

Dozens of German Shepherds Help Protect Tigers in India

How can a German Shepherd protect a tiger? By learning special training in one of their most prized skills — an ability to find — they're helping track down poachers and stop the illegal trade of wildlife products.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- In India, forests are being cleared to make space for power projects, roads, and human dwellings, leading to significant habitat loss for the region's tigers
- More than a dozen new German Shepherd "soldiers" joined the ranks helping to tackle animal poachers in India
- After an intensive training session, the dogs learned how to detect wildlife products (including tiger skins, ivory tusks, and bones from endangered birds) and locate injured animals
- While there were an estimated 100,000 tigers in India 100 years ago, there were just 2,226 in 2014
- There are only about 3,200 tigers left in the wild worldwide, and India is thought to be home to nearly three-quarters of them, placing international scrutiny on their tiger conservation efforts

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In the U.S. and certain other countries, like the U.K., German Shepherds are among the most popular dogs used by police. While the dogs can be fierce and learn to display aggression when instructed, their primary skill is to find.

German Shepherds may be used, for instance, to find a suspect inside a building and alert police (via a head camera) to his whereabouts. They're also valued for their ability to track dead bodies and find other valuable pieces of evidence (like a dropped weapon or article of clothing) from which police can draw DNA evidence.¹

In countries such as India, German Shepherds are also being used for fighting crime, in the form of wildlife sniffer dogs trained to help stop animal poaching.

Poachers Are Decimating India's Wild Tiger Population

In India, forests are being cleared to make space for power projects, roads, and human dwellings, leading to significant habitat loss for the region's tigers. This is one threat facing the majestic creatures, but it's not the primary one.

The greatest threat to India's tiger population is thought to be poachers, who kill the animals illegally for their organs and bones, which are valued for use in traditional Chinese medicine. While there were an estimated 100,000 tigers in India 100 years ago, there were just 2,226 in 2014 (and that's up from 1,706 in 2010).²

There are only about 3,200 tigers left in the wild worldwide, and India is thought to be home to nearly three-quarters of them, placing international scrutiny on their tiger conservation efforts. While reporting a promising increase in the population from 2010 to 2014, 66 tigers died in India in 2014 and at least 64 tigers have died so far in 2015, many from illegal poaching.³

However, this is more than a matter of simply stopping a rogue hunter in the woods. The Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI) explains that many poaching incidents are orchestrated by “large organized networks of poachers, traders, and smugglers — all controlled by city-based businessmen who are seldom linked directly to the illicit goods.”

WPSI has a large network of undercover agents and informers at work to gather intelligence on these increasingly sophisticated operations. Worldwide, Interpol estimates that illegal wildlife-products trade brings in \$12 billion a year.⁴

German Shepherds Are Helping to Protect the Tiger Population in India

More than a dozen new “soldiers” joined the ranks helping to tackle animal poachers. Fourteen German Shepherd sniffer dogs, and their 28 handlers, graduated into action after an intensive training session.

The dogs learned how to detect wildlife products (including tiger skins, ivory tusks, and bones from endangered birds) and locate injured animals, which helps authorities track down poachers.

The new recruits will join 13 other sniffer dogs already in use in India, which have more than 100 cases of identifying body parts, leading to successful prosecution and convictions, to their credit. One of the dogs, Jimmy, even received a certificate of merit in 2013 for his work in cracking 25 wildlife poaching cases.⁵

The dogs will help patrol wildlife areas at increased risk of poaching as well as baggage, cargo, and vehicles at airports, railway stations, and bus stands. The program was jointly funded by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and TRAFFIC, a wildlife trade-monitoring network. As reported by Scroll.in:⁶

“TRAFFIC estimates that a dog and its handler can thoroughly scan 75% of the passengers and their baggage arriving off a Boeing 747 in 20 to 30 minutes. It would take 36 humans to do the same job in the same amount of time, and they would be able to offer no more than a cursory examination.”

The dogs and the handlers must work closely together as a team in order to make the program successful. Scroll.in continued:⁷

“When dogs scent something of interest and abruptly change their search pattern, their handlers have to recognize this behavior. Once the animals locate the article, they may whine, paw, point, or simply sit next to it.

But if a dog hasn’t been trained to track a specific object, for example, a reptile, it may show interest, but it may not alert its handler. The human has to interpret dog behavior and decide whether that bag needs manual searching.”

Will 27 German Shepherds in India Be Enough to Make a Dent in Poaching?

The dogs are reportedly stretched thin, leaving many areas of the country vulnerable to poachers. Nitin Desai, director-Central India of WPSI, said they hope to have major wildlife states equipped “with at least five-six dog squads each,” but that would require huge investments in state support and collaboration with conservation groups.⁸

For now, though, the dogs have made an impressive impact. Aside from Jimmy, the certificate-of-merit dog, other standouts include:

“In 2010, Raja unearthed the carcass of a leopard stuffed in a plastic bag and thrown into a pond in Maharashtra’s Brahmpuri wildlife division, leading to the arrests of seven villagers.

The same year, Jackie led sleuths to two poachers in possession of animal traps and six grey francolins. In 2012, Tracey helped forest officials find the missing tusks of a dead elephant in Dalma Wildlife Sanctuary, Jharkhand. She died earlier this year.”⁹

How You Can Help Save India’s Wildlife

Getting informed about the serious threats facing wildlife in India and elsewhere is the first step. Armed with knowledge, you can share it with your friends and family and others in your community to help raise awareness.

You may wish to organize a walk or exhibition to educate others about wildlife, write letters to the editor of a newspaper (print or online), start a blog about an area of wildlife conservation you’re passionate about, or even write letters or petitions to local and national leaders. WPSI further recommends:¹⁰

- **“Choose wildlife conservation as your career.** *The expansion of the conservation movement sees the need for people from all sectors, such as lawyers, computer operators, designers, etc. Consider making conservation your career or spending a couple of years of your career in a conservation-related profession.*
- **Volunteer with an environmental/wildlife NGO [non-governmental organization].** *Support an NGO by offering them your time or skills. Before you take this step, research the field and organization that you wish to assist. Once you have short-listed an organization, be sure their basic philosophy is similar to what you believe in.”*

Sources and References

¹ [The Telegraph February 13, 2001](#)
^{2,3} [New York Post August 12, 2015](#)
⁴ [WPSI, Tiger Poaching & Illegal Wildlife Trade Investigations](#)
⁵ [Quartz June 22, 2015](#)
^{6,7,8,9} [Scroll.in June 30, 2015](#)
¹⁰ [WPSI, How to Help Curb India's Wildlife Crisis](#)
