TRAVEL & I

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Chairman of Pugdundee Safaris and a local stakeholder of Panna who actively contributes to the Panna Tiger Reserve

Photos: Panna Tiger Reserve
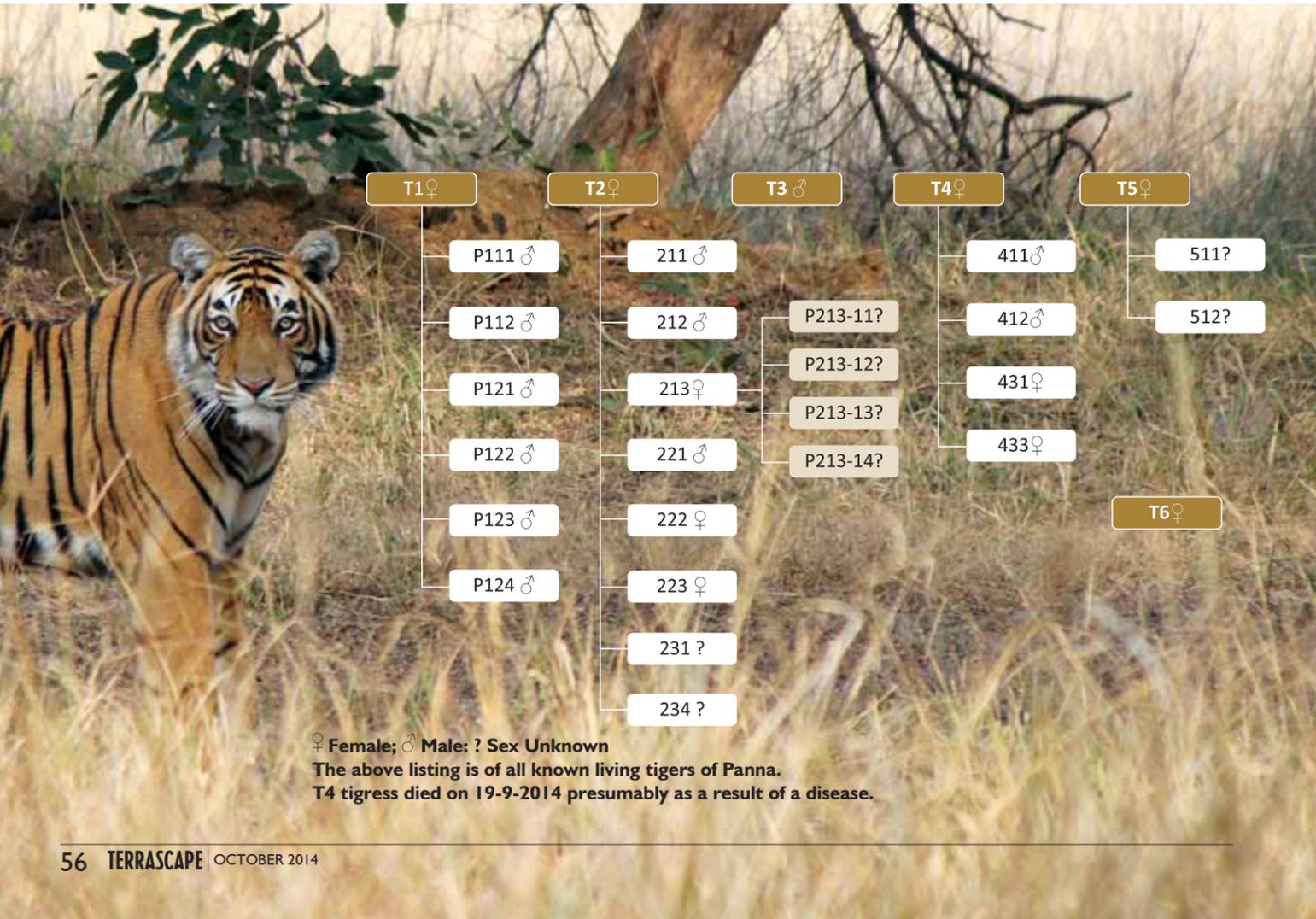
Translocation of tigers: the chapter on Panna

Without a team effort, our wildlife heritage will soon be lost to man's need for space and resources

The translocation of wild animals, or, reintroduction of wild animals, are wildlife management terms used for the process of moving animals from one area into another for various reasons. In the case of Panna Tiger Reserve, tigers were reintroduced into Panna from other tiger reserves of Madhya Pradesh when the original population of tigers in Panna died.

The tiger reintroduction programme in Panna started in 2008. Between 2008 and 2014, five females (T1, T2, T4, T5 and T6) and one male tiger (T3) were strategically introduced in a planned manner as founder animals. The reintroduced tigers were closely monitored by the tiger reserve management and allowed to naturally breed with an intention to repopulate the tiger reserve.

