

# Keep track of India's grrrreat success story

Fifty years after the start of Project Tiger, a conservation triumph, Harriet O'Brien goes in search of the big cats whose future is burning bright

Alarm calls from monkeys grew increasingly shrill, the shrieks of peacocks ever louder. The jungle was on red alert. Such animal warnings about predators are just what you want to hear if you are searching for a big cat in India: in this drum roll of agitation, our 4x4 rounded a corner and came to an abrupt halt. In front of us, a tiger had stepped out of the undergrowth.

In the golden glow of late afternoon, the spectacular feline padded across the track and sat down on the sun-warmed red sand. She (my guide quickly identified the tiger as a two-year-old female) did not so much as glance in our direction, or at another safari vehicle nearby, yet she had evidently chosen to hold silent court with us all. There was hypnotic majesty in the way she reclined, minutely flicking her tail, her ears taking in the forest sounds.

I was at Bandhavgarh National Park, in India's central state of Madhya Pradesh; about the size of Italy, it offers some of the best tiger-watching opportunities on the subcontinent. I had come not only in hope of seeing a tiger, among other wildlife, but also to catch



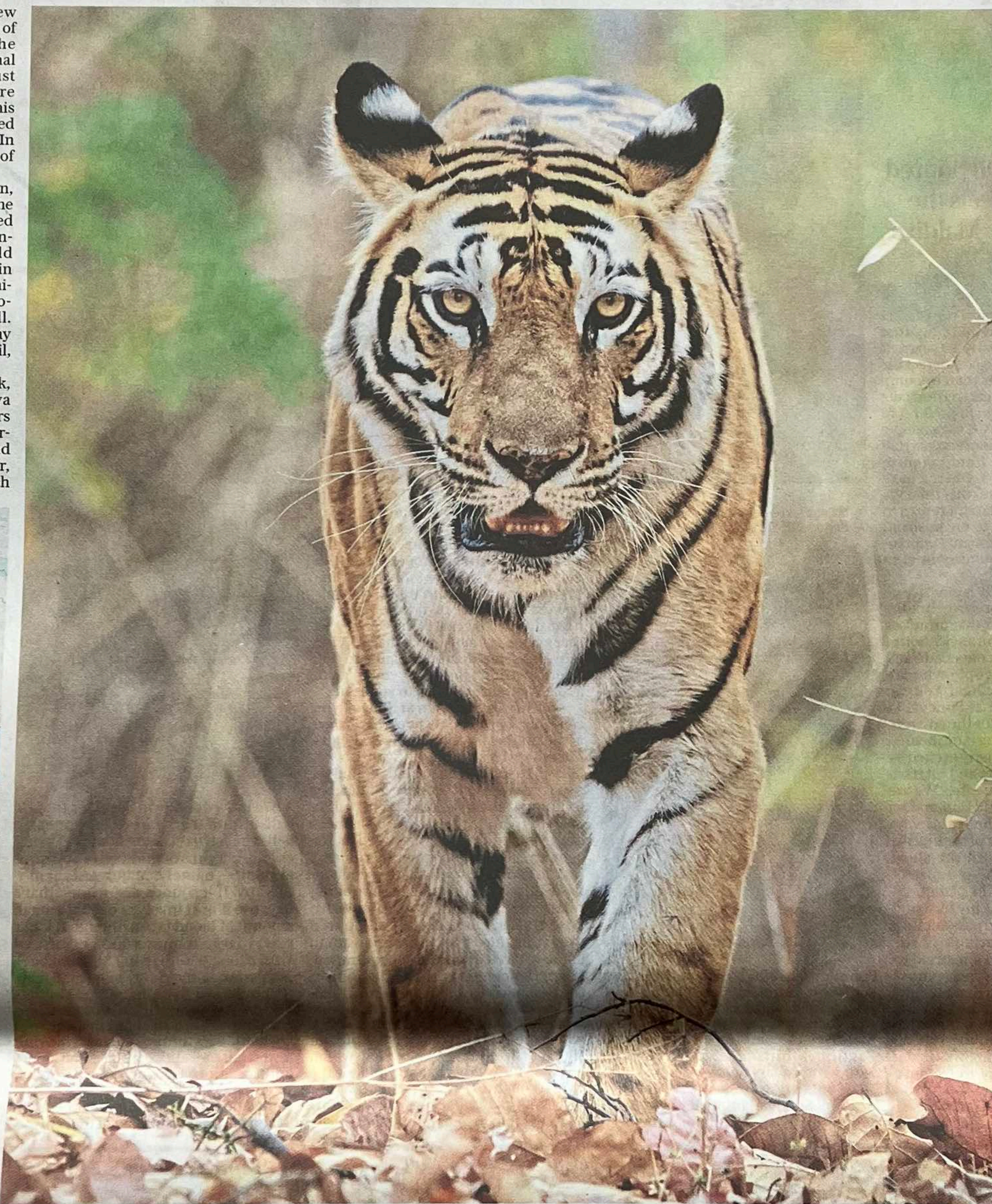
the mood: 50 years ago, India's major conservation programme, Project Tiger, was set in motion.

