

Securing the future of Tigers in Bhutan-Manas Complex: An Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme in Bhutan

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Tigers, like elsewhere have always been a priority for conservation in Bhutan. In a time when human induced changes are significantly threatening the persistence of tigers especially in the developing countries through poaching, prey depletion and habitat fragmentation; the most pragmatic way seen, to stop it is to bring people into the conservation programmes. As such, the Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme (ITHCP) provides a perfect start to integrating this idea into conservation management strategies. The Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme was established in 2014, financed by the German Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development. The programme is for a duration of 5 years and is worth 20 million Euros. It is administered by the German Development Bank (KfW) and implemented by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). The programme is in line with the objectives of the Global Tiger Recovery Programme. Up to now, 8 projects have been committed under the ITHCP (Ohls 2016) and their implementation is underway. These projects involve the management and restoration of tiger habitats and their prey, confronting human-tiger conflicts, intensifying anti-poaching efforts and roping in the support of local communities in tiger conservation. A major portion of the project fund goes towards infrastructural investments and then, towards uplifting sustainable livelihood of the people. The ongoing projects are located within Tiger Conservation Landscapes: India, Bhutan; Myanmar and Indonesia (Fig 1).

Under the programme, Bhutan received a grant amount worth of 700,000 Euros in the winter of 2015 for a period of three years. The project is titled "Securing the Future of Tigers in Bhutan-Manas Complex" and will be implemented in Royal Manas National Park (RMNP). The project is led by the Gross National Happiness Commission through the Department of Forest and Park Services (DoFPS), Ministry of Agriculture and Forests, Royal Government of Bhutan. Ugyen Wangchuck Institute for Conservation and Environment(UWICE) under DoFPS facilitates the implementation of the project activities in a strong collaboration with Royal Manas National Park; geog (village block) administration of Pangkhar, Trong, Jigmecholing, Ngala, Norbugang, Tarithang and Umling; Wildlife Conservation Division(WCD); Forest Protection and Surveillance Unit, Bhutan Foundation and Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) Bhutan.



Fig 1. Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Portfolio (Picture courtesy: ITHCP, IUCN 2016)

The main objective of this programme in Bhutan is to ensure that the tigers in Bhutan's Royal Manas National Park persist into the future and serve as a source population for tigers within the Indo-Himalayan region. Through the implementation of the activities, the project will provide timely intervention in terms of reducing poaching of tigers and their prey, increasing the population of tiger and strengthening the prey base through habitat restoration and improvement, trans-boundary regional co-operation, reducing the dependence of communities on the natural resources and also in terms of reducing human-wildlife conflict.

Infrastructural investments include constructing watch towers and forest outposts, anti-poaching aid field gears, eco-tourism infrastructures, equipment for tiger and prey monitoring, grassland management and restoration etc. In terms of uplifting the livelihood of communities, investments include low voltage electric fencing, providing improved breeds of cattle to farmers, supplying improved variety of feed and fodder, provide CGI roofing to reduce resource extraction for roofing materials, institution of insurance schemes to compensate for crop and livestock loss and providing small scale bio-digesters to the farmers. Investments will also be made to create awareness among the communities and the conservation fraternity in Bhutan and abroad. It will also provide support to the forest protection and surveillance unit under the Department of Forest and Park Services. The first phase of the project is already complete and currently, few of the activities

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under phase 2 are under planning and few in implementation.

Wild tigers (*Panthera tigris*) receive a unique place in the nature and culture of Bhutan. Conservation of the tiger is of great relevance to Bhutan's religious and cultural heritage and the animal is highly revered (NCD 2005). Bhutan is in an ideal and exceptional position concerning tiger protection thought about to other tiger range nations, and can play a key part in this at local and universal levels and in this light, the project "Securing the future of tigers in Bhutan-Manas Complex" under the ITCHP is timely and substantial. It is strongly felt that including communities in conservation work is fundamental to fit concurrence amongst tigers and individuals and this project focuses on conservation and livelihood based investment in Royal Manas National Park. While focussing on the keystone species is important, in Bhutan, we also have a strong belief that the communities too are an indispensable part of nature and conservation in particular. ITHCP funding is substantial and different in a way that it focuses on communities and takes them for a very important component of conservation and so the project has

been planned in such a way that people are made partners to conservation. It will ensure that while tigers are conserved, the livelihood of people living there will not be undermined. The project thus, is in line with the guiding principles of Gross National Happiness (GNH). GNH as a sustainable and just approach to conservation and development, it will guide to balance the needs of humans and tigers in a way that it does justice to both.

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