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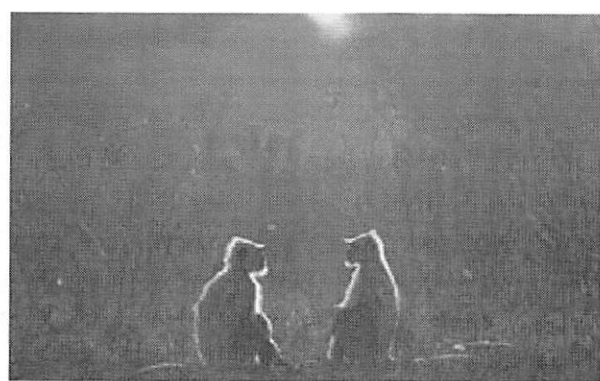
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Mumbai Leopards: Killers or Victims?

By Stephanie Sears

The Forest Department in Mumbai estimated the number of wild leopards in India to be 14000 in 2007. The 2001-02 census reported a total of 8203 leopards but since no count was available for twelve Indian states in that census we surmise that a full total could have approximated that given for 2007 and that the leopard population is therefore relatively stable. The number compares favourably with the less than 3000 tigers that are realistically believed to exist in India. However it may be wildly optimistic. In his natural environment the leopard is even more difficult to see than tiger and poaching statistics alone show that for every two tigers poached eight or nine leopards suffer the same fate.

Wonderfully handsome, the leopard is nonetheless smaller and therefore less spectacular than the tiger. Considered less at risk of extinction, the leopard is less sought out by nature tourists for whom a visit to Indian parks is considered incomplete if they haven't seen a tiger. As acrobatic and undetectable as a ninja, the leopard usually remains invisible to the common human eye, even when, at times, he boldly enters human settlements in search of easy prey such as domestic animals. Unfortunately, his adaptability seems increasingly to be of disservice to him and to label him both pest and a poacher's substitute for the disappearing tiger.



It is in one of the least likely places in India that those who long to see a leopard may have their best chance. Mumbai, the country's largest city, also has the largest nature park in the world, the 104 square kilometre Sarai National Park, better known as Borivli after a town on its western side. Providing an essential relief to the bad air, Borivli has also two lakes, Tulsi and Vihar, that Mumbai with fresh water. For centuries it has been the traditional territory of leopards and of the Warahi tribe 700 families continue to co-habit legally with some 30 leopards (April 2007 census).

At first the situation appears to be an idyllic and unparalleled environmental success to be emulated by other large cities suffocating in their own foul breath and pathological separation from nature. Alas, the impression is misleading and the park that once stood outside of the city has over the years become surrounded on three sides by the relentless urban sprawl and the ever-swelling population often originating from regions as distant as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to seek employment. The park's protective enclosures have been breached in places and shanty dwellers have penetrated and illegally settled on the park grounds. These breaches in walls have also allowed leopards to roam out of the park into the surrounding shanty quarters of Bhandup, Pada and Goregon. Amidst these flimsy constructions the leopards have found easy prey, mainly among the domestic animals attached to the settlements. Sometimes, unfortunately, leopards have come across children or sleeping adults and attacked them.

These accidents seem to have contributed to blurring the legal boundaries between 'inside' and 'outside' the park and to have justified the unlawful presence of the shanty dwellers settled inside. Between 2002 and 2007 18 people were injured and 36 killed inside Borivli, 23 injured and 21 killed outside. The majority of the victims were children from five to six years old (80 percent of all victims). Others were adults sleeping outside of their dwelling or with the door open. One exception to the shanty victims was a lawyer who had come into the park for an early session of yoga and was attacked while sitting on the ground.



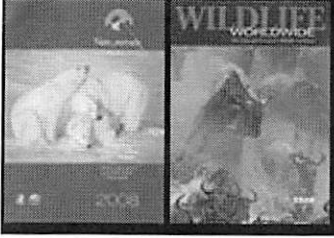
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The families of individuals killed are offered monetary compensation amounting to 2 Lakh (200,000 rupees) but this does not solve the on-going competition for space between wild animal and humans. According to Thane Forest Department Officer, Sarfraz Khan, leopards are drawn outside of the park mainly because of the numerous stray dogs in the area - a nuisance to people and a favourite treat for leopards - and also because of the exposure of human corpses awaiting burial.

Between 2002 and 2007 seven leopards were caught inside the park, sixty one outside, and five or six were killed. thirty leopards left in Borivli in 2007, ten had been sentenced as man-eaters to an incarceration of an undetermined duration with the vague prospect of being released into another park at some later date. When visited by the write group of officials the imprisoned leopards did their best to live up to their fierce reputation by snarling or sullenly retreating to the back of their cages, rumbling with reproach and misery. Because park authorities wish to keep the state of Maharashtra, Sarfraz Khan admitted that it might take up to two years to find the proper place for each animal. In the meantime, confined to small cages their future does seem compromised.

The Borivli encounters between wild animals and people have drawn strong emotion from both defenders of human encroachment and of wildlife. After a considerable struggle 55000 people were removed from the park, yet about the same number remains, determined to stay.

The poised tone with which Dr. P.N. Munde, director of the park, describes the on-going battle between park authorities and encroachers, fails to hide his outrage: 'This park has always been the leopard's territory and our job is to protect wildlife. The law is the law and must be respected.'

What of the park itself? One may wonder if it will survive the city's assaults. Even though quite beautiful and astonishing in its appearance of authentic wilderness incorporated in Mumbai, it has, even in the relatively cool November day visit, a ragged look. It is as though the two million visitors a year, the illegal wood-cutting, poaching, and grazing, as being used as a human encampment is too much for the park to sustain. Paper and plastics mar the vegetation. hanging laundry and wandering babies of the shanty installations give it the motley aspect of an emerging suburb. what one expects to see in a national park, one, furthermore, that provides a favorite week-end outing for Mumbai citizens in search of a relief from urban pollution.

If the leopard is considered so disposable as to lose the battle in his own territory, one might wonder if the park itself not soon disappear after him, and if other such outcomes may not then be accepted elsewhere as natural and inevitable. Borivli may indeed be a microcosmic illustration of a general drift towards relaxing laws instituted to protect nature gradually excluding wildlife from the planet in the name of expediency and our immediate needs. If so, we may be tragically short-sighted.

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