

Tiger Fire: how bright is the future for tigers in India?

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Wildlife conservationist Valmik Thapar's epic, 'Tiger Fire', serves as a remarkable 500-year 'time capsule' account of tigers and their relationship with humans in India, currently home to more than a billion people and about half the world's remaining wild tigers (Global Tiger Initiative Secretariat 2013). This 624-page book will fascinate anyone interested in human-animal interactions, tiger behaviour, and conservation management strategies in a world increasingly focused on economic business models of development. He appeals to eastern cultures to retain their traditions, which honour and respect tigers as gods, supernatural beings and guardians. Although illegal international trade in tiger parts is run through organized crime networks (Sharma et al. 2014), a book like this could make a difference if it reaches a global audience and inspires people to take action to save wild tigers. Engagement with non-academic audiences may stop people consuming tiger parts or keeping them as exotic pets (Challender 2014). Concurrently, communication with peers and community leaders may improve future conservation management strategies and policy.

Thapar has carefully edited anecdotes about encounters with tigers from the 16th to the early 20th centuries by authors ranging from Mughal emperors to hunters, naturalists, and travellers. Many of the accompanying images show people 'battling' tigers with swords, spears and guns. In one instance, a European woman in voluminous gown, petticoats and elegant hat wields an umbrella from the back of an ox-drawn cart, to ward off an approaching tiger in the Sundarbans in the late 1700s. Later in the book, readers are provided with a stunning 100-page pictorial essay of wild tigers in India, with tigers roaming through the pages—playing, fighting, walking, swimming, resting, climbing and hunting—seemingly untouched by the presence of humans.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature Commission on Education and Communication's 'Love. Not Loss' campaign, urges scientists to 'personalize, humanize and publicize' the animals they study, turning their research projects into 'soap operas' with underlying messages of love, since love is

considered to be a greater motivator for positive action than loss or fear (IUCN CEC 2012). Empathy, affection, emotional bonds, and anthropomorphic language are encouraged as tools to engage with everyday people, who ultimately will determine the fate of tigers and other species. However, the 'love story' approach is contrary to everything "drummed into" undergraduate science students, discouraged from writing in emotive styles infused with anthropomorphic terminology and subjective experiences (Root-Bernstein et al. 2013). Scientists must learn to tailor messages to different



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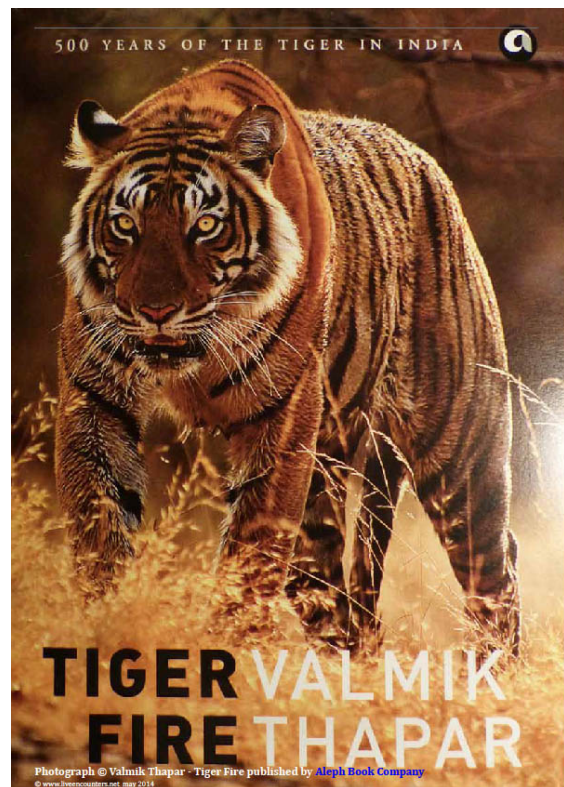
Valmik Thapar

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target audiences, and challenge peers to recognise that rigorous scientific practice is not compromised by empathy and respect for other sentient beings. Thapar's 'The Secret Life of Tigers' section demonstrates this approach, in his 'best-of' collection of stories about 200 different tigers of Ranthambore. His 37-year long 'love affair' with tigers began with a profound two-minute encounter with a growling tiger at night, caught in the beam of Thapar's flashlight as his jeep was about to be submerged in a lake. Thapar named animals based on their individual personalities, and he openly admits to having favourites (Padmini and her cubs) and even all-time favourites (Noon and Ghenghis). Half way through the book, he states that tigers are no longer named but assigned a number from T-1 to T-52, which has the effect of not only 'distancing' the original observers from the tigers, but also the reader. Scientists remain divided about naming animals or forming close bonds with them, but the 'personal experience perspective' is seen as increasingly important in primatological research (Vitale 2011). Tourists, readers, documentary viewers, stakeholders and sponsors connect emotionally with individual animals and their stories. The 'soap-opera' style animal documentary, 'Meerkat Manor', ran for four seasons, airing in 160 countries. Rwanda's Kwita Izina ceremony annually brings together thousands of local community members, politicians, celebrities and international visitors to celebrate the birth of new Mountain Gorillas and name them. Digit, the mountain gorilla featured in Dian Fossey's 'Gorillas in the Mist', has been dead for over 35 years, but he still inspires people to support gorilla conservation.

Tiger Fire ends with a summary of tiger management disasters at Sariska, Ranthambore and Panna. In one year alone (2004–5), 80 tigers "vanished", probably poached, from seven protected areas. Thapar credits just seven people as being the "real saviours" of tigers in India: Jim Corbett, Billy Arjan Singh, Kailash Sankhala, Fateh Singh Rathore, Brijendra Singh, K. Ullas Karanth and Belinda Wright. He provides short biographies of these largely unknown "tigerwallahs". Missing off the list is Dr. Raghu Chundawat, a pioneering conservation biologist and 'conservation hero' (Post 2010), featured in the BBC Natural World documentary, 'Battle to Save the Tiger'. He became a 'whistle-blower' after raising the alarm with the authorities about tiger numbers plummeting at Panna Tiger Reserve, when official reports were inaccurately overestimating numbers. In the final pages, Thapar appeals to the Indian government authorities to consult both experts and local communities, and to establish models of governance tailored to the needs of

tigers. Tiger Fire is essentially five books-in-one, each with its own distinctive narrative style and focus, likely to appeal to different audiences. This is both a strength and a weakness. The size and cost of the book will restrict its ability to reach everyday readers, and if not widely promoted amongst conservation scientists, its distribution will depend largely on "word-of-mouth". To facilitate wider readership, it could be made available as a series of electronic books. Ideally, it should provide readers with simple ideas and behaviours that can be undertaken to help save tigers, and websites and other online resources. Web-based resources, social media and other ways of connecting with technology-savvy people, especially younger audiences, remain underutilized by many conservationists. We are all responsible for saving tigers in India and elsewhere, and I agree wholeheartedly with Thapar, that if we fail to save Tigers in India, history will never forgive us!

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