Back in 1964, the naturalist EP Gee estimated that in the early 20th century there were some 40,000 Bengal tigers in the wild in India, but, due to hunting and habitat destruction, that number had dwindled to 4,000. Two years later, Indira Gandhi became the country's third prime minister. The famously steely politician cared deeply about nature, and in 1972 she spearheaded India's Wildlife Protection Act and also appointed a "task force" for tiger conservation. Its members included naturalist Kailash Sankhala, conservationist Dr MK Ranjitsinh and champion of Indian wildlife Anne Wright, who with her husband had stayed on after independence from Britain and was a founder trustee of WWF India, launched in 1969. Their first act was to draw up an estimate of tiger numbers, dismally concluding that 1,827 of the big cats remained in the wild in India.

The tiger task force launched Project Tiger on April 1 1973. Its remit ran from mapping habitats to research on how to save the tiger from extinction, and nine areas were designated as tiger parks. Fast-forward 50 years and there are now 53 such reserves across India. In 2018, an official census estimated their combined tiger population at 2,967. New figures are due to be released by India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, on April 9 and word on the bush telegraph is that the count could be as high as 4,000.

So, the outlook is positive. But Project Tiger has been far from plain sailing. It got off to a good start in reversing the decline of the big cat, but then faltered in the 1980s and 1990s when poaching escalated to devastating effect. Although by 2007 the major players had been arrested, smaller-scale poaching continues, according to the Wildlife Protection Society of India, founded and run by renowned conservationist Belinda Wright, Anne Wright's daughter, 39 tigers in India were lost to poaching or capture for criminal trade in 2022. Meanwhile, dotted across the fringe zones of the country's protected forest and jungle areas are 170,000 villages, and encounters between tigers and the local human population continue to cause tragic problems.

For the tourists who want to find them, though, tigers are notoriously elusive – on three previous forays in



Eye on the tigers: Bandhavgarh National Park, in Madhya Pradesh, is one of the best places to spot the elusive big cat

from a lounging leopard to fabulous birds such as serpent eagles and a very well-camouflaged nightjar.

Roads in Madhya Pradesh are remarkably good, and it was smooth going to reach Bandhavgarh National Park further south, where I checked into the Taj Mahua Kothi. A blend of sophisticated hotel and rustic retreat, it has a stylish central lodge and 12 suites strikingly presented as village huts. More importantly, it prides itself on extensive training for its wildlife guides. Hart, who toured the park with me twice, had eagle eyes; quite apart from the majestic big cat we found on our first excursion, he later picked out a male tiger sleeping in the undergrowth, its stripes melding with the dappled sunlight.