The programme became a success when the original goal of the programme–to increase the number of tigers in Panna–was realised. As of August 2014, over 20 tigers had been born in Panna as a result of the reintroduction. Table 1 lists the reintroduced tigers and their offspring born in Panna.

Translocations and reintroductions of wild animals is likely to be a tool that will be used more frequently in the future, especially in the Indian context. As a result of the expanding human population and the need for more space and resources, we are competing with wildlife. When competition intensifies, I notice that wildlife usually loses because of the ability of humans to dominate. However, for our benefit and for the benefit of

our future generations, we must take measures to safeguard our natural heritage and it is with this philosophical framework that reintroduction and translocations of wildlife with an intention to conserve, is undertaken.

Reintroduction and translocation is a very complicated task because the work is technical and demands a good understanding of the animal and its biology. A certain amount of risk of losing reintroduced animals exists in such programmes. Further, the work is very costly and time consuming and needs local community support. Also, politically the work is very sensitive because it raises the question, "Is investing in our wild animals so important when many Indians are poor?" So, success in a complex programme such as the Panna tiger reintroduction programme, is vital.

The reintroduction programme of tigers in Panna and its success showcases our (India's) capacity to undertake such complicated projects. In fact, the Panna tiger programme is the first successful programme in the world, one in which large cats like tigers were successfully re-established in an area where they had become extinct. The tiger reintroduction programme when it started had three tasks to fulfill–A) to manage the newly reintroduced tigers; B) to address the issues that caused the local tigers to go extinct so that it does not repeat; and, C) to get the support of the local community to undertake the costly, politically sensitive and time consuming project.

Task A and B were handled by the Madhya

The dispersing tiger **(above)**

The godman (Bhagirath) who rescued the tiger from the mob **(left)**

Family tree

T1♀	T2♀	T3♂	T4♀	T5♀
P111♂	211♂		411♂	511?
P112♂	212♂	P213-11?	412♂	512?
P121♂	213♀	P213-12?	431♀	
P122♂	221♂	P213-13?	433♀	
P123♂	222♀	P213-14?		
P124♂	223♀			T6♀
	231 ?			
	234 ?			

♀ Female; ♂ Male: ? Sex Unknown
The above listing is of all known living tigers of Panna.
T4 tigress died on 19-9-2014 presumably as a result of a disease.

Pradesh Forest Department, Wildlife Institute of India and external advisors to the project. To address component C, to which I contributed, members representing various community groups –also called stakeholders–had to be convinced of the usefulness of the project and their support for the programme had to be assured.

Support from unexpected areas

As the number of tigers increased in Panna, they started dispersing into the larger landscape adjoining Panna. Sometimes these unexpected movements of tigers, through human areas, create anxiety for the local communities. What if the tiger attacks people or if people decide to kill the tigers, either of these outcomes could create barriers for the tiger programme at Panna.

I will highlight a case when the local people became involved and supported a dispersing tiger.

In the winter of 2013, one large male tiger moved away from Panna. Such movements are normal in tigers and they usually disperse great distances to establish new territories and that way they add vigour to the tiger population in the region.

Having travelled 200 km in an east direction from Panna, crossing many villages and small forested patches, the tiger finally got into a situation where it could not travel further. It had reached a point from where there was only human habitation, fields and villages and towns. Confused, the tiger stopped in its tracks and rested near a villager's hut. The residents came to know of this and panicked and a situation arose. A large number of villagers, armed with sticks, encircled the tiger. It appeared, at that stage, that the tiger's

The tiger (circled in red) resting next to a villager's hut

The tiger was finally captured and translocated to a safe place

fate was in the hands of the frightened mob.

In that chaotic situation, almost as a messenger from God, a local *sadhu* (Bhagirath) who learnt of the story of the dispersing tiger intervened and with loud shouts and screams came in support of the tiger. He explained the religious importance of the tiger and the need to save it to the people. Surprisingly, the frightened mob listened to the *sadhu* and refrained from violence.

Instead of hurting the tiger, the villagers–under the instructions of the *sadhu*–helped the Panna Tiger Reserve monitoring team, that was following the tiger, to work and take necessary action. This opened a window of opportunity for Sreenivas Murthy, Director, Panna Tiger Reserve, and his team to translocate the tiger to safety.

Situations like the above, reassure me that tigers in India have hope, a future. We can come together and carry out complex projects. In order to succeed in wildlife reintroductions, we all need to work as a team and play our part and contribute. Sometimes it is difficult to know how and where to contribute, so as a first step learn from Forest Departments or experienced people where and how you can contribute. Only with unified efforts can we succeed in safeguarding our wildlife. ∎

The author had assistance from Shekhar Kolipaka, wildlife researcher, University of Leiden, Netherlands who provided details of tigers' tree and read through the draft.