

# Saving Tigers

## Tiger mascot universities advocate for big cats

*By Rachelle Beckner*

The morning tour was finished. Our caravan of Gypsies, the ubiquitous open-top vehicles favored by rangers at Kanha National Park, were descending toward the valley floor past an area where the day before we'd spotted unmistakable tracks in the soft dirt. Rounding a bend in the path, headed for our guest house in the central Indian village of Kisli, we spotted a Sambar deer lying awkwardly in a ditch, swaying almost imperceptibly, as if dancing to music our human ears could not hear.

Then we saw its dance partner.



**What we call *Panthera tigris* arose from the great cats of the** early Pleistocene nearly 3 million years ago. While subject to some debate in the scientific community, it is generally accepted that there are nine sub-species of tiger: Amur, Bali, Bengal, Caspian, Indo-Chinese, Javan, Malayan, South Chinese and Sumatran.

That is to say, there were.

Extinction came for the Bali tiger first. By the 1940s, hunting and loss of habitat sealed its fate. Those same anthropogenic pressures claimed the Caspian tiger by the end of the 1970s, and the Javan tiger by the 1980s.

Today, there are fewer than 3,900 wild tigers remaining. To put it in context, that's about the same size of the 2018 freshman class at Clemson University, a group that proudly celebrates the world's biggest cat by adorning cars with stickers of its paw, wearing its color on everything from T-shirts to slacks and chanting its name at sporting events. But this exuberance, one shared by the untold thousands of alumni, faculty and friends who proudly chant "Go Tigers!," is in many ways sobering.

Few truly understand, after all, just how perilous a future tigers face.

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President James Clements understands.

That's why, in 2017, he established the U.S. Tiger University Consortium, headquartered at Clemson University. It is an organization that brought together some of the brightest minds in



**Clemson 2018 freshman class**

wildlife conservation at Clemson, Auburn University, Louisiana State University and the University of Missouri. In partnership with the Global Tiger Forum, an international thinktank headquartered in India, the Consortium supports research that will, its leadership hopes, save tigers from extinction. Dr. Brett Wright, director of the U.S. Tiger University Consortium and dean emeritus of the College of Behavioral, Social and Health Sciences, said supporting research starts with raising awareness.

"It's easy to get caught up in the excitement surrounding our beloved mascot," Wright said. "We want our fan base to have the same level of enthusiasm for the majestic animal on which it is based and for that enthusiasm to translate into awareness, advocacy and support for our work." That brings us back to a brisk morning in the forests of Madhya Pradesh, India. An adult male Bengal tiger, five years-old and at 500 pounds firmly secure in his place at the top of the food chain, lies contentedly in a ditch. His abrasive tongue scours the hide of the sambar, itself massive, to get at the tender meat below. He pays no attention to the retinue of vehicles and their occupants quietly watching the scene unfold, a portrait of fauna engaged in ancient ritual, raw and unbridled. Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote of nature as "red in tooth and claw," and this tiger is the metaphor revealed: his face is a red mask as he rises from the fresh kill and saunters away into the underbrush.

It's a scene that plays out with regularity in rural Madhya Pradesh, a large central Indian state some 1,000 kilometers from the bustling capital in Delhi. Here, nearly 2,000 square kilometers are set aside for Kanha National Park, arguably the crown jewel of India's 50 wild tiger preserves. Given that some 70 percent of the world's wild tiger population lives in India, Kanha is among the best tiger reserves in the world.

Even then, only 100 or so tigers who live within its borders. Hence, it is somewhat rare to even see a tiger, let alone witness one with captured prey, forest officials told us. Not only is Kanha National Park a large expanse of thick forest roughly the size of Greenville County, its most famous denizen is an exceedingly solitary animal; as an ambush predator, a tiger only eats what it can kill on its own. There is no pride for support, as there is for lions. Blazing speed, which is a cheetah's greatest asset, is not something nature bestowed upon its larger cousin. Sheer strength and an almost mystical ability to will itself into nothingness—that is how a tiger hunts. Kanha officials, then, seemed as awestruck as we were at this deeply personal moment between predator and prey.

But it was not the first tiger we saw that February morning; it was the third. All told, we saw



**Madhya Pradesh**



six during the 10-day fact-finding mission that brought together officials with the U.S. Tiger University Consortium, the Global Tiger Forum and the Indian government. The trip was the latest part of a Clemson University campaign whose goal is as daunting as it is inspiring: to save the wild tiger from extinction.

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Patricia McAbee has served on the Clemson University Board of Trust since 1993. She and her husband, Dr. Thomas Eison, a board-certified orthopedic surgeon, were among the members of a Clemson-led team of philanthropists, researchers and wildlife activists who participated in the India mission.

Clemson can make important contributions to our world through the application of knowledge and research in areas such as behavioral, social and health sciences and forestry and environmental conservation among others, especially as they relate to issues related to survival of the tiger, McAbee said after returning from India. “It’s more than saving a beautiful animal and more than even saving our beloved mascot,” she said.