Continuing to Kanha National Park, I called in at a luxury tented camp in the making. With plunge pools and river views, Hidden India Mahayan is being developed by hotelier and conservationist Latika Nath. Over lunch, the conversation segued to tigers, one of Nath's concerns being human-animal conflict. She pointed out that back in the 1970s, India's population was



Chitvan Jungle Lodge, in Kanha National Park, is included on Cox & Kings' wildlife tour

about 600 million; today, it is more than 1.4 billion. How do you accommodate growing numbers of tigers beside this rise in human lives?

I proceeded to Kipling Camp, on the other side of Kanha. Opened in 1982, this retreat was the first private wildlife camp in India. It was beautifully devised by Anne Wright and her family and is now run by Belinda Wright, alongside her conservation work. It exudes old-school charm, with 15 bedrooms in cottages set around an open-sided lodge, where guests dine around a central table. Friendly, efficient staff and a resident elephant, 70-year-old Tara, add to the delights of a stay here.

Kanha was a joy to explore, complete with a grassland area where rare southern swamp deer thrive, having been brought back from the brink of extinction. With a core area covering 580 square miles, it is the second largest reserve (after Satpura) in Madhya Pradesh: I took in part of the west of the park from Kipling Camp and a southern stretch from my last port of call, Kanha Jungle Lodge.

This forest retreat of 18 neatly devised rooms set around a thatched hub was established by Project Tiger's Kailash Sankhala in 1988. Today, his grandson Tarun Bhati is host and manager, along with his wife, Dimple. On my safari with them both, the jungle birds put on a great show: grey hornbills and flamboyant pink and bright blue Indian rollers in particular. No obliging tigers emerged, but we stopped to admire enormous gaur bison – which are quite capable of seeing off a tiger, Dimple told me.

At the end of my trip, I marvelled again at the ecosystem on a Zoom call with Project Tiger co-founder Dr Ranjitsinh in Delhi. He talked of his experiences of setting up the programme back in the 1970s and how the original concept was to protect the tiger's environment as much as the animal itself. Does he think the tiger's future is secure? "Yes," he told me. "That is because the people of India are now on board and have adopted the tiger; it has become an icon of the country and the people will not let it go."

Harriet O'Brien was a guest of Cox & Kings (03330 603303; [coxandkings.co.uk](http://coxandkings.co.uk)), which offers a 10-night Wildlife of India tailor-made tour from £3,955pp, including flights, transfers, a stay at Chitvan Jungle Lodge, guides and some meals. For details of some of India's best lodges, see [rareindia.com](http://rareindia.com)

## WHAT NEXT FOR INDIA'S TIGER CONSERVATION?

**Dr MK Ranjitsinh**  
Founder member of Project Tiger

"When Project Tiger started, we saw tiger numbers grow quickly in the reserves. Today, there are hardly any tigers outside these parks – and it is imperative that we add to our protected areas. We have reached saturation point in some parks and we urgently need more corridors, so the animals can move around."

