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Tiffany Haddish Mogul in the making

TIGER



FIFTY YEARS AGO, INDIA'S BENGAL TIGERS WERE ON THE BRINK OF EXTINCTION. NOW THE POPULATION IS THRIVING THANKS TO THE SANKHALAS, A THREE-GENERATION CONSERVATION DYNASTY. **TAMARA HINSON** HEADS TO THE JUNGLE TO MEET THE YOUNGEST OF THE THREE MEN, AND HOPEFULLY SPOT ONE OF THE FEARSOME BIG CATS

PHOTOGRAPHS: KARAN KUMAR SACHDEV



KINGS



Previous page:
Third-generation
conservationist
Amit Sankhala
Left: On the path
of Bengal tigers
in Bandhavgarh
National Park

AMIT

Sankhala is certain I'll see a tiger. He tells me this as we bump along the dirt roads of Bandhavgarh National Park, India's tiger country – 1,540km² of swaying grassland and tropical forest where the mighty Bengal tiger roams freely. As we drive past gaggles of langur monkeys and slender sal trees scarred with claw marks, I'm getting increasingly desperate. So far on our safari, we've spotted twerking peacocks, a plodding elephant and a herd of snuffling wild boar, but India's most famous cat has eluded us.

Amit isn't stressed, though. "Don't worry," he says, adjusting his Ray-Bans and stretching across the back seat of the open-top Jeep. "You'll get your tiger."

If anyone can promise this, it's him. Amit is a third-generation conservationist – his grandfather, legendary tiger-whisperer Kailash Sankhala, helped shape Project Tiger, a landmark conservation project that's credited with bringing India's Bengal tigers back from the brink of extinction. Now, 50 years after the project began, Amit tells me tiger numbers are flourishing across the country. ►

But it's been a long road to get here. It all started in the 1950s, during Kailash's tenure at India's Forest Service, where he issued hunting permits. At the time, shooting tigers was a common blood sport and Kailash's friend goaded him to pick up a rifle.

