

## 'Tigers Are Poached for Medical Needs of China'

In the book *Mammals of South Asia (Vol I)* co-authored with Nima Manjrekar, AJT Johnstungh documents the mammal species of the region and looks at the species that have become extinct. He tells Yogesh Vajpeyi that the invasion of a number of exotic species has threatened the survival and habitat of the ungulates in South Asia.

**When did you first conceive the the book on Mammals of South Asia?**

I started working on it about 15 years back. The absence of a book giving detailed information on most of the mammals of South Asian region prompted Dr Nima Manjrekar and me to work on the book. South Asia has seen lots of research on mammals during the last two to three decades and there was a need to put it all in the form of a book.

**Which of the 574 mammal species are extinct today?**

The list includes the names of

mammals that are extinct in South Asia, like the cheetah and Javan rhinoceros. The Sumatran rhino is extinct in India and Bangladesh where it was found earlier and its existence in Myanmar is precarious. The Great Indian rhino, which was once found in the Indus Valley in Pakistan, is extinct there and now found only in India and Nepal. This listing is done by my colleague P O Namer who is an authority on mammalian taxonomy. He is also the Head of Centre for Wildlife Studies, Kerala Agricultural University, Trichur.

**What are the major threats to our wildlife?**

Invasion of exotics (species which don't belong to the area, like *Lantana camara* which has come from South America) is a huge problem which reduces the carrying capacity of the wildlife habitat for ungulates. We are unable to address this problem successfully. The Kaziranga National Park is invaded by a thorny plant called *Mimosa invisa*, a native



of Brazil which reduces the habitat available to the thick-skinned rhino. The understorey in the sal forests of the Kanha Tiger Reserve is dominated by *Flemingia bracteata*, another inedible species. Lack of regeneration of species that are palatable to wild ungulates is also a huge problem. In addition to this, we have the growing and the persistent problem of poaching. Tigers are poached to feed the medicinal needs of China and recently the Vietnamese have started believing that rhino horn powder is a curative for cancer! Crucial corridors should be established without any delay. Sadly, there is no accountability in our country. An officer may work in an area for three years and without doing anything significantly during that period, he may move to another area. With immense regret I would cite the example of the corridor across Ganges between the two halves of Rajaji National Park in the Chilla-Motichur corridor. We have not established it during the last 30 years. The government should appoint the right officers in charge of our protected areas. Building of arch-

es, watch towers and check dams in protected areas should be banned. **What's the impact of climate change on mammals?**

Animal populations will suffer largely due to drought. We are seeing this happening in the Mudumalai-Bandipur-Nagarahole landscape where the rains have failed and elephants are dying. Death of smaller animals would go unrecorded. Forest fires will become a more serious problem. Climate change can affect the plants in the mountain habitats, which in turn affect species like musk deer and serow that are already being heavily poached. Invasives would spread more devastation. One thing we should do is to create thousands of garbage-free water bodies in the country, and planting and protecting tree species such as jamun, banyan, peepal and neem in millions to keep our countryside little cooler after some decades.

**What's your next project?**

I am compiling my articles on the Western Ghats as a book and updating my book on Jim Corbett's trail with more articles.