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KNP has healthy tiger population, says survey

By Prabal Kr Das

GUWAHATI, Feb 15 – In the wake of tiger deaths in Kaziranga National Park, there is now a glimmer of hope. An initial survey under an ambitious project by the conservation group Aaranyak suggests that the park now possesses a healthy and stable population of tigers.

If the present survey, part of a bigger endeavour to document tigers, is to be believed, there is an average of around 16 tigers per 100 sq km in the protected area that is also a UNESCO world heritage site. The figure is the highest in the Northeast, and indicates good prospect of survival for the threatened species.

Field zoologist Firoz Ahmed of Aaranyak, who is carrying out the survey, told The Assam Tribune that the species appears to be thriving inside the park because of good protection and availability of prey.

The new effort based on camera trapping in 50 locations in the Kohora and Bagori ranges, has so far recorded more than 400 images. The advanced imaging equipment with infrared sensors have been able to shoot a range of animals, including the tiger. Set up at strategic locations, the cameras would eventually help create the biggest image bank of animals after sundown in Kaziranga.

Moreover, tigers have been spotted by personnel of the Forest department and others trained by Aaranyak as part of the ongoing project.

“Both camera traps and human observations suggest that the number of tigers, of different ages, has not come down compared to previous surveys,” remarked Ahmed, who revealed that by the end of April this year, an overall estimate could be made.

Ahmed and his team are encouraged by findings that the prey base for tigers is intact, and the quality of habitat has not deteriorated.

However, he was concerned that the source population in Kaziranga is now rather isolated with loss of corridors connecting them with other tiger habitats. If such corridors were available, the tigers would have faced a better future.

Asked if the tigers in Kaziranga could face difficulties due to inbreeding, the researcher said that there was scope for scientific studies in this regard. However, so far no such problem has been reported.

Park Director SN Buragohain said this survey would be a tool to arrive at an estimate of tigers at a time people are guessing about its population in Kaziranga. It would also lay the foundation of the final census that would take place later this year, he added.

The collaborative project between Aaranyak and the State Forest department would help build a new database on tigers and their habitat in Kaziranga. Spin-offs would include advanced training of biologists and personnel of the Forest department vis-a-vis tiger monitoring and management. The endeavour has been supported by the David Shepherd Foundation, Rufford Small Grants and Rufford Maurice Laing Foundation.

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