



The Wildlife Watch Binocular

PO Box 532, New Paltz, NY 12561

Fall/Winter 2021-2022

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The Wildlife Watch Binocular is happy to launch its new column. My View starts with Sherry Reisch's article below.

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NEW YORK'S ATTITUDE TOWARD ANIMALS HAS COME A LONG WAY, BUT...

By Sherry Reisch

Those of us New Yorkers who love animals know that our state is not doing all that it can to care for our domestic and wild neighbors. The **Animal Legal Defense Fund** ranks states as to how they treat their resident animals. New York came in as number 32 (out of 50) which is considered the middle tier. As an animal advocate who attends demonstrations and does political work, this was disappointing but not surprising.

I recently picked up the book, "A Traitor to His Species," by Ernest Freeberg. It is the story of **Henry Bergh** and the birth of the animal rights movement. Henry Bergh lived in the mid-1800s to the early 1900s. **He was a champion for horses in a time when there was no outcry over their poor treatment.** At this time, horses were utilized everywhere on the streets of New York City. They were viewed as solely having a utilitarian purpose, as they were the primary mode of trans-

Continued on Page 4



An Inspiration: GRASSROOT CONSERVATIONIST CHANGED CAREER TO STOP THE HORRIFIC SNARE TRAP OF WILDLIFE

Bindu Gopal Rao

The anti-poaching work that Mat Suraj does in Chhattisgarh, India is changing the region's mentality surrounding snare traps. Chhattisgarh is an area where wildlife is greatly threatened.

Mat Suraj, (also known as M. Suraj), has had a life journey that has been equal parts unexpected, ecological, and humane.

M. Suraj's knowledge of wildlife was once largely restricted to information he learned from National Geographic and Discover television shows. In 2012, his knowledge began to expand far beyond those sources.

"My friend Snehshil Anand invited me to his home on the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra border, which adjoins the Pench Tiger Reserve.

This was the first time I learned what a forest looks, feels, and sounds like. This journey brought a new light into my life, and I decided that every year, I would visit a waterfall or at least a protected area."

His studies expanded past his college graduation. He found himself busy studying and preparing for competitive exams, which, if passed, would have landed him a coveted government job. He actively searched for

jobs in which he could work in forests or other protected areas. He said, "I chose Guwahati as the center for my Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering just so I could visit Kaziranga National Park, and I worked as a preterm lecturer in an engineering college to save money for pursuing my M.Tech." In 2013, however, his life took another turn.

"It was a Sunday. I saw a man on the street striking a huge rat snake with bamboo. This was a common practice in our region at the time. I went to him and pushed him away. I held the rat snake in my hand, but it was already dead. I grieved and cried. I had never felt like that before in my life.

That's when I decided to initiate a wildlife rescue operation and helpline in my city. The helpline became very pop-ular, and we received a lot of calls."

As successful as his wildlife work became, M. Suraj still needed to support himself financially. For this reason, he continued his engineering trajectory and only did rescue work part time. While doing his part time rescue work, M. Suraj said, "I came across local NGOs, (non-governmental organizations) like Nova

Continued on Page 2

Nature Welfare Society, Chhattisgarh Wildlife Society, and national NGOs like Wildlife Trust of India, otherwise known as WTI. **They helped me with conducting wildlife conservation related activities. They also helped me to understand the wildlife issues which affected the state."**

In 2016, **Alok Tiwari**, a forest department officer of the Indian Forest Service, asked M. Suraj if he wanted to spend the next six months conducting a tiger-monitoring program. After much thought, Suraj resigned from the college, packed his bag and headed straight to Boramdeo Wildlife Sanctuary in Chhattisgarh to start work.

"I was guided by some of the best mentors like Moiz Ahmed, (experienced wildlife conservationist in Chhattisgarh) and Krishnendu Basak (project manager at WTI), who taught me everything about tigers and how to monitor them."

After this stint, Suraj gained an opportunity to conduct the Phase IV Tiger Monitoring Program at Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve (USTR) from November 2016 until September 2017. While this was an exciting opportunity, he faced many obstacles. He said, **"This reserve suffers due to political unrest and the unwillingness of politicians to work towards conservation. If one wants to conserve wildlife, one needs to address both issues. There are 99 villages inside of this tiger reserve. That is a lot of biotic pressure on the land and yet the sparse wildlife that does live here is thriving."**

Wildlife was not populous in the area, but Suraj was able to observe whatever wildlife there was via hidden cameras. He said, "At that time there were only two tigers present in the region, a male and female. The cameras frequently captured the male tiger. My team and I were very fond of him."

After a devastating personal experience, Suraj soon found that the reason that the tiger population was so low on the reserve was due to tiger poaching. He explained "In 2018 we were working in the field when we heard that police confiscated the skin of a huge male tiger. We were worried and hoped that it was not the male tiger that we had been observing on our cameras. To our dismay, however, it was." The whole team was grief stricken and they worked hard over the next few months to collect evidence related to the poaching of this beloved tiger. This quest was unsuccessful as Suraj proclaimed "All of this work did not bring the tiger back and the culprits are still free and uncharged."