McAbee and Varma

McAbee’s epiphany was one that came to Keshav Varma as a young child. The CEO of the Global Tiger Initiative, Varma is a former executive with the World Bank and current chairman of the Sabarmati Riverfront Development Corporation in India. He has decades of experience at the highest levels of the Indian government and in building strategic partnerships around the world. When Dr. Wright took over as the Consortium’s first director, Varma was one of the first key allies. Their friendship—along with partnerships Dr. Wright continues to form with stakeholders from tiger range countries around the world—is paying dividends in the Consortium’s efforts.

Varma came to tiger advocacy from a young age. As a child, he regularly encountered a wild tiger he named “Old Uncle,” one that claimed the Varma family farm as its territory. He often stole away to watch the tiger drink from a small stream near his home. They became, if not friends, then certainly acquaintances. On his frequent trips into the forest, the tiger came to accept this curious child who’d watch him from a distance. For Varma, he came to think of Old Uncle as a treasured member of his family, a face that would appear only after his presence was announced by the cacophony of the forest: deer and monkeys and feral pigs and birds, all announcing the king was near.

“That face is still in my mind,” Varma said.

In those days, tiger hunting was legal, and Old Uncle was a trophy many villagers wanted—not as a friend or family member, but as a hide on their floor. Varma’s father was a district official in those days, and the son urged his father to use whatever influence he had to protect the tiger. That was the first—but certainly not the last—time that Varma fought for a tiger’s life.

“That experience left an impression on me,” Varma said. “There is divinity in a tiger; it exists in a state of meditative repose. So when you see a tiger, it’s an experience that transforms your life. It transformed mine.”

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Varma is a gifted storyteller, a bureaucrat with a poet’s sensibilities. For him, describing a tiger is like composing lines of verse that come from a place of intimate, first-hand knowledge. “A forest comes alive when the tiger is there,” he said. “The trees are more beautiful. The breeze blows more gently.”

And this is where poetry and science intersect. Dr. Wright is not a poet, but explains the tiger’s impact on flora and fauna in much the same way as does his friend.

“As an apex species, tigers protect the forest, in a way,” Wright said. “When they are no longer there, we have an imbalance in the ecosystem. And that affects everyone – you, me and the world. The presence of a tiger means the forest is healthy.”

It’s a classic illustration of the food chain, or more accurately, the symbiosis of nature. Clean air and water means healthy grasses. Healthy grasses mean large numbers of deer and other foraging herbivores. And when prey species like sambar, swamp or spotted deer are in abundance—as they are in Kanha—apex predators aren’t far behind. And there is no apex predator like a tiger.

Healthy tiger? Healthy ecosystem. Healthy ecosystem? Healthy world.



Back Row (l to r): Himmat Negi, Tomy Eison, Bruno Laporte, Mohnish Kapoor, Hrishita Negi, Brett Wright, L. Krishnamurthy  
Front row (l to r): Judy Wright, Rachelle Beckner, Andrew Beckner, Keshav Vamra, Patti McAbee, Victoria Laporte, Dr. Rajesh Gopal

Himmat Singh Negi spent 14 years at Kanha, the last four of which he served as its director. He said that simple calculus has enormous implications to life, not just in India, but halfway around the world, in a southern state in America where tigers have never lived, but where people celebrate the species nonetheless.

“It’s the top predator, which explains the survival of human beings, and that is what we really need to understand,” said Negi, one of the members of the Clemson expedition. “If you protect the tiger, you protect yourself.”

Hence the urgency of the U.S. Tiger University Consortium’s mission, and Wright’s leadership in finding partners around the world. The Global Tiger Forum, with which Clemson signed a memoran-



dum of agreement to help launch the Consortium, is perhaps the most important of those alliances. “The fact that we are partnering with the Global Tiger Forum is extremely important,” Wright said. “It is the organization that coordinates all efforts among the 13 tiger range countries. We share resources and ideas while collaborating on research that is having an enormous impact on tiger health worldwide.”

Among those who is central to that process is Mohnish Kapoor, who leads programs and partnerships for the Global Tiger Forum. He is a relentless advocate for tiger conservation and travels the world, building relationships among stakeholders. Kapoor estimates he’s seen hundreds of wild tigers, but “still I get goosebumps.”

“The feeling is there, every time,” he said. “I just hope future generations can witness them too. It is one of the best gifts of God to this planet. I really hope we can be successful in our work to save this majestic animal.”

It is that hope that brought the Clemson team to India, and it’s that hope that brought Kapoor and Varma—at Dr. Wright’s invitation—to see other kinds of tigers; namely, those who play football. Kapoor grins widely when recalling his first college football game: Clemson vs. Auburn. Tiger vs. tiger.

“There are no wild tigers (in Clemson),” Kapoor said. “But the amount of excitement that I saw when I was there was amazing.”

Amazing, yes. But also sobering. Because, again, how many of the 85,000 people in Death Valley that day know what’s at stake? It’s the mission of the U.S. Tiger University Consortium to help them know.

“Hundreds of times a day, on our campus and across South Carolina, Clemson fans say, ‘Go Tigers,’” Dr. Wright said. “But what will we say when they are gone?”



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