

Mystique of the Bengal Tiger: The Making of *India: Kingdom of the Tiger*

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(Lead-in synopsis) Following in the footsteps of Jim Corbett, who became famous as a hunter of man-eating tigers and went on to become a renowned tiger conservationist, the filmmakers of *India: Land of the Tiger* explore the rich mosaic that is India. From the foothills of the Himalayas to the deserts of Rajasthan, the crew tracked tigers from the backs of elephants to capture for the big screen the elusive Bengal tiger, the timeless spirit of wild India.

The people in this village know me, for in response to an urgent telegram, which the whole village subscribed to send me, and which was carried by runner to Naini Tal for transmission, I once came hot-foot from Mokameh Ghat, where I was working, to rid them of a man-eating tiger.

--Jim Corbett, "The Queen of the Village," *My India*

The story of Jim Corbett is the story of conservation in modern-day India. Born in 1875, Corbett became famous for his skill as a hunter of man-eating tigers. His life is noteworthy for trajectory it followed as he moved from importuned tiger hunter to one of the founders of Indian conservation. India's first national park and one of its largest, at 1,200 square miles, is named after him. Corbett National Park, so-named in 1957, two years after Corbett's death, one of the national parks for tiger conservation in India today.

In the spring of 2000, James Neihouse and Keero Singh Birla went to India for NWF, to Bandhavgarh National Park, where they had heard that a tigress was struggling to survive with her two cubs. Following a treacherous 30-hour bus ride from Delhi to reach the park in Madhya Pradesh in the center of the country, the two men met with the park's naturalists, who agreed to help them film the tigers living within the 200-square-mile park.

In particular, I wanted Neihouse and Birla to film the tigress and her cubs, but how to find them? The naturalists patrolled the park on elephants. When they located the tigers, they used their walkie-talkies to notify

Niehouse and Birla, who came also on elephantback, bearing cameras.

“A healthy respect exists between elephants and tigers,” said Birla. “Tigers will tolerate the approach of elephants, but if elephants get too close, tigers will bare their teeth.” Even so, on elephant, our filmmakers could get quite near a tiger.

Elephants, however, make for an unsteady filming platform. Birla and Neihouse built 12-foot tripods, which they would carry on the elephants along with the IMAX camera. Once they spotted a tiger, they would stop their elephants and begin a 15-minute procedure to assemble the tripods and camera. Neihouse would then balance himself and the large, heavy camera on a 12-inch square platform at the top of the tripod.

“By then,” Birla said resignedly, “the tiger might very well have turned away.” They did this many times a day, for many days. Ultimately, “we knew we had the makings of an extraordinary film, but we needed a way to tell the story.”

As executive producer, I met with Birla and Neihouse, the film’s producer Goulam Amarsy, and the film’s director, Bruce Neibaur. Bruce was also the director

of the box-office success, *Mysteries of Egypt*, the highest-grossing large-format film in 1999. In a story conference, we decided to let the life of Jim Corbett convey the tale.

His journey, from hunter to conservationist, inspires *India: Kingdom of the Tiger*, the latest large-screen film to be produced by the National Wildlife Federation in conjunction with Canadian-based Primesco, Inc.

The film is somewhat of a departure for an NWF production in that it uses a dramatic storyline to entertain and inform viewers about an endangered species. When I was considering possible subjects for our next large-screen film, I looked at the animals that are part of NWF's Keep the Wild Alive program. This campaign focuses attention on 25 highly endangered species and seeks to enlighten the public about the threats each species faces and how to help. One species leapt out at me—the Bengal tiger.

To me, tigers are beautiful. Lithe and powerfully muscled, they embody grace combined with strength. Of the original eight species of tigers, only five remain. The tiger species that lived in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea is extinct. The Bali tiger, extinct. The Java tiger, extinct. The Siberian tiger is reduced to a few hundred. Maybe 500 Sumatran tigers remain. The Indo-Chinese tiger of

Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar numbers about 1,500. The most numerous species remaining is the Bengal tiger. Perhaps 4,000 or so Bengal tigers remain in small populations, scattered throughout the Indian subcontinent. Only a hundred years ago, 50,000 to 80,000 of the cats stalked the earth, from Eastern Europe to Indonesia. The creature that typified wild Asia scarcely 100 years ago is now one of the rarest big predators in the world.

