

# COVID-19 Impact on Protected Area Management in Tiger Range Countries

## *Update of Survey Results*

This English language on-line survey was led by WWF Tigers Alive Initiative, CAITS, and Ranger Federation of Asia (RFA). It examined the impact of COVID-19 on the functioning of Protected Areas across Tiger Range Countries, with all responses returned during May-June 2020. The survey was designed to be completed by Protected Area managers, rangers, and civil society supporting protected area management in government managed Protected Areas. Respondents were asked 35 questions which compared the current situation with that pre-COVID (i.e. within the preceding 12 months). The questions were focused around protected area management and staffing, law enforcement, and threats.

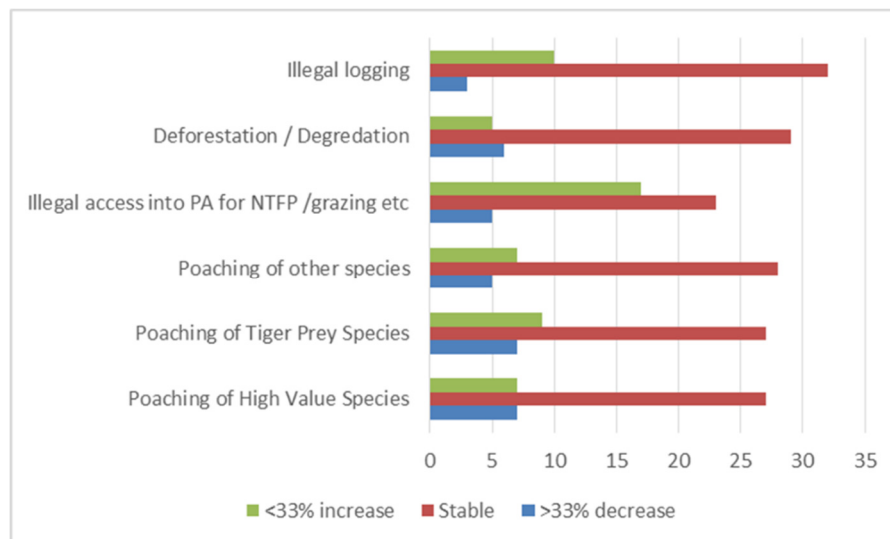
The survey link (on Survey Monkey) was circulated by WWF offices in Tiger Range Countries and through partners including members of the CAITS Executive Committee. A total of 77 complete responses were received from 12 countries i.e. all Tiger Range Countries apart from Bangladesh. At least 40 protected areas were represented with respondents primarily from Nepal (32) and Bhutan (17).

The key findings of the survey included:

**Rangers are being stretched thinner and their job is becoming more difficult.** New duties for law enforcement rangers were reported from 31% of protected areas, job losses in 8% of protected areas, and temporary salary cuts to rangers in 23% of protected areas. New duties for rangers were particularly an issue outside Nepal with more than half of rangers in the other 11 Tiger Range Countries surveyed indicating that they were asked to take on wider duties (e.g. border control, community health checkpoints, etc.) than prior to the pandemic.

The ability of rangers to effectively work has also been compromised. Key supplies, equipment, or maintenance has been disrupted in almost 60% of protected areas whilst increased constraints in filing legal cases against offenders were reported by 40% of respondents (e.g. due to issues with safely handling and managing offenders; temporary closure of courts). Community engagement activities have essentially stopped around the surveyed protected areas.

**No consistent evidence threats have changed:** At the time of the survey (May-June 2020) the respondents reported limited evidence of threats to protected areas having changed since the pandemic started. Levels of patrol coverage were generally reported as stable. .



*Fig 1. Change in perception of levels of threat to tiger range country protected areas in May-June 2020 in comparison with pre COVID-19 levels. Note not all respondents responded to all questions.*

The most notable change was an increase in illegal access into protected areas for Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP) collection. [In line with previous observations](#) this was particularly prevalent in Nepal with 75% of respondents reporting a >25% increase in illegal access into protected areas compared to <30% across the remaining Tiger Range Countries.

**Budgets are being cut:** Almost half (47%) of respondents indicated that their budgets for managing the protected areas have already been reduced compared to pre-COVID levels. Budget reductions of <20% were reported from protected areas in Nepal, Bhutan, India, and Cambodia and reductions of >20% from protected areas in Nepal, Malaysia, and India. The majority of respondents were pessimistic about future budget allocation (76%) and their ability to manage the protected area (62%) due to the impacts of the pandemic.

## Conclusions

Whilst the information on perceived changes to threat levels within the protected areas surveyed is encouraging we emphasize that this represent a snap-shot in time. Threats to protected areas, tigers, and tiger prey may change if funding, legal effectiveness, and levels of community engagement continue along the trends that were reported by this survey. It is also probable that the factors covered by this survey may further worsen as the global pandemic continues to drag on. For instance, COVID cases have

risen rapidly in the country with the largest tiger population (India) shortly after the close of the survey. We urge governments and donor agencies to ensure funding levels remain or are increased in tiger Protected Areas across the region. Effectively managing Protected Areas will allow us to protect our cherished wildlife and wild places and help maintain an essential buffer between zoonotic disease pools and human populations.