth, working with up to 17 cops and volunteers at a time, conducted three raids that would break the back of the Ranthambhore poaching network. On October 28 they descended on the home of their first bust, sidestepping a pack of ferocious dogs to arrest a man who had killed one tiger and trafficked in the skins of many more. On October 30 they nabbed a gang leader who had killed four tigers. That man's entire extended family was in town for the funeral of his mother, and they chased Khandal and company with sticks and axes. Finally, on November 15, they hauled away another gang leader, who admitted to killing five tigers. These three arrests yielded intelligence

that led to 27 more, including the bust of the kingpin, Neema Kampa, in Delhi on February 5, 2006.

Just as important, one of the gang leaders explained to police how easy it was to dodge Ranthambhore's 273 park guards. "Forest guards don't move at night," he said, adding that occasionally "we came across them, but they never intercepted us." He said that he often killed tigers not far from guard posts with his loud, muzzle-loading rifle, but no rangers ever came inquiring. These confessions showed up in a front-page story in the *Indian Express*, resulting in the immediate removal of Ranthambhore's top officials. The forest service could no longer deny the poaching meltdown in India's premier tiger sanctuary. "They weren't ready to face the embarrassment," Vashisth says, explaining the behavior of park officials. "If your job is to protect the forest and you can't do it, you don't want someone else to succeed."

ONE SUNNY AFTERNOON Khandal takes me sightseeing around the perimeter of Ranthambhore. Along the western boundary we watch women in brightly colored saris parade out of the

park through a hole in the stone wall with freshly cut branches balanced atop their heads. "They have no trees, no wood for fuel," Khandal says, noting the crops planted right up to the park boundary. "So they get it from the park." We pass other

RANTHAMBHORE NATIONAL PARK HAS BECOME AN ISLAND IN A HEAVING SEA OF STRIKINGLY IMPOVERISHED HUMANITY.

holes in the wall where shepherds amble in and out with herds of goats. Along the northeastern boundary, Khandal points out an area where once rugged, 50-foot ravines—natural havens for tigers and hyenas—have recently been leveled off and planted with crops.

There was a time when the wildlife

sanctuaries that border the park on three sides helped buffer it from the 100,000 villagers who surround Ranthambhore. But calling any of these a "wildlife sanctuary" today is a joke. Ranthambhore National Park has become an island in a heaving sea of strikingly impoverished humanity.

Unfortunately for India's tigers, the government seems conflicted about how to manage the country's forests. On the one hand, it passed a law in 2006 granting millions of Indians living in them legal rights to their land for the first time. That law triggered a nationwide landgrab, with thousands of people flooding into the forests, pressuring wildlife like never before. On the other hand, at about the same time, the government passed a law stipulating that all national parks and tiger reserves be made absolutely safe for tigers. The plan calls for beefing up security at existing tiger reserves, creating new ones, and relocating the 400-plus villages currently situated inside the reserves.

The question now is, can the same folks who let the poaching crisis occur, the Indian Forest Service, successfully implement this new policy and save India's tiger population?

I travel to Sariska and talk to the new deputy conservator of forests, Sunayan Sharma. "The working conditions in the forest are tough," he admits. "There's no doctor. No one can keep his family here. There's not enough petrol. To do the job, the frontline staff needs to be young." The average age of the forest service's 3,500 officers and 150,000 staff nationwide is 50. There's been almost no fresh recruitment in the past 20 years. As for making Sariska inviolate for tigers, Sharma has so far relocated just one of 14 villages. "It's a process," he says. "You're moving people, not luggage."

It's possible that if India had a federal agency to deal with wildlife—like the Fish and Wildlife Service in the U.S.—it could more effectively make and implement coordinated decisions about tigers. But it doesn't. "Seventeen state governments decide what to do with tigers," says Valmik Thapar, the author of 14 books on tigers. "There's no coordination. We have a mess on our hands, the scale of which is indescribable."

Rajesh Gopal, the head of India's National Tiger Conservation Authority, says that Indian states have agreed to work with the federal government. But that remains to be seen. Federal and state officials can't even agree on how to judge Khandal's contribution to tiger conservation in India. "Khandal has done a wonderful job with the Moghiya children," Gopal says. "He has also helped in busting poaching gangs. Such contributions from committed people are needed at this critical juncture." But when I ask Ramesh Mehrotra, chief wildlife warden for the state of Rajasthan, about Khandal, he dismisses him completely, saying this: "We have confidential information that Khandal is smuggling snakes out of the park and selling them in Bombay." He offers no proof of these allegations.

While wildlife officials continue to bicker, the tigers themselves face an increasingly bleak future. "India has 1.2 billion people," says Thapar. "The tiger population will settle down to between 500 and 700 tigers in six landscapes, if we're successful. We need to seal off those landscapes. We need a federal force of a thousand armed men. Coexistence between tigers and people is over."

WHEN KHANDAL WANTS

to relax, or rather, try to relax, he takes his friends to a little restaurant on the Banas

River near Ranthambhore's northern boundary. Really, it's just a lean-to made of sticks with a small courtyard, standing all by itself in the middle of nowhere on the sandy floodplain. We're sitting in plastic chairs in the sand, watching a crocodile swim by as the sun, red and glowing, sinks behind the scrub-covered ridge just over the river. Three cooks are preparing a treat for us, the classic Rajasthani dish, *dal batti churma*, over an open fire.

It would be a perfect scene except that Khandal has brought along one of his Moghiya informants, and the guy won't stop complaining about money. He's a former gang leader and the killer of four tigers, but he's a decent informant, so Khandal keeps him around, paying him bit by bit. The informant's brother and son have also poached in the past, and Khandal could nail them at any time. But he pays them, too, for information. Khandal has busted 44 poachers since his first raid in 2005, and he's got sources spread across two states. He's learned that some people you bust and some you don't. Some are worth paying and some, not so much. The calculus can be dizzying.

"Sometimes I feel like a small businessman," Khandal tells me. "Always trying to figure out how to make the most of the money I have."

He doesn't have much. Khandal's main funders continue to be the students of the Shri Ram School in Delhi, who have raised more than \$20,000. That's a lot of refrigerator art and paper lanterns. The kids have also provided enough books to make libraries in six Moghiya villages, and they've wired another with 115 solar lights.

But the informant is still whining. Khandal sighs and looks at me.

"This is ridiculous," he says. "Talking to this man, talking to all these poachers, trying to keep these informers straight. What am I doing?"

He's scheduled to deliver a snake and spider lecture at the University of Rajasthan soon. He'd much rather be preparing for that than hanging out with ex-poachers. He tells me about one spider that kills its prey with ultraviolet light. He's fascinated by this. "The spider is a predator with many skills," he says. "They catch prey many different ways." He thinks about this, then adds, "I learn a lot from spiders." ▲

Additional reporting by Jay Mazoomdaar