The challenge of saving the tiger is at the heart of conservation. It involves a national commitment and an international effort. Is the tiger worth it? Jim Corbett spent his life among tigers, and he put down his rifle for a camera so that others could also look into the ineffable depths of a tiger's eyes and see the world from a tiger's point of view. From his hours spent in the forests and his knowledge of jungle lore, Corbett came to understand the role top predators play in a healthy ecosystem.

"The tiger," Corbett wrote in *Man-Eaters of Kumaon*, his first and best-loved book, "is a large-hearted gentleman with boundless courage." Much the same could be said about Corbett himself.

In making this film, Bruce Neibaur and the entire crew dedicated themselves to carrying the torch passed by Jim Corbett. “We probably walked the paths and traveled the same roads that Corbett did. Inspiration came from being there, and our goal was to transfer that feeling to the screen. To be in India is to be on an adventure,” said Neibaur.

Most of the film was shot on location in the foothills of the Himalayas, in the area of the Kumaon hills, part of the central mountain range in the northeastern state of Uttar Pradesh. Filming took place in a village called Mukteshwar near Naini Tal, a popular hill station where Corbett was born and raised. “This is a beautiful landscape,” said Neibaur, “with terraced farmland carved into steep mountainsides. Time has stood still here. It is not hard to imagine yourself back in 1910.” It is a land of lofty snow peaks and vivid green valleys.

The steep terrain, though beautiful to look at, posed challenges for filming. “We used a steady cam, which is not much used in large-format filming,” said Neibaur. “A steady cam is usually hand-held but keeps the image stable. It’s not normally used with cameras as heavy as IMAX cameras.” A counter-weight balancing mechanism with

springs helped hold the camera, the idea being to let the camera “float” and find its own balance. The steady cam proved useful when Jim Corbett is walking through the jungle. The images it captured give a sense of movement, and viewers see what Corbett sees.

The character of Corbett is played by the actor Christopher Heyerdahl, who happens to be the nephew of Thor Heyerdahl, author of the *Voyage of the Kon Tiki*. “Not only is he a great actor,” Neihaur said, “but he also has a close physical similarity to the real Jim Corbett.”

The film crew, composed of Americans, Indians, and Canadians, numbered about 100. “It was a challenge finding places for our crew members to stay, as there were no hotel rooms. Mukteshwar is not easy to get to. You fly to Delhi and then have another 18 hours of travel by train and automobile to get to the location. We had rain, snow, and heat. Down on the plains, the temperature would reach 110 degrees,” recounted Neibaur. “But there is no substitute for seeing and working in the real location. The images we built came about as a result of the inspiration that comes only from being in the real place.”

India: Kingdom of the Tiger takes viewers to one of the oldest civilizations in the world. A crossroads for

thousands of years, India is a diverse land, culturally and spiritually. The film shows us the many faces of India, yet that very human tide—India's population has now reached nearly a billion people—threatens to overwhelm what has been called *The Tiger Raj*, or Kingdom of the Tiger.

Not so long ago, wherever one traveled, from the dense tropical forests to the scorching deserts, from fertile plains fed by thundering Himalayan rivers to remote mountain peaks, one could find tigers roaming there. The tiger is incredibly adaptable, to different climates, to different food sources, to different circumstances. But it does need one thing, and that is room to roam.

Tigers need large territories--a male tiger may stake out a claim of 25 square miles—and a large prey base. An average tiger is about 10 feet long, from nose to tip of tail. Males weigh about 400 to 500 pounds; females slightly less. Tigers use their powerful forelimbs and strong claws to wrestle prey to the ground, and canine teeth as long as a man's thumb deliver the killing bite. A tiger makes a kill every eight days or so and will return over the week to feed on the carcass until all the meat is stripped. As long as they have room to hunt, are healthy, and have an intact prey base, tigers will leave humans alone.

Increasingly, though, humans are encroaching on tiger habitat. With 16 percent of the world's people making their home on 2 percent of the world's land, India is fast losing its wildlife habitat. At the turn of the twentieth century, 40 percent of India was covered in forest. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the figure is 15 percent. And only 3 percent of that has been specifically set aside for wildlife.

Yet, as Gandhi himself said, "A society can be judged by the way it treats its animals." Conservationists in India are working hard to preserve tiger habitat and police poaching. Persistent tiger poaching may be the greatest danger to tiger conservation. A poacher can sell tiger parts for as much as some villagers make in a year. The animals are shot for sale to China, which uses tiger parts, including bones, hides, whiskers, and flesh, in traditional medicines.

