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Live baiting: Why ‘misplaced kindness’ is becoming a problem for tigers in India

While feeding wild tigers goes against the basic tenets of conservation, it has become common practice in certain popular reserves, as a wider culture of quick intervention spreads across the country. This, experts say, carries dangerous consequences.

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The Anantpura male (T2) with a buffalo bait in 2010. This tiger died of old age in 2011. (Photo courtesy: Aditya Singh)

Kankati, a **23-month-old tigress, has killed two people in less than one month** in Ranthambore, Rajasthan.

Since her birth, Kankati and her two siblings have been habituated to live bait offered to their ailing mother, Arrowhead.

The tigers have often been seen hanging around the pen where buffalo calves are kept, and stalking bait delivery staff and their vehicles.

This loss of inhibition for people, experts fear, has made Kankati — and potentially even her siblings — dangerous for the forest staff and the visitors to Ranthambore.

What is live baiting?

Live baiting is an umbrella term for offering a prey animal to a predator.

British hunters preferred live bait (buffalo or goat) to lure tigers, and shoot from the safety of their perched hiding spots. And as tiger tourism began gaining currency in post-Independence India, forest officer Kailash Sankhala — who in 1973 became the first director of Project Tiger — noted that "live bait is put out every Friday evening" in Sariska so that "visitors can see and photograph tiger at a kill." (Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society, 1964).

While hunting tigers was banned in the early 1970s, live baiting tigers for tourists continued until Prime Minister Indira Gandhi put a stop to the practice at a meeting of the Indian Board of Wildlife in 1982. However, in conflict situations, live baiting with goats or dogs is still a common practice to trap big cats, particularly leopards.

In the present context, live baiting means offering a live animal, usually a buffalo calf, every week or ten days to feed an injured or old tiger that cannot hunt wild prey.

An ill-advised practice

Live baiting to lure tigers for easy sighting is prohibited. However, for dealing with old or injured tigers in the wild, it is "not advisable" — not banned — under the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

All wild tiger populations, the NTCA SOP says, “need to be managed with minimum human intervention”, and artificially feeding wild tigers to ensure their “longevity goes against the basic tenets” of wildlife conservation.

The SOP underlines that the “natural process is facilitated by the ‘survival of the fittest’, through natural elimination of the aged/weaker individuals from a population” and “it is not advisable to intervene in this natural process through artificial feeding”.

This, the SOP states, “may also lead to habituation of wild tigers which may lead to human-wildlife interface problems like livestock or human depredation.”

As veteran conservationist Valmik Thapa puts it: “Wild tigers can be fed only as an emergency measure. If a tigress with cubs gets an injury and is unable to hunt, baiting can be tried to improve her condition but only once in two weeks and for not more than three months. You can not prolong this as tigers get familiar and fearless with humans”.

‘Misplaced kindness’

In nature, the weak and the injured must perish so that the fittest can flourish. It is perfectly normal for a tiger to die of starvation or at the hands of an adversary. This fundamental principle, say experts, is increasingly lost on many who “espouse the tiger’s cause on social media”.

Dr Rajesh Gopal, who served at the helm of both Project Tiger and NTCA, recalls “a surge of misplaced kindness” for wild tigers among an “influential segment of opinion makers” in the years after the Sariska debacle in 2005, when the wipeout of the tiger reserve’s local population rallied support for the national animal.

In 2008, the public outcry following the death of Ranthambhore’s Guda tigress of suspected poisoning made the forest department regularly offer bait to her two 16-month-old cubs.

Raised on buffalo calves, they did not get to hone their wild survival skills. Since females seldom face deadly challenges from other females, the sister (T37) stood a better chance at surviving. But the brother (T36) was killed by a younger male in 2010 in an unequal battle between a raised tiger and a wild one.

Another brother-sister duo, orphaned when Ranthambhore's Berdha tigress died in April 2009, was also regularly served live bait. In July 2010, Simba, the three-year-old brother, hurt himself attempting to hunt a porcupine and subsequently died of quill injuries.

Once orphaned, T36 and Simba would have died of starvation. Or necessity would have made wild tigers of them. But their fate was sealed the day they became "raised" tigers in the wild.

In 2010, this regime stretched to geriatric care — Machhli, the iconic matriarch of Ranthambhore, and her former partner T2, the ancient Anantpura male, were both offered life support. The male was soon too weak to kill even a tethered calf and died in 2011. But Machhli survived on live bait, and the occasional kill, for seven long years until 2016.

Not just feeding

While instances of live baiting are limited to certain popular reserves like Ranthambhore and Tadoba, where repeated sightings of particular tigers make tourists deeply bond with the individual animals, a wider culture of quick intervention and care has struck roots across the country.

"Every scratch and limp visible to tourists' eyes now triggers a demand for some medical response, leading to frequent tranquilisation of tigers. One bad summer calls for additional water holes. Artificial augmentation of food by shifting prey species by truckloads is not rare anymore," says Dr Dhamendra Khandal of TigerWatch, a Ranthambhore-based NGO.

Be it Corbett in Uttarakhand, Bandipur in Karnataka, Kanha in Madhya Pradesh or Pench in Maharashtra, the new normal is to medically attend to tigers, often well past their prime, and injured in territorial fights. Others, such as Ranthambhore's tigress

Arrowhead or a male tiger in Pilibhit (Uttar Pradesh), are getting specialised treatments for deformities that require multiple interventions over time.

The net outcome, experts say, is bound to be negative. Beyond dangers posed to individual tigers by multiple sedation or habituation to bait, such interventions lead to artificial boosts in pocket populations, worsening conflict among tigers, and between tigers and people.

A wild tiger, cautions Dr Gopal, does not need pet care. “All it requires us to do is to protect its home — the natural forest habitat with its natural prey base — and leave it alone.”

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