His cameras were useful in detecting other problems in the reserve. He captured several images of people with snares who had killed animals for their body parts. In an attempt to address this issue, he applied to Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) for the 'Rapid Action Projects' (RAP) program on a pilot basis, for a small region of the tiger reserve.

"I am grateful to WTI and David Shepherd Wildlife Foundation who provided financial support to the project. Within a span of six months, we had conducted a project with the state forest department and local communities to collect snares from the study area. We had identified some 300 locations where snares were usually deployed, and we confiscated numerous snares/traps that target species ranging from small hares to large ones like sambar and spotted deer."



Further action was needed to remedy the poaching problem. The villagers of this remote location needed to be educated on the topic of poaching. They were primarily poaching to earn money from selling wildlife or its parts to support their families. **"We needed to work in building opportunities like livelihood generation, research on various socio-economic aspects and sustainable agriculture to improve their living standards. I have been working on this for the last eight years, but I believe these efforts are just the tip of the iceberg and a lot is required to be done."**

Now, Suraj is an expert in doing anti-snare walks where he involves both local communities and forest front-line staff to search for snares placed by poachers in the suspected areas. This helps in getting rid of the snares and there is also an exchange of knowledge between locals and the forest department. He is obliged to **Pankaj Talwar**, DFO of Mahasamund Forest Division, Chattisgarh for his support from the forest department's side.

"In our past study, we had targeted three ranges of the Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve including Core 1 (North and South Udanti Ranges) and a buffer (Kulhadighat Range). Walks were conducted for two days per week, across 36 beats of the target area during four months of study session. Several snares, ranging from small hare traps to larger clutch wire snares were confiscated.

We have also found mouth bombs - a type of bomb that explodes when an animal bites into it, killing the

Continued on Page 3

animal. About 300 locations were identified where people used to deploy snares for hunting and the team assisted the forest department in confiscation of those snares.”

Many poachers are very skilled at the activity and adamant about continuing it because it financially supports themselves and their families. They look for regions where the chances of capturing wildlife are higher. “Our team too tries to target wildlife-rich areas. We also enlist locals who have previously been involved in poaching, and so get access to their deep knowledge about locations/sites used by poachers for deploying snares. We also try to make this a part of day-to-day patrolling activities in which the forest staff walks about 3 to 6 miles searching for both animal signs and snares and dismantling or destroying the snares they find.”

Obtaining funding is a great challenge for wildlife conservations. Knowing this, Suraj applied to “The Habitat Trust’s Grants Programme. He found great success when his project was selected for the Conservation Hero Grant in 2020. Rushikesh Chavan, who heads The Habitats Trust said, “we selected M. Suraj through a rigorous five-stage process that considered the expected impact, relevance and scalability of his project; his capacity to deliver and finally the long-term sustainability of his proposed work past the one-year grant period. Suraj is working on anti-poaching initiatives in various parts of Chhattisgarh where wildlife is greatly threatened. He has a deep connection with the communities living alongside wildlife, who are among the most im-



Indian Tiger, Photo Credit: Hans Veth www.unsplash.com

portant stakeholders for long-term conservation action. “The grant (roughly about \$13,675) will be utilized for implementation of the project over the Barnawapara Wildlife Sanctuary Udanti Sitanadi Tiger Reserve landscape. “The project is in its initial phase and we should be able to share outcomes soon,” says Suraj.

Looking ahead, Suraj plans to conduct systematic scientific studies on a few rare and endangered species that are found in the tiger reserve but are low in numbers. These species include the mouse deer, the rusty spotted cat, and the Asian small clawed otter. If necessary, captive breeding programs for these species may also be considered. “Simultaneously, I plan to develop livelihood alternatives that may benefit local communities and help reduce their poaching activities. All this work needs a lot of financial support and a dedicated team. Currently, I have a good team and I am trying to secure financial support. I am continuing whatever I can do, with a hope that we will get to continue this work and scale it up.” Certainly, this effort deserves much help.

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Bindu Gopal Rao is a freelance writer and photographer based in Bengaluru. She has a special interest in the environment. She enjoys birdwatching and looking for local and unusual stories in any destination. You can follow her on Instagram [@bindugopralao](https://www.instagram.com/bindugopralao) and view her work on www.bindugopalrao.com.



WILDLIFE WATCH 877WILDHELP

Wildlife Watch needs your help more than ever to continue providing our vital wildlife hotline service to the public. We receive calls from across the country, and occasionally from Canada, from people needing help with injured and orphaned wildlife.

Our easy to remember number 877WILDHELP is recommended by veterinary offices, SPCAs, and law enforcement agencies.

Additionally, we publish the Wildlife Watch Binocular to inform the public about environmental impacts on wild animals, to highlight people who help them, to promote wildlife watching, and to engender understanding that all animals are individuals deserving of compassionate treatment.

Wildlife Watch maintains current lists of wildlife rehabilitators around the country. Our hotline helps us to help hundreds of people and animals annually.

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