

Man of forests who pioneered Karnataka's green initiatives

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BENGALURU: A forester, photographer, author and wildlife specialist, Sethuram Gopalrao Neginhal (SG Neginhal) was the driving force behind the setting up of the Bandipur Tiger Reserve which turned 47 last week. At 92, Neginhal is active with his lens and pen, apart from being part of various conservation activities.

Known as the Tree Man for his role in planting 10.5 lakh saplings across Bengaluru in 1980s, Neginhal was the wildlife officer of Bandipur sanctuary that was set up in November 1973. He retired in 1987.

He was born in 1929 at Dharwad, then under the Bombay Presidency, and his father Gopalrao was a forest officer, who trained way back in 1912 at the prestigious Rangers College in Dehradun under the British. “My love for the forest and its inhabitants started from a young age as I would often

accompany my father on his official trips and wildlife expeditions,” recalled Neginhal, while speaking to TOI at his Basaveshwaranagar home.

Following in his father's footsteps, young Neginhal joined a two-year forest rangers course at a training institute in Dharwad in 1951 and served in several wildlife zones in the country. “My work landed me a posting in Mysore in 1972 as wildlife officer incharge of Bandipur and Nagarhole sanctuaries, Ranganathittu bird sanctuary and Biligirirangana Hills,