

27th February 2020

Bhushan H. Sethi
60 Jared Drive
North Brunswick,
NJ 08902, U.S.A.
bsethi@gmail.com

To: Hon. Chief Minister **Shri. Ashok Gehlot**,

Chief Minister's Office,
Secretariat, JAIPUR 302005
Phone : +91(141)2227656, 2227716
Fax : +91(141)2227687
Email : cmraj@rajasthan.gov.in

Re: Loss of CTH due to Reversal of Human Relocation at Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve (RTR) and missing tigers (possibly)

Dear Sir,

To offer a quick introduction, I am a corporate leader based in the United States and a strong biodiversity conservation catalyst & supporter and have been involved in multiple conservation and social initiatives across India the last 10 years. After travelling extensively across most of the North American, African and Indian landscapes, I have built a personal initiative to help understand and support the green initiatives and wildlife, specifically – Project Tiger. I have always been supportive and appreciative of initiatives underway to safeguard Rajasthan's environment and forests.

In India specifically over the years, I have been involved with the ground level initiatives and village relocation undertaken by the State Forest department at RTR towards habitat development under Project Tiger. While this has provided many insights into challenges habitats face due to anthropogenic pressures, it has also offered perspectives into difficulties faced by the wildlife itself towards their sustenance. My regular visits, association and involvement with this work have given me unique perspectives of life in the semi-arid terrain of Rajasthan for man and animal alike.

To offer a quick update on the relocation work so far, over the past ten years the state's forest department RTR staff and the Sawai Madhopur District Administration have overseen relocation of approximately 1600 families across 8 villages under Phase I (Kalibhat, Hindwar, Mordungri, Bhid, Kathooli, Paddada & Munderheri). This initiative has benefitted the relocated villagers in many ways. I commend all such initiatives and look forward to supporting your government over the coming years. I understand that about 75-80% of this relocation was completed. The key success factor to this initiative is ensuring completion of as much of the remaining 20-25% in a timely manner such that all loose ends are tied. Further it is imperative that nothing gets left to chance that will jeopardize the good

efforts of your government and forest department for a better future to the green initiatives within Rajasthan, specifically at RTR. The areas of land surrendered to the government have to be brought under the greening program and checks put in against re-encroachment. Even though the core N.P. habitat extends over an area of about 392 sq. km. namely Ranthambhore National Park (RNP), the greater CTH extends beyond RNP including the Sawai Mansingh Sanctuary, Sawai Madhopur Sanctuary, KelaDevi Sanctuary and Qualji Reserve forest totaling about 1,700+ sq. km. The border areas of RNP viz **Keladevi Sanctuary** and **Sawai Mansingh Sanctuary** are critical to RTR since this is the first overflow space for tigers growing up in the core area. The relocation of villages under phase-I has provided precisely this. Per my observations I want to emphasize that tiger numbers have almost doubled during the duration of the relocation exercise. The role taken up by the RFD staff working on relocation has ensured an improvement in about 150-200+ sq. kms. of wildlife habitat and much of it is now **inviolable**. Therefore the increased tiger numbers could be absorbed, in spite of this there have been reports of tiger exodus from the park due to ever increasing numbers and their fight for space. Tigers being prolific breeders will continue to multiply in coming years thereby continuing to make more demands on the existing space at RTR. ***I feel the State of Rajasthan can take increased ownership in coming years and be a leader pan India for Tiger conservation in a very unique way. To support this the relocation initiative needs to be expanded much more and hence my letter,***

There have been some challenges that need your urgent attention,

- a. During my recent visit to RTR I was very happy to see a lot of tigers moving in tourism zones. However, on a visit to Zone 8 I was saddened by a view from the top of the Neemli Dang hill view point. It was apparent that the village of Kalibhat that was almost relocated and in-violable except for a couple of families pending until a few years ago, (those too were in the process of seeming to move out) - now seemed to have large fields being tilled around the Kalibhat village lands within RTR. I am sharing a photo (**Attachment A**) of the same that I captured. On making enquiries it was brought to my attention that due to a multitude of reasons some people who had already availed of the financial incentives were trying ways and means to re-establish their presence in the park for personal benefits - **Reverse Relocation**. I was given to understand this is the case with some other villages like Hindwar also in addition to Kalibhat.