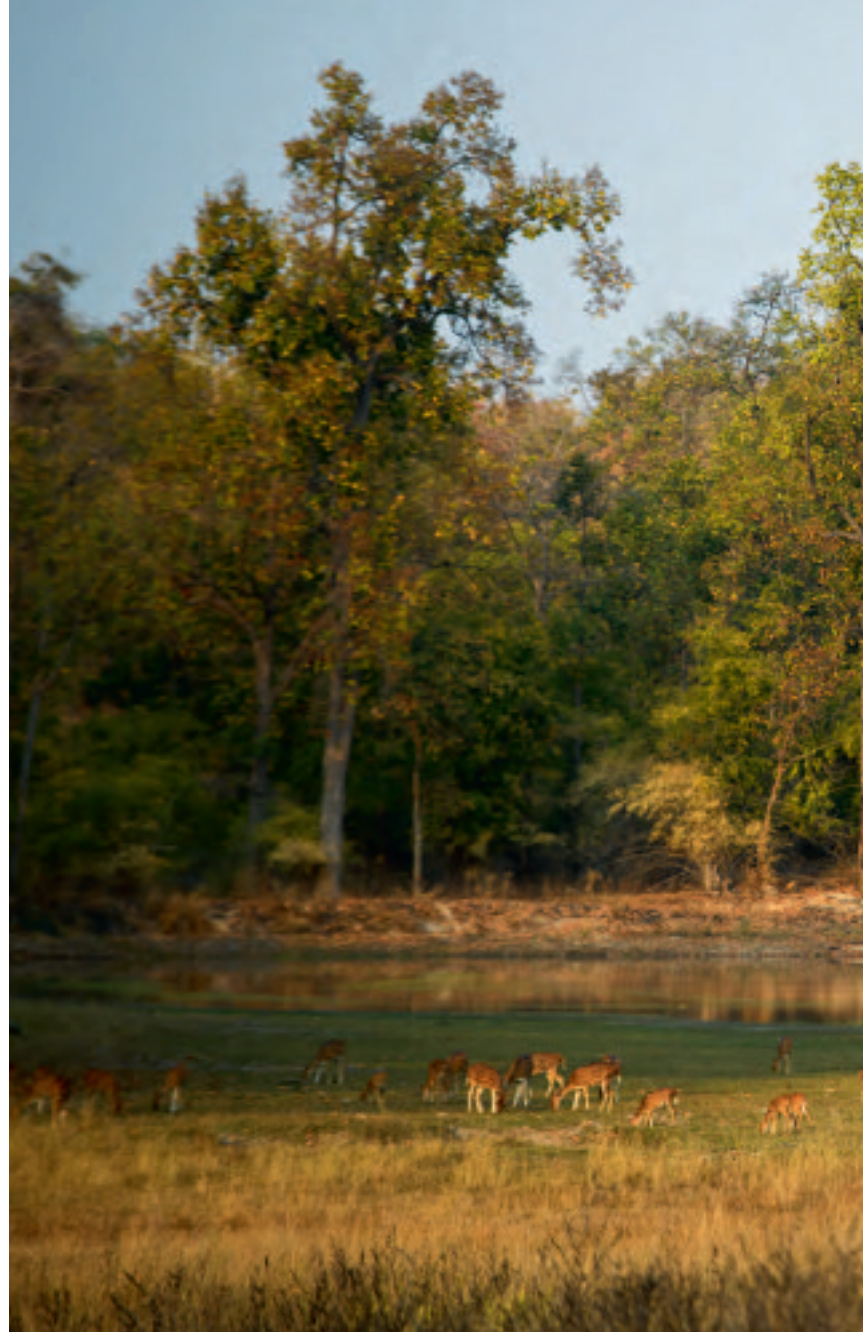


"He'd never killed a tiger," Amit tells me as we pass a grazing herd of sambar deer. "And when he finally did, he was traumatised."

After that watershed moment, Kailash decided to dedicate his life to protecting India's tigers. What followed was an illustrious career in conservation that was filled with hard-won achievements – like when, in 1969, he convinced Prime Minister Indira Gandhi to ban tiger hunting. After Kailash conducted India's first tiger census and discovered there were only 1,827 tigers left in the country, Gandhi launched Project Tiger and appointed him director. Kailash relocated entire villages to create tiger reserves – a drastic approach that paved the way for the tigers to make their comeback.

"His attitude was different to mine, but the challenges were different," says Amit. "You had to move human-animal conflicts out of places rather than incentivising locals to stay."

After Kailash saved tigers by segregating them from humans, Pradeep – Amit's father, who also



"MY FATHER'S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT WAS CREATING A SUSTAINABLE TOURISM INDUSTRY IN REMOTE PLACES"

grew up to be a conservationist – had the task of bringing them back together. So, in an effort to reconcile tourism and animal conservation, he opened Kanha Jungle Lodge, India's first eco-lodge, in 1989. The lodge I'm staying at, Bandhavgarh Jungle Lodge, with its cosy brick villas scattered across a jungle clearing, was opened by Pradeep in 1992. Amit recalls childhood holidays here, when he'd explore the park from atop an elephant – which dropped him back at the lodge afterwards.

But today it's a Jeep, not an elephant that returns me to the lodge after a long day without any tiger sightings. I'm dusty and disappointed – but luckily I'll be heading out again at the crack of dawn, my final chance to catch those elusive cats before I head back to Mumbai. I'm comforted by Amit's optimistic

words as I discuss the day's sightings with other guests, surrounded by Sankhala family artefacts like Kailash's beloved binoculars. On a table nearby, we're watched over by a photo of Kailash embracing Jim, a tiger who once lived in his home.

I think about the three-hour journey I took to get here from Jabalpur, the local airport – an epic drive that winds through forested valleys and farming villages shaded by mahua trees. It calls to mind something Amit told me earlier that day. "My father's greatest achievement was creating a sustainable tourism industry in remote places," he said. "Back then, getting here from Delhi involved a 19-hour train ride."

The lodges not only provided locals with employment, but reignited Indians' deep-rooted

From top: A family photo of Kailash Sankhala with Jim, a sickly tiger he adopted from Delhi Zoological Park; spotted deer; a langur monkey; and a medal awarded to Kailash in recognition of his work at Project Tiger



BURNING BRIGHT

3 MORE PLACES TO SPOT BENGAL TIGERS



Jim Corbett National Park

Uttarakhand's forested sanctuary – India's first national park – is famous for its tigers, as well as its leopards and wild elephants. A plum position at the foothills of the Himalayas means that the landscape is as enthralling as the wildlife.

