

SPECIAL FEATURE

# TO TADOBA WITH LOVE

**#NeverStopDiscovering**—that attitude alone has led wildlife champions Poonam and Harshwardhan Dhanwatey on a lifelong journey to protect the forests where the tiger makes its home. From the safety of a Land Rover Discovery Sport we get the insider's tour. By **Prasad Ramamurthy**. Photographs by **Arjun Menon**



Poonam and Harshwardhan Dhanwatey in a Land Rover Discovery Sport, at their private conservancy near the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve



Poonam and Harshwardhan Dhanwatey, founders of the NGO Tiger Research and Conservation Trust (TRACT). Clockwise from above: TRACT staffers looking at photos of animals spotted at Tigress@Ghosri; a tiger inside the reserve; prayers being offered to a tiger idol; the TRACT team with local volunteers



An earthen lamp sits to one side of a small tiger statue erected by the road. A bunch of incense sticks circumambulate the idol. The hands holding them belong to a dhoti-clad man who appears to be praying fervently. Another gent showers the idol with what seems to be vermilion. If you are looking for a sign to tell you you're in tiger territory, well, here it is. "When someone is killed by a tiger their family erects a statue," explains Harshwardhan Dhanwatey, co-founder of the NGO, Tiger Research and Conservation Trust (TRACT), as he pilots the Land Rover Discovery Sport past this scene. He's taking us on a drive around the conservancy he and his wife afforested nearly two decades ago. We are on the far fringes, just outside the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, 130km from Nagpur, in Maharashtra. "Every year they come and pray to the idol," he says, switching from the Discovery Sport's General Driving mode to the Grass, Gravel, Snow option, as the vehicle goes off-road. "They tie a string around the statue's neck. The belief is that as long as the thread stays on, the tiger will spare the other residents

of the dead person's village." There are dozens of villages within the buffer zone that surrounds the reserve and predators, ever so often, do lift livestock from these villages. People, too, have lost lives. And so, such belief is only to be expected considering the close proximity between tigers and humans in a region that's come to be known as the 'Real Land Of The Tiger'. The reserve is said to house more than 80 striped cats and Harshwardhan and his wife Poonam, a member of the Maharashtra State Wildlife Board, are possibly the best guides to show us where the tigers lurk.

The Dhanwateys have been studying the tigers of Tadoba since 2001. In fact, they were the first to scientifically map the area using camera traps and GPS. The data obtained has helped create pioneering models of sustainable conservation and eco-tourism where both locals and the tiger benefit from each other. One of their earliest initiatives was to recruit villagers as wildlife ambassadors. "We realised that people would accept life lessons only if it came from those who face the same situations as they do," explains Poonam. Her team

at TRACT, also drawn from the local area, teaches locals how to live with predators – the dos and don'ts of venturing into the forest; how to deal with a wild cat if it enters a village; what to do in the event of a forest fire; how to report any suspicious activity. "For tigers to thrive, people have to be safe. If people are safe the tigers will be safe," adds Harshwardhan. "But we felt, to convince them of this they had to have a major stake in conservation. They had to feel that the tiger belongs to them and not the forest department." This led to a state-run program, conceived by Poonam, which provides villagers with, among other things, electricity and cooking gas. This reduces their dependence on the forest. Another program, which has significantly contributed to conservation and the cause of tourism, trains villagers residing in Tadoba-Andhari's vast buffer zone—nearly twice the size of the reserve—to conduct safaris. The money from this activity is theirs to use as they see fit. Build toilets, light up streets and create better infrastructure for themselves. "This direct economic benefit is what gives them ownership of the forest and

the wild animals in it," says Poonam. The cumulative effect: better management and protection of the forest and its residents, specifically the tiger.

One morning we see the program in action at Agarzari, one of the buffer zones that's open to tourism. Devidas, a local who did odd jobs before becoming a forest guide, asks for our mobile phones to be handed to him. As the devices are placed in a metal box and tucked under his seat, he says it's a measure to ensure a tiger when sighted is not hounded by visitors. That no one including himself can call and tip off other guides to the tiger's whereabouts. If you've ventured into an Indian wildlife park before, you know this to be true. All too often phone calls among guides and drivers results in dozens of vehicles scrambling to the same spot, where tourists noisily jostle for that perfect photograph,

haranguing the animal till it disappears into the undergrowth. Later, when two sub-adult tigers make an appearance, a silent "thank you" seems in order. The honour/trust-based system appears to be working. There are just six pairs of eyes watching the siblings swagger down the road, rub their hides against the trunks of teaks, stretch and roll about in dry grass, weave their way in and out of bamboo thickets – all for a good thirty minutes. And no noise to disturb them or cell phones to distract us from the unadulterated joy of seeing these powerful beasts behave like kitty cat.