One promising effort to weigh the economic scales against tiger poaching is the promotion of the ecotourism value of tigers and their habitats to local people. The Corbett Foundation, established in 1994 by Dilip Dharamsey Khatau, has brought groups of villagers for conducted day visits to Corbett National Park. Recently, five hundred villagers, nearly half of them women, and

some 100 teachers and 600 school children have learned about the biodiversity of the Corbett Tiger Reserve and possible ways the reserve can be managed to benefit the local community.

Educational support materials will be an important part of the promotional plan for *India: Kingdom of the Tige*. NWF will develop an array of educational collateral, including, for example, an educator's guide, a four-color "interactive" poster, artifact trunks, and an informative website.

"I hope NWF's big-screen film whets people's curiosity about life in India and the fate of large predators, in India and throughout the world," Neibaur said. "The film is meant, foremost, to entertain. But once you have the viewer's attention, you have an opportunity to inform, enlighten, and inspire."

In the character of Jim Corbett, you have an adventurous spirit who had the wisdom to see that life in an interconnected, interdependent web of biological relationships. It is my hope that through this film, the legacy of Jim Corbett, the famous *tiger-wallah*—"tiger-man"—who worked to save the greatest of the great cats, will continue to bear fruit.

Jim Corbett: The Large-Hearted Gentleman

Edward James Corbett was born in 1875 of English ancestry in a part of India called Kumaon, in the picturesque foothills of the Himalayas. His father, the post master in the popular hill station of Naini Tal, died when Jim Corbett was four. It fell to his wife to raise and educate twelve children on a widow's meager pension. His mother, Corbett recalled, "had the courage of Joan of Arc and Nurse Clavell combined."

Corbett remembered his boyhood as a sort of forest idyll. Lying in his bed at night, he would listen to the sounds of the jungle. He learned to imitate the cries and calls of the animals so precisely that he once impersonated a leopard so convincingly that a British hunter and a leopard crept toward him simultaneously.

He began hunting to help feed his family. He had to make every shell count. His gun was an ancient muzzle-loading shotgun whose one good barrel was lashed to the stock with wire. Corbett's shooting skill and encyclopedic knowledge of the surrounding jungle soon became well know. As early as 1906, requests come to him, begging that

he track down a tiger or leopard that had preyed on humans.

Corbett believed that animals that had struck under special conditions, such as protecting cubs or disturbed at a kill, should be given the benefit of the doubt. He was only interested in habitual man-killers and would only consent to come after two conditions had been granted: that all offers of a reward were withdrawn, and that all other hunters had to leave the area. He wrote, "I am sure all sportsmen share my aversion to being classed as a reward-hunter and are as anxious as I to avoid being shot."

Between 1906 and 1941, Corbett hunted down at least a dozen man-eaters. It is estimated that the combined total of men, women, and children those twelve animals are thought to have killed before he stopped them was more than 1,500. His very first man-devourer, the Campawat tiger, alone was responsible for 436 documented deaths. Corbett's reaction to his success as a hunter was invariably ambivalent.

In the 1920s, Corbett became appalled at the ever-increasing number of hunters, British and Indian, in the forests and concerned about the view of jungles as a source of profit from timber rather than a sanctuary for wildlife.

He began speaking to groups of schoolchildren about their natural heritage—he electrified blasé students by concluding with the full-throated roar of a tiger. He helped create the Association for the Preservation of Game in the United Provinces and the All-India Conference for the Preservation of Wild Life. He worked to establish India's first national park, inaugurated in 1934 in the Kumaon Hills.

By the mid-thirties, Corbett had almost entirely abandoned hunting and, instead, turned his attention to the challenge of capturing tigers on motion-picture film. When he found that the whirr of the camera was disturbing the tigers, he dammed a stream so its gurgle would cover up the sound of the camera. He sat day after day for four months nearby until he was at least rewarded with the appearance of seven tigers there, which he caught on film.

Corbett was sixty-four years old when World War II broke out. He volunteered to train Allied troops in the techniques of jungle survival, but the strain proved too much and he became very ill. Recuperating, he wrote *Man-eaters of Kumaon*, which became an international best-seller, was translated into twenty-seven languages, and was almost universally praised by critics.

After the war, and after Indian independence in 1947, Corbett and his sister, Maggie, to whom he had been devoted all his life, retired to Kenya, where he continued to write and sound the alarm about declining numbers of tigers and other wildlife. Jim Corbett died of a heart attack in 1955 and is buried in Africa. The national park he fought to establish was renamed in his honor two years later and is now nearly twice its original size. It is a favored place for visitors hoping to see a tiger.

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