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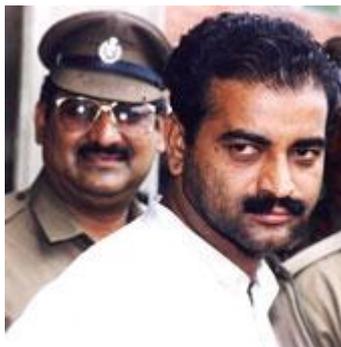
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ONLY 14 CONVICTIONS IN 748 WILDLIFE CASES [+uc('Hunt for Sansar Chand')+]

- Only 14 convictions in 748 wildlife cases

Last month's haul of animal skins and parts in Delhi shows that while wildlife cannot roam free, poachers can. And at the head of this network of killers is a wily and elusive trader. **Avijit Ghosh** reports



hide & Seek: Police display animal skins seized in a raid of a Delhi warehouse on January 31; (extreme right) Sansar Chand

It was a three-month long undercover operation that led to a west Delhi warehouse. But when Inspector Rakesh Giri raided the godown with his team of policemen, he just wasn't prepared for the magnitude of the haul and the savageness of the gore. Blood-soaked paws, claws, canines and jawbones of tigers and leopards were packed in cartons. Some big cat skins were stained with blood. "It was like being in a slaughterhouse," says Giri.

The policemen had tracked down the secret treasure depot of Sansar Chand the man described as the Veerappan of the north and one of India's most wanted wildlife smugglers. Sansar's nondescript godown nestling in the middle-class Patel Nagar area yielded two tiger skins, 28 leopard skins, 42 otter skins, 14 tiger canines, three kilograms of tiger claws, 10 tiger jaws, 60 kilograms of tiger and leopard paws and 135 kilograms of porcupine quills in all, one of the country's biggest ever seizures.

Sansar himself is absconding and the wildlife smuggler's wife Rani and son Akash are already behind bars for their alleged involvement in another wildlife case. But among those arrested in the January 31 raid was his niece Ritu. Belinda Wright, executive director, Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), sums up his professional career,

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‘He is probably responsible for more tiger and leopard deaths than anyone else in the country.’

It’s a jungle out there

Coming at a time when tigers have alarmingly vanished from the Sariska reserve (**see box**), the huge seizure has sent alarm bells ringing among law enforcement officials and wildlife enthusiasts alike. For, it only reaffirms that organised, illegal trafficking in wildlife products continues to flourish. WPSI records show that in 1994-2003, 684 tigers, 2,336 leopards and 698 otters were killed by poachers.

Environmentalists believe that these seizures represent only a small percentage of the total illegal trade.

In the new millennium, illegal wildlife trade has been globalised. Supply no longer depends on local needs. India has become a supplier of skins, bones, claws, paws, even whiskers, of the big cats to burgeoning markets in China and Southeast Asia, where these are used for clothes, balms, aphrodisiacs, charms and accessories. ‘Every body part of a tiger is invaluable. Even its blood and penis,’ says wildlife lawyer Sudhir Mishra.

This is also the age of made-to-order skin products. Home delivery is made as per demand; some skins seized by the police carried signatures indicating that they had been booked by traders.

Even the poachers are laying out their traps in a larger playing field. A group from Katni in Madhya Pradesh was caught by the Gujarat forest department in Ahmedabad. If the networking has grown, so has convergence. Elephants found dead in Uttaranchal’s Corbett National Park were killed by a poison usually used by poachers in the Northeast.

Crime capital

Delhi is the hub of this wildlife trade. Goods come to the Capital from central India, western India and southern India and Uttaranchal before being sent to international markets, where a tiger skin can fetch anything between Rs 3 to 5 lakh. ‘Delhi-based illegal wildlife traders ensure that demand meets with supply,’ says Mishra, also principal legal adviser, WPSI. Those known as the big daddies of wildlife trade such as Sansar Chand and Moti Lal operate out of the Capital.

It is not possible to ascertain whether the big cat skins discovered from Sansar’s godown belong to the tigers missing from Sariska reserve. But Ashok Kumar, senior adviser, Wildlife Trust of India (WTI), doesn’t rule out the probability of poachers connected with Sansar and family being involved in the Sariska case. ‘It is possible,’ he says.

Police and wildlife NGOs though admit that Sansar is not a poacher himself. He allegedly outsources the job. He is known to be the master puppeteer who controls a network of poachers – the Bawariyas of Panipat and the Bahelias of Katni – who operate in an area ranging from Rajasthan to Uttaranchal. And, now, even down south. Last October, Karnataka forest officials were stunned when a gang of poachers apprehended in Bandipur National Park confessed to being a part of Sansar's network during interrogation.

Wildlife experts believe he has created an organised and efficient network of buyers and sellers of illegal wildlife products across the country. Says Wright, "He sends his own people to collect the goods and stockpile them. Later, he sells these goods to Nepalese and Tibetan buyers." Many Tibetans and Nepalese arrested with wildlife products were found to be carrying Sansar's phone number with them.

Sansar, who has previously been convicted, is an accused in at least 13 wildlife cases all over the country. But his lawyer Sidharth Luthra offers an alternative view of his life and crimes. Says Luthra, "His image is larger than life. And for no justifiable reason. Sansar has become the favourite punching bag for all who are riding the wildlife bandwagon."

Undeniably, though, Sansar is smart, even if he can neither read nor write. Kumar of WTI recalls an occasion when Uttar Pradesh forest officials came to take him on transit remand. During the mandatory medical check-up, the wildlife trader started crying and complaining of a heart attack. "So he could not be sent out of the state that day," he recalls.

The police insist that efforts are on to nab Sansar. He has been arrested at least nine times before, but has usually managed to get bail. "And once he gets bail, he goes back to his old ways. The system doesn't seem to be capable of keeping him away from these actions," says Shiv Bhatnagar, assistant commissioner of police, Delhi (central).

Justice delayed

The larger truth though is that judicial convictions relating to wildlife cases are abysmally low. Out of 748 cases in India where the skins of tigers, leopards or otters have been seized, there have been only 14 convictions. The cases also proceed at a snail's pace taking about 8-10 years before being decided. A designated court for wildlife has more than 250 cases in Delhi alone.

Wildlife lawyer Mishra cites poor application of law by enforcement agencies, lack of sensitisation on wildlife issues for the trial court magistrates and the absence of aggressive enforcement strategies in the courts by forest department officials as reasons why illegal wildlife traders and poachers stay in operation and out of jail. About eight years

ago, Delhi state administration also toyed with the idea of having special public prosecutors trained in wildlife law. But nothing happened.

Similarly, a proposal for setting up a Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) is languishing with the Union ministry of environment and forest since 1995. 'If India needs to save its endangered wildlife, then the WCCB must become a reality immediately,' says Wright.

But then, wildlife hardly figures in the official priority list. Barely three weeks after the huge haul in Sansar Chand's godown, the authorities seem to have lost interest in the case. Wright points out that at the bail hearing last week in the January 31 seizure case, the public prosecutor did not even appear in court. Laments Wright, 'Despite the importance of the recent seizure, very little interest is being shown by wildlife authorities in the investigation and prosecution.'

No surprise, poachers stalk the jungle with impunity and illegal wildlife traders continue to roam free. Unlike the tigers of Sariska.

