

India

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India's first anti-poaching tiger force begins work

By Habib Beary Bangalore

India's first forest ranger unit charged specifically with preventing tiger poaching has gone into action.

The 54-member force will patrol tiger reserves in national parks straddling the borders of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala states in the south.

The Special Tiger Protection Force has received training in jungle survival and weapons use.

Tiger numbers have shrunk alarmingly in recent decades. A census last year counted about 1,700 tigers in the wild.

A century ago there were estimated to be 100,000 tigers in India.

Numbers up

"The force is operational," Karnataka conservation official BK Singh told the BBC. "They will deal with poachers and hunters."

The Special Tiger Protection Force was formed by the forest and environment ministry on the recommendation of the National Tiger Conservation Authority and Karnataka authorities.

With their special training course completed, the unit has moved into Bandipur and Nagarahole national parks, south of Bangalore.

The forested region has the highest number of tigers in India, according to a census released in March 2011 by the forest and environment ministry.

Karnataka state, which has six tiger reserves, has about 300 tigers, followed by Madhya Pradesh in the north with 257.



Tiger force members celebrate after finishing a training course near Bangalore

The census indicated that tiger numbers had increased to 1,706 from 1,411 at the last count in 2007.

Officials say conservation efforts by the government and wildlife organisations have helped tiger and elephant populations increase.

But poaching remains a threat, with some 25 tigers killed in Karnataka alone since 2006.

A second tiger force will be set up in the eastern state of Orissa.

Senior National Tiger Conservation Authority official Rajesh Gopal said 13 tiger reserves in seven states across the country had been identified for special measures to protect the big cats.

Tiger expert Ullas Karanth said the new force would go a long way toward saving tigers from poachers.



India's tiger numbers have shrunk from 100,000 to 1,700 in a little over 100 years