

INTERNAL COMBUSTION

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A TIGER COULD NOT CROSS NATIONAL HIGHWAY 7, DUE TO A HIGH WALL IT COULD NOT JUMP OVER

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The recent floods in Assam, which have submerged vast areas of the Kaziranga National Park, have also resulted in lots of wildlife coming out onto National Highway 37, which passes through this rich wildlife habitat. A video of an exhausted rhino resting on the side of the highway, while vehicles drive past has gone viral. Fortunately the forest department staff was at the location to direct the vehicles through and eventually they also guided the one horned rhinoceros back into the safety of Kaziranga National Park. But unfortunately seventeen hog deer and wild boar have died after being hit by rashly driven vehicles. These wild animals were trying to cross the road to reach higher ground on the other side, but were crushed by insensitive speeding drivers. This once again

shows that we need very strong rules and penalties for road kills. I have written about this earlier, and something certainly needs to be done to reduce road kills of wildlife in our country.

On 29th July, we celebrated the “International Tiger Day”. Few weeks prior to this on the night of 13th July, a full grown tiger was seen sitting on the Nagpur-Jabalpur National Highway 7. The tiger was spotted near Rookhad, which is part of the buffer zone of Pench Tiger Reserve. The videos and photos of the tiger sitting in the center of the highway illuminated by headlights of several trucks and cars went viral on social media. Some people even called the police and forest department. When the forest department team arrived at the spot they first cleared the traffic away and tried to make way for the tiger to cross the road and go back into the forest. This is when they realized that the tiger was having difficulty getting over an under-construction wall. Vikram Parihar, the field director of Pench Tiger Reserve, as per some reports said, “The tiger couldn’t cross the mitigation structure under construction. A guide wall to avoid soil erosion is to be constructed at the spot where it was trying to unsuccessfully jump over.”

Several times in the past also, tigers and leopards have been sighted on this busy highway passing through the Pench Tiger Reserve. In fact, it was due to this that the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) was instructed to create adequate wildlife mitigation measures by constructing elevated stretches with underpasses for wildlife to cross from one side of the jungle to the other. Sadly this work is not complete and construction of these underpasses is still underway in some places. This needs to speed up, because a report by the Wildlife Institute of India has shown that between March and December 2019, over 5,450 wild animals, including 11 tigers have been photographed on trap cameras while using the underpasses that are complete, to cross from one part of the forest to the other!

What is also heartening is that few recent incidents show that it is beneficial to have politicians in power, who also care for nature. In early July, Uddhav Thackeray, the Chief Minister of Maharashtra, wrote to Union Environment Minister Prakash Javadekar and Railway

Minister Piyush Goyal, asking for an alternate route for a proposed gauge conversion of a railway line passing through the Melghat Tiger Reserve. Uddhav Thackeray is a keen wildlife photographer and thanks to his love for nature, Melghat might just be spared and saved from a busy, polluting and disturbing railway line, passing through its prime tiger and wildlife habitat.

Uddhav’s son, Aaditya Thackeray, the Maharashtra Tourism and Environment Minister, also opposed the auction of the Bander Mine Block located near the Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. Due to his opposition and also that of former Environment Minister of India, Jairam Ramesh, the Union Coal Ministry decided to withdraw the Bander Mine from the list of 41 coal blocks that were to be auctioned. That’s not all. On 16th July, Aaditya Thackeray wrote to Union Minister for Road Transport and Highways Nitin Gadkari requesting him to save a 400-year-old banyan tree, which was scheduled to be cut because of expansion work on the Ratnagiri-Satara Highway. Thackeray later tweeted that the response from Gadkari had been positive and that the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) was realigning the highway expansion. The NHAI’s original plan to cut the tree had activists up in arms and the local villager’s had also launched a “chipko” kind of protest movement. Fortunately, Aaditya Thackeray’s intervention helped save the tree and in my opinion, because of these initiatives, he definitely deserves to be the Environment Minister of Maharashtra.

Many motorists value and appreciate tree-lined highways. There was a time not so long ago that most of our highways were lined with trees on both sides and you drove in their shadow. I have great memories of stopping under shady trees to enjoy a packed breakfast or homemade lunch. One would look for a spot that safely allowed you to pull over under these trees. Then the food, flask of coffee and so on, would be placed on the bonnet for a relishing, refreshing and re-energizing break on long distance drives. But unfortunately, while widening our highways, the authorities have mercilessly cut most of the trees. Now it’s so sad that on some of our highways, finding a suitable tree to stop under is not just difficult, but almost impossible! 🚗