Bandhavgarh National Park

The former hunting reserve of the Maharaja of Rewa, Madhya Pradesh's national park has come a long way – it's now home to the highest number of Bengal tigers in the world. Don't miss the various nods to the park's past, including an enormous crumbling sandstone statue of Hindu god Vishnu.



Kanha National Park

This fauna-crammed reserve is home to leopards, striped palm squirrels, common langurs, jackals, sloth bears, hyenas and, of course, tigers. The wildlife shares some stunning real estate among forested plateaux and sprawling, grassy plains.



**“ALMOST ALL THE WILDLIFE WHICH EXISTED
IN INDIA CENTURIES AGO STILL EXISTS.
NO OTHER COUNTRY CAN SAY THAT”**



love of the natural world. “In India, we’ve always loved our wildlife,” Amit told me. “Today, in Bandhavgarh, 90% of visitors are Indians.” Their continued presence is a boon for the tiger population – proceeds from lodges help fund Tiger Trust, a conservation-focused NGO founded by Kailash (Amit is a trustee).

Like his father, Amit believes passionately in involving the public in conservation. He’s helped launch several community-centric initiatives through Tiger Trust – including a programme that trains former poachers as park rangers. Tiger Trust also engages communities living near national parks, either through educational activities or by offering employment. His personal mantra hints at his holistic approach: “Save the tiger and you’ll save everything around it.”

Thanks in large part to the Sankhalas, it’s locals’ voices that are loudest in India – an unusual dynamic in the world of conservation. “Some 90% of Africans haven’t been on safari,” he tells me. “When they’re building a highway through the Serengeti, who’s shouting the loudest? Tourists and a bunch of conservationists.”

This symbiosis between the Indian government and its people means that India has become a conservation leader. “Almost all the wildlife which existed in India centuries ago still exists,” says Amit. “No other country can say that. Yes, there’s conflict, but the tigers, sloth bears, snow leopards and elephants? They’re still here.”

Roaming around Bandhavgarh, you can see the impact Amit, Pradeep and Kailash have had on the locals. The three men have all encouraged people to really listen to the natural world; today, guides in the park rely on instinct, not

From left: Forest ranger Ram Pratap Baig, who has patrolled Bandhavgarh National Park for 20 years; telltale claw marks in a tree trunk; the climax of the trip: a sighting of a Bengal tiger

crackling radios, to find wildlife, and there are no guns. They also hand over phones on entry, which minimises the risk of high-speed dashes to see kills relayed by colleagues.

My safari guide, Sumit, was armed only with a book listing Bandhavgarh’s bird species. Without the help of a radio, he frequently asked our driver to stop so he could listen for alarm calls from animals – the most reliable of which came from barking deer, apparently – or examine animal tracks.

As for Amit’s promise of a tiger? Well, the next morning, we pile into the Jeep again. Within a few hours, we’ve racked up sightings of wild boar, mongoose, eagles and plum-headed parakeets, but still no tiger. Then, as our Jeep bounces through a forested area, Amit notices tracks pressed into the red dirt. “There’s a tiger ahead,” he announces, in the way a passenger in a car might casually warn the driver about a rabbit in the road. And then it happens. We turn a corner to see a tiger plodding slowly down the dusty track. Occasionally he pauses to sniff a tree trunk, curling his lips and exposing fearsome teeth as he inhales scent marks left by other tigers. For several minutes we follow the cat slowly, halting the Jeep when he pauses. He’s huge, but his fur’s markings, a tiger’s equivalent of a human fingerprint, are even more impressive – a beautiful tapestry of dark stripes, swirls and spots.

When he eventually lumbers into the thick forest, I say a silent thank you to the big cat for gracing us with his presence. Then a thought occurs: if this tiger could talk, he’d probably have a few words of thanks for Amit, too.



■ bandhavgarh-national-park.com

✕ Fly to Mumbai