**Belinda Wright** ▶  
Founder and CEO of the Wildlife Protection Society of India

"For the continued success of tiger conservation in

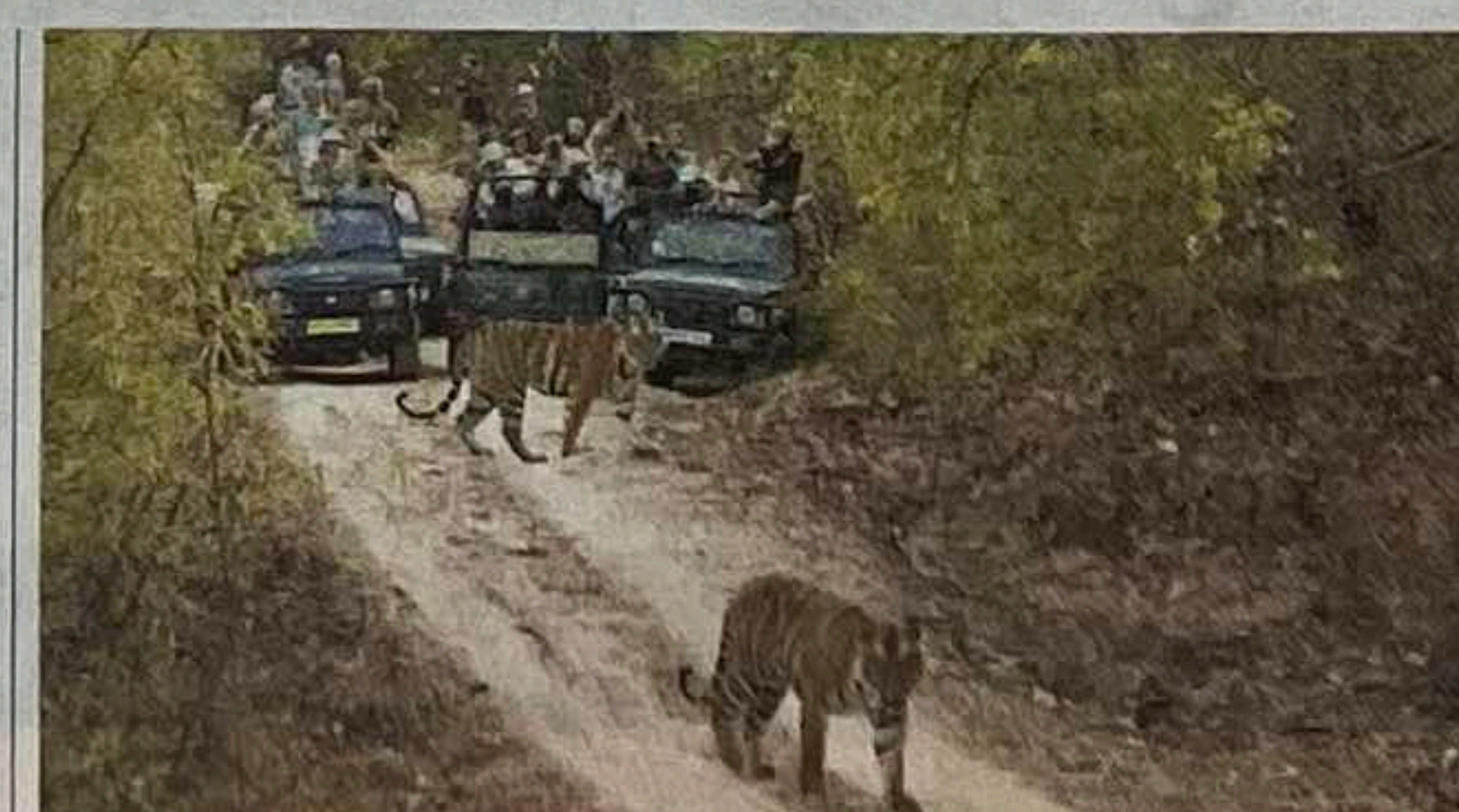


India, there are six main areas to address: fuel-wood collection by villagers wandering into tiger territory; packs of feral dogs, which hunt the deer and antelope that tigers prey on, and carry infectious diseases; forest fires; illegal

sand mining in protected areas for use in construction; illegal electric fences that kill tigers and other wildlife; and sound pollution from mobile DJ equipment, increasingly used in villages and resorts."

**Dr Raghu Chundawat**  
Conservation biologist, and Joanna Van Gruisen, Wildlife documentary filmmaker

"India's tiger conservation has followed a model based on well-protected, exclusive areas and, by and large, that has been a success. But tiger habitats outside these areas have been ignored and we have not planned for our successes within the



protected areas. We need to develop landscape plans to address the tiger's three main conservation issues – range contraction; small, unviable populations; and lack of connectivity. This can only be done through an inclusive model that

brings enhanced livelihoods to the communities sharing the tiger forests. Tourism can be a brilliant tool for this, when designed on conservation principles, with communities as the main stakeholders and beneficiaries."