



My experience of trapping sloth bear in camera traps

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Studying and understanding wildlife in its natural habitat has always been a topic of curiosity for humans since the beginning. Over the period of time, innumerable research work has been generated using different approaches. On the parallel side, new techniques were continuously discovered especially for observing elusive species. One such technique that revolutionised the research on observing animal behaviour in wild was camera trapping. Introduction of camera traps for observing and recording wildlife movement dates back to 80s. This enabled researchers to capture images of rare wildlife species for understanding and developing conservation strategies. However, as interesting it sounds to employ a camera trap in wild, I learned it a hard way that not always technology can be of aid to you in studying animal behaviour in wild.

I got introduced to sloth bear in my childhood as dancing bear used as a source of entertainment. Years later, an unplanned trek to a temple site in Jessore sanctuary led me to a sloth bear sighting in its natural habitat. As fascinating it was to observe this species with my own eyes, it also troubled me to watch it foraging on leftover food in the surroundings of the temple. Being a myrmecophagy animal, it was confusing to observe an alteration in their behaviour. Jessore sloth bear sanctuary, lying in the foothills of Aravalli is well known for inhabiting a good number of sloth bear in the state of Gujarat (Garcia et al., 2016). Lately, increase in the number of human bear conflict cases were reported mainly due to encroachment by locals and habitat degradation (Dharaiya and Ratnayeke, 2009). Working with wildlife and conservation biology lab gave me an opportunity to monitor sloth bear movement in two sloth bear sanctuaries of north Gujarat.

Funded by International Association for Bear Research and Management, I began my research in Jessore and Balaram sloth bear sanctuary. Initial field visits gave me an understanding of the area, the undulating landscapes sporadically comprised by tribal houses along with the villages in the peripheral region. These locals rely on forest produce for their livelihoods. Every



Setting up camera trap in Sloth bear sanctuary Photo by: V. Shah

morning these villagers plies through the forest for livestock grazing. It is interesting to interact with these people as one might come across some rare observations recorded by them. Captivated by the idea of monitoring a sloth bear in wild, I tried to employ camera traps inside of both the sanctuaries.

It is a protocol to work with forest department while conducting a research in the Protected Area. The compelling thing to observe is the knowledge of tribal residing inside the sanctuary area. One can be surprised to hear all stories related to wild animals and how to avoid attacks. Depicting the walking style and noise sloth bears make was quite fascinating.

I proceeded with instalments of camera traps on pre identified routes taken by sloth bears or other wildlife with the help of forest officials. It was planned to leave 10 camera traps in each sanctuary for a specific period of time to collect sufficient data. To my surprise 6 out of 10 camera traps were stolen in the first week of installation. Over a period of time, I was losing camera traps from the field without any trace left. It was quite bewildering in the beginning to figure out a way to keep the camera traps intact inside the forests. Later on, I stumbled upon my mistake of missing out an important element out of the whole strategy of conducting research and monitoring. And that crucial element was local community that has been ignored during the whole process. It makes sense to include locals as they are frequent visitors of the forest, who can be a better candidate to locate and assure safety of camera traps in the area. Besides, including them as a part of research opens a window for combining both traditional and scientific knowledge. Also, regular monitoring becomes easy with their assistance as they are an integral part of the ecosystem being studied. It was observed that locals shares the same level of curiosity with the scientist towards wildlife activity. Allowing them to assimilate their archaic information with the new technologies and scientific ideas will benefits both communities. It will help in creating awareness among the locals by understanding and promoting co-existence in the area. By losing those camera traps has made me realise that participatory approach can be a good start in conducting scientific research in areas inhabiting tribal.

**References:**

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