

Sunita Dhairyam is saving not just wildlife but poor villagers

Author - , Published on - 18.3.2015



"Wildlife has become my life and the humanitarian aspect of conservation has been

long-neglected," she says. BANGALORE: Most foreign-returned professionals pursue similar agendas - a comfortable job, a swanky home and a six-digit paycheque. But Sunita Dhairyam was different. When she returned to Bengaluru in 1998 after a decade of living the American dream, she chose, against familial and other odds, to permanently settle down near the Bandipur National Park -living, initially, in a small room with no water and electricity -to pursue her passion for wildlife. However, she ended up not only using her art to create awareness about wildlife conservation, but also made a difference to the lives of impoverished people around Mangala village in Chamaraajanagar district.

"Wildlife has become my life and the humanitarian aspect of conservation has been long-neglected. So, I try and help the villagers here out of their poverty-related issues in whatever way I can," the 52-year-old told ET.

Sunita has a three-pronged approach. First, she helped a doctor set up a clinic that provides free treatment to the 15 villages nearby . Then, she addressed the major concern of compensation for the villagers who lost their livestock to carnivores. The remaining funds are directed towards child education in the villages.

"If a cow gets killed by a tiger, leopard or a wild boar, we first evaluate the authenticity of the claim. Once the application form is filled by the owner, the amount is immediately transferred to a bank account in Gundlupet," she said, adding that while `3,000 is an insignificant amount for cattle, it often prevents villagers from resorting to retaliatory killing (of the carnivore) and eases their anger and frustration towards wildlife.

"The forest department not only takes a long time for compensating villagers, but it does not consider applications for cattle killed inside the forest," she said. Since she started the compensation service in 2007, Sunita has received as many as three applications per week. "Though my compensations are a bare minimum, they seem to have worked. Now, it has become a routine system here," she said.

She set up the Mariamma Charitable Trust to gather funds and address these chronic issues. "I also started Temple Tree Designs, where I use my skills as an artist to design and sell wildlife paraphernalia like t-shirts, caps and jackets for tourists visiting the park." She also regularly exhibits her paintings and part of the proceeds goes to the trust.

Sunita believes that it is a constant battle to keep working with locals and sensitising them about wildlife diversity and preservation. "I know we can never put a price on wildlife, but the fact that villagers from far and wide trust me and never turn away , keeps me going." First published in **The Economic Times**