

# Life of a Tigress

John Seidensticker

Charles McDougal, a National Zoo Research Associate, has been watching the tigers of Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park for more than 15 years. His long-term observations are the most extensive ever made on tiger behavior and ecology. Over the years, as he tracked the rich details of their lives, Chuck also came to know many individual tigers intimately. He recently wrote to report the death of a tiger and a friend.

"On the afternoon of August 10, 1987, the still-warm remains of female tiger No. 115, 'Chuchchi,' were found beside the path between Dhaker Khola and Banth Khola Puchchar, just south of the Reu River in Chitwan. Her back was broken. A careful reading of tracks showed she was killed by a forepaw blow from a 3-year old male tiger, the son of female tiger No. 122. At the time of her death, Chuchchi was emaciated (98 kg or 215 pounds) and had badly worn canines. She was at least 15.5 years old."

From the time Chuck started watching tigers, Chuchchi (meaning "pointed toes," for her distinctive tracks) had been an unobtrusive and vital force in Chitwan, where she lived and hunted and reared her cubs in the tall grass and riverine forest on the flood plain between the Rapti and Reu rivers. She was a key figure in the scientific monographs and papers on tiger social organization and land-tenure system written by Chuck and by former Smithsonian Tiger Ecology Project scientists Mel Sunquist and Dave Smith.

I first met Chuchchi in 1974 when she was still working out the boundaries of her territory with No. 122's mother. When Chuck and I studied tiger predatory behavior, Chuchchi was one of our focal animals. She was also an important player in our study of interactions between tigers and leopards. We learned that female tigers defend territories from other females by watching and tracking Chuchchi and her neighbors. Chuck

and Dave Smith learned how female tigers maintain exclusive territories without fighting by observing Chuchchi and female tiger No. 122 mark and inspect trees along their common boundary. Through radiotracking (she was first collared in 1978), careful reading of pug marks, and direct observation, Chuck and his Shikari assistants learned the details of Chuchchi's life.

Although Chuchchi lived on the same territory throughout her breeding life, in 15 years she had many different males in her life. The first male to occupy a territory that overlapped Chuchchi's was No. 102, in 1975-76. From 1976 to November of 1979 there was No. 105, followed by Sahila Bhale, whose tenure lasted until August of 1981. Then there was a 6-month period of upheaval. First to enter the vacant territory was a young male, No. 123, but he was soon joined by male No. 127. In the ensuing fight over possession No. 123 was killed. No. 127 was usurped in February of 1982 by Kanchha Bhale, who took over and stayed until 1985. He was then replaced by Bahadur Bhale, the last of Chuchchi's males. Some of these male tigers fathered her cubs; some probably killed her cubs; some undoubtedly did both.

Chuchchi's first litter was born in mid-1975, her last in mid-1985. In those 10 years she produced a total of 16 known cubs in five litters. Eight cubs survived at least until they dispersed at about two years of age, but Chuck doesn't think any of the cubs in her last litter survived.

Adult female tigers often remain near their mothers and some even acquire territories from their mothers. A female from Chuchchi's 1977 litter, known as the Panch Pandu Tigress, settled adjacent to her mother in 1979. In 1981-82, Chuchchi gave up about half of her territory to her daughter Jabarjastri, who was born in 1979. Kanchhi Pothi, a daughter born in 1982, never left her mother's territory. In fact, she finally drove Chuchchi out



Fiona Sunquist

Chuchchi

at the end of 1986 before she produced her first two cubs in May of 1987.

In the last few months of her life, after Kanchhi Pothi displaced her, Chuchchi took a number of long, wandering trips to places she was never known to have visited before. But she kept returning to the Dhaker Khola area, where she had spent her life and where she finally met her death.

In his book, *The Face of the Tiger*, Chuck described an encounter with Chuchchi—a face-to-face meeting on a knife-edged Swilalik ridge: "As I crested a rise on the ridge I saw a rapid movement and a flash of reddish-brown just on the near side of the next rise. It suddenly resolved itself into the tigress, who crouched facing me 15 yards away, her eyes locked into mine. I did not move. She did not move... Then it struck me that perhaps the tigress was leaving the first move up to me. Quite slowly, so as not to alarm her, I took a step backward. Then, as there was a sheer drop on either side, I turned around and retraced my steps back along the ridge the way I had come, resisting the impulse to look over my shoulder."

Sound conservation practice and policy is based on good natural history. The glimpses we had into Chuchchi's life were essential to our comprehensive understanding of tiger ecology and behavior. You could say she is the "stuff" of what we know about tigers. This information is the foundation of the enormous conservation effort mounted by His Majesty's Government of Nepal, which makes it possible for Chuchchi's daughters and granddaughters to still stalk their prey and raise their cubs in the tall grass of Chitwan Valley. But Chuchchi is gone. All of us who knew her feel a great loss. □