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Forensic science is being used to crack cases of poaching in Gir National Park

Between February and March 2007, 10 lions were killed by poachers in three different incidents at the Gir National Park (GNP) which houses 360 Asiatic lions, the only surviving population in the wild.

Eighteen months later, 30 tribals belonging to the Baheliya tribe were found guilty by a local court in Junagadh and sentenced to three years imprisonment. This is unprecedented in the history

of wildlife crime in India on two counts: use of forensics to crack the case and speedy conviction of the accused.

In late March 2007, Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi took personal interest in the case and the investigation was handed over from the Forest Department to the CID-crime under Inspector General of Police (IGP) Keshav Kumar.

"We inherited a blind case with no seizure, no eyewitnesses," says Kumar. Forensics was the only ray of hope. The Modi Government gave him a seven-member team along with a mobile forensic lab.



Gir officials and forensic experts get to work at the scene of the crime

The reconstruction of the site of crime, linking the evidence gathered to the perpetrators of the crime was crucial for solving the case.

Each and every piece of evidence was meticulously collected and sealed.

Evidence collected from the scene indicated that the poachers were in the forest along with their families.

At this stage of investigations crucial help came from a Delhi-based NGO, Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), which specialises in anti-poaching operations. It provided police with the crucial input about the modus operandi of the Bahelias, a traditional nomadic poaching tribe.

They dress shabbily as herbal medicinal vendors while travelling to various wildlife centres, never revealing their true identity. Bahelias go by strange names like Cycle Bhai, Motor Singh and Diesel Singh.

A search operation was ordered and police apprehended a gang of 45 Baheliya women and

children, barring two males, in Gujarat. Director of central India operations of WPSI, Nitin Desai says, "My informers helped establish the real identity of the accused. They helped police nab four absconders."

Even after the arrests, linking them to the crime was difficult. Those arrested feigned ignorance and no recovery of lion parts was made. Here forensic support came handy. The team had recovered lion carcasses, with bones and claws missing, from pits near the Baheliya camping sites.

The accused were subjected to forensic tests, which established that their nails, spears and animal traps carried traces of flesh, blood and hair of the poached lions. The analysis determined the species of the sample as well as the unique DNA fingerprint of one particular animal, whose flesh was found on the equipment. The link was clearly established.

First of its kind

- Forensic science was used to crack the case.
- Narco-analysis was done on a woman and that too in a wildlife case.
- DNA fingerprinting used to link crime, site of crime with the perpetrators of the crime.
- Life insurance policies were recovered from the poachers, hinting at the involvement of bigger players.

To confirm the line of investigation, in a yet another unprecedented move, a narco-analysis test was conducted on one of the accused, a woman. It confirmed the initial findings. Based on the irrefutable evidence, the CID was able to submit a charge-sheet within three months.

The investigation would have gone in vain had the accused secured bail.

"Bahelias are known to jump bail and they cannot be traced as they are nomads," says Sudhir Mishra, a Supreme Court lawyer, who was appointed legal consultant for the case by the Gujarat Government.

The accused had bona fide proof of address— ration cards and voter I-cards—but the probe proved they were fake.

Faced with no ground for defence, the accused withdrew their bail application.

officials at the site where lions were killed in Gir National Park

The investigations revealed the tribals get for poaching animals to wildlife parts going. The huge life insurance covers.

The police found 18 LIC policies in gang, with Rs 4,50,000 paid as They were bought from one agent



Modi with forest and police were killed in Gir National

extent of patronage the keep the global trade in supposedly poor tribals had

the name of three of the premium for these policies. in Madhya Pradesh.

The police is now probing the source of money for these policies. "In this case, wildlife crime was treated at par with any other crime. That made the difference," says Belinda Wright, executive director, WPSI. Poachers on the endangered list?