

Conservation value of protected area (Melghat Tiger Reserve)

Melghat Tiger Reserve (MTR), the part of Satpuda Maikal ranges falls in Amaravati, Akola and Buldhana districts of Vidharbha in Maharashtra. It is one of the 9 Project Tiger declared initially in 1973 by Government of India and came into existence on 22nd Feb, 1974 as the first tiger reserve of Maharashtra. MTR is the store house of biodiversity and tribal culture. MTR is a typical representative of Central Indian Highland forming a part of the Bio-geographic zone '6 E-Deccan Peninsula'– Central Highlands. The reserve forms an important corridor between protected and forests areas of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra ensuring contiguity of forests in Satpuras. Melghat Tiger Reserve is predominately inhabited by *Korku* tribes. The *Korkus*, *Nihals* and *Gaolis* have their own tradition of indigenous ethno botanical knowledge. The gotras of *Korkus* are seen to have been named after trees e.g. Jamunkar, Semalkar etc. which goes to prove the integration of their culture with nature.

The reserve forms a very important catchment to Tapi and Purna river systems with important tributaries like Dolar, Khandu, Sipna, Gadga, Khapra and Wan river. The river Chandrabhaga which originates from Chikhaldara has its watershed in the reserve. The Gavilgarh fort and Vairat points in the Vicinity of Chikhaldara hill station have important historical significance. Crevices in valleys and forts offer good hiding spaces for wildlife. It harbours a viable population of Tiger (*Panthera tigris*) and of the endangered Gaur (*Bos gaurus*). All India Tiger Census, 2010 estimated the presence of about 32-35 tigers in the reserve and it has the potential of supporting 50 tigers based on today's prey base available as estimated by the method of Hayward et.al. The number may go up also depending on the availability prey base, refuge and water in future. It also harbours a number of other faunal species some of which figure in the IUCN Red Data List. These are Wild dogs (*Cuon alpinus*), Jackal, (*Vulpes bengalensis*), Sloth bear (*Melurus ursinus*), Leopard (*Panthera pardus*), Caracal (*Felis caracal*) and Ratel (*Mellivora capensis*) There are 37 species of mammals and several species of reptiles, butterflies and insects. The reserve is also very rich in avifauna with 265 species of birds including the recently rediscovered Forest Spotted Owlet (*Athene blewitii*). As many as 1451 species of Spider species, out of a total 39882 Spider from the world are reported in India and Melghat have 204 Spider species. Ecologically sensitive animals like Flying Squirrel is abundantly seen here which is an example of close canopied and dense forest of old growth. The embankments of Tapi, Khapra and some 'doh' in 'Koktu' valley are also reported to harbour crocodiles and otters.

The floral diversity of Melghat Tiger Reserve consists of 769 plant species belonging to about 400 genera representing 97 families. It includes 90 tree species, 66 shrub species, 316 herb species, 56 climbers, 23 sedges and 99 grass species. The flora shows a combination of floristic elements from Western Ghat and Satpura, with many endemic species. Some of the Himalayan plant species like *Preistylus constrictus* are also reported here. The rare plants include *Convolvulus flavus*, *Utricularia striatula*, *Drosera indica* and many species of orchids like *Vanda tessellata* and *Aerides maculosum*. The northern area receives good rains and has better vegetation growth in lower gentle slopes and valleys. The teak forests dominate the areas and *Bombax ceiba*, *Zizyphus*, *Stereospermum*, *Dalbergia sisso* and *Diospyros* remain associated

with *Tectona grandis* (Teak). The soil of trap origin rich in mineral supports the teak well in the area. The species of NTFP importance are also occurring in the areas and these are *Madhuca latifolia*, *Embllica officinalis*, *Terminalia belerica*, *Terminalia chebula*, *Eugenia cumini*, *Aegel marmelos* etc

The National Tiger Conservation Authority had requested the Government of Maharashtra to declare the "Critical Tiger Habitats" in the Tiger Reserves under section 38(V) of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 vide their letter dated 16th November 2007. Accordingly, Govt. of Maharashtra had notified the Critical Tiger Habitat vide notification no. WLP 10-07/CR-297/F-1, dated 27 December 2007. The declared "Critical Tiger Habitat" of 1500.49 sq. km. includes 1. Gugamal NP (361.28 sq. Km.), 2. Melghat WLS (788.75 sq. Km.), 3. Narnala WLS (12.35 sq. Km.), 4. Ambabarwa WLS (127.11 sq. Km.) and 5. Wan WLS (211.00 sq. Km.). Out of this, 1150.03 Sq.Km. (Gugamal and Melghat Sanctuary) belongs to the initially declared Melghat Tiger Reserve on 22nd February 1974. The buffer area of 1268.03 sq. Km. from adjoining territorial divisions of Akola, Buldhana, East and West Melghat was identified and declared by the State Government vide the notification no. WLP 10-10/CR-139/F-1, dated 29th September 2010.



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