To highlight the issues - with help from the NTCA, RFD has directly spent in **excess of 150 crores since 2009** (not including other funds and benefits offered by the state's district administration and other agencies) to ensure relocation of villages towards increasing the amount of inviolable spaces for tiger habitats at RTR. This entire investment of time, money and the successes ensured in past decade is at **a severe risk of being lost** if proper oversight and management of NP area is not provided. **This needs addressing URGENTLY.**

- b. **Secondly**, there was talk on the ground of a lot of tigers not being sighted and a general assumption that they have migrated away in search of habitats due to overcrowding in the park! In the past each tiger exodus due to whatever reason

was documented clearly via photographic and other evidence. I have myself witnessed the previous park management taking great efforts to go out of normal routine of duty and follow tigers running away towards, Chambal, Kota, Bharatpur, qualji etc. This is essential as a tiger missing without records can be presumed for the worst..... There was an [article](#) (**Attachment B**) in the press saying 26 tigers are presumed missing, something that is officially commented on by the RFD as well. I think it will be worthwhile for the department to first ensure if the missing number is **26 or higher** and then the detailed reasons thereof for each missing.

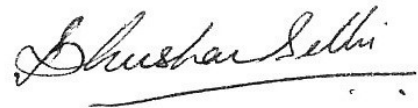
- c. **Third**, on the three days spent at RTR I had a **Corporate Sponsor** friend from the UK who specifically requested to understand my involvements and the conservation cycle RFD has made a success at RTR towards their willingness to help directly via sponsorships etc. After having very good wildlife sightings however we were both saddened to see the villagers openly removing firewood across the park in broad daylight. This is something that was previously well managed and thereafter peripheral villages were given free gas connections so that their dependence on the N.P. for fuel wood reduces. **Also**, there was a lot of single use plastic and snack wrappers visible in an around the park area. **Finally**, it was also brought to my attention that there was rampant grazing in the rainy season – evidence of which was bovine feces spread around.
- d. **Longer term at RTR**, per estimates the current land usage density by tiger's in RTR is at about 10-15 sq. kms. per tiger in the core of RNP, further growth in animal numbers by 30/40 over the next 5 years would at-least require approximately an additional 3-400 sq. kms. of prime habitat. This land need is non-trivial as you can appreciate and the only way it can be realistically achieved is by making large areas of forests within Keladevi and Sawai Mansingh Sanctuary bordering RNP free of disturbances to develop as wildlife habitats. To make it inviolate about 40+ surrounding villages in will have to be reviewed for relocation suitability towards executing a largescale voluntary relocation exercise. **A proposal to this effect has already been submitted, and reviewed in 2016 by the Chief secretary to which I was a special invitee. (Minutes - Attachment C)** This needs to be looked and actioned urgently to avoid tigers running away to neighboring states.
- e. **Finally**, on meeting with the current officials in charge I professed my observations and also ability and willingness to help the park managers. The response I got was lack-luster to say the very least and in my 10 years of working with the RFD and RTR teams I have never come across such a low morale/drive, willingness and motivation. I am sharing this so that the CMO and Forest Department may marshal better resources to manage the park. Here I would like to further state that good forest officers starting with the range officers and above take time to train and mature especially in sensitive wildlife areas that combine tourism. **I would request that a panel of able/retired forest officers be nominated to train and mentor upcoming field officers within RTR.**

Therefore, I would request the state to take up an initiative to **set up a high level assessment committee** incorporating experienced / retired senior FD and DA officers to study both material and non-material requirements for implementing the above. It is imperative the committee takes into cognizance addressing people's well being at a higher level by addressing all facets of their needs via state's current provisions and welfare schemes. A critical factor is jobs creation.

It has been evident that the village relocation program at RTR has played a very critical role for conservation by providing an inviolate space, stability to state's bio-diversity and improving the living conditions of relocated villagers. I write this letter in good faith as a well-wisher, Good Will Ambassador to Rajasthan Forest Department and will continue to support conservation initiatives in Rajasthan's Project Tiger. While outcome remains to be seen, I truly believe the state has a unique position in being a leader in large scale biodiversity conservation by pursuing the above-mentioned initiatives.

Thanking you in advance for all your help in the matter. Please do the needful and oblige and let me know if any further assistance.

Yours Sincerely,



Cc: Mr. D.B. Gupta Chief Secretary, State of Rajasthan
Mrs. Diya Kumari, M.P. & member-NTCA
Mr. P.S. Somasekar ex-PCCF, RFD & Addl. DG. NTCA
Mr. G.S. Kushwaha ex-Colonization Commissioner, Bikaner &
Ex-DM Sawai Madhopur