That fuzzy feeling lasts only for a short while. Out for a walk in the unmanicured grounds of Tigress@Ghosri, the Dhanwateys' six-room guest house, a guttural growl-like sound stops me in my tracks. The high grass ahead stands tense, as if scared stiff by whatever is

behind it. What looks like a bovine hoof sticks out. The stories of the tigers and leopards that frequent the property come to mind. Images of them, caught on camera, and seen on the living room TV flash past. The feet quickly backtrack to the relative safety of the house. The TRACT staffers who man the property and patrol the grounds herd the visitors inside. Later that night the home-style dinner (starring puffing-hot phulkas and a kheer my dreams are made of), is disrupted by the sharp call of barking deer, literally beyond the fence that runs around the swimming pool in the backyard. It is pitch dark. The tall teak trees that surround the property compound the sense of isolation. The deer are soon joined by the band of langurs that live on the property. All lights turned off, we wait. Our hearts are beating so loud the tiger or leopard outside can probably hear us. →





A room at Tigress@Ghosri; the Discovery Sport on the road to Ghodazari; a gaur inside the reserve



Quickly we head to the living room to check the live feed coming in from the watering hole nearby. When they bought the seven-acre parcel of rocky, barren land the Dhanwateys had created the little pool for monkeys and birds to get a drink from, especially in the scorching summers. The land was left to its own devices. The belief that if humans didn't intervene the forest would take over. And it did. Soon neelgai, deer, leopards and tigers began stopping by. "The caretaker called one day to say a nilgai had been found dead on the property and that a tigress had killed it," says Poonam. "We put camera traps and discovered the tigress, which had been coming here to drink out of the watering hole. She continued to come even after she had cubs. We felt this land was more hers than ours," adds Harshwardhan, revealing how the property got its name. Today one such visitor lurks within leaping distance, or so the herbivores tell us. The carnivore, though, refuses to reveal himself and silence slowly returns to the natural world.

The success of the Tadoba model of conservation has led to an increase in the park's tiger population. Sightings have been on the rise not just within the core or the buffer area, but also in parts adjoining the reserve, like around Tigress@Ghosri. "As the population increases, tigers have been dispersing from Tadoba looking for new homes for themselves," says Poonam. "And we moved as they moved, into newer forests. That's how we discovered Ghodazari." The 159sqkm sanctuary, 45km from Tadoba-Andhari, is Maharashtra's newest. It includes the rolling Saatbahini hills, full of trees endemic to the region—mahua, jamun, dhawada, char, bel and bakain – perennial waterfalls and the life-nurturing Ghodazari Lake. TRACT's research has shown that not only is Ghodazari an important corridor for the movement of animals from the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve to the forests further north—Umred-Karhandla, Nawegaon-Nagzira and Pench, but that Ghodazari itself is home to dozens of tigers and leopards. They exist here because their prey base—

chital, sambhar, neelgai, bison, wild boar —exists here, alongside, monkeys, foxes, wolves, hyenas and a plethora of winged creatures, both resident and migratory. All of this boosted Ghodazari's case, which the Dhanwatey's played a pivotal role in making. Nudging the Discovery Sport on a beaten path along a nullah, which separates the Ghodazari forest from fields, Harshwardhan tells us it was the locals who lobbied for the creation of the park, with the rider that the Tadoba eco-tourism model be implemented here. The residents of nearly 60 villages hope to benefit from Ghodazari's new status in the years to come, when the park is opened to visitors. "It's an absolute win-win situation," says Poonam, summing up the positive role played by tourism in tiger conservation. "As long as people feel ownership of the tiger and of the forest, they will protect it. That certainly is the case here, in this region. The future is bright." Almost on cue, her walkie-talkie crackles, "Madam, ek adult male ka sighting hua hai," says the voice at the other end. The future is bright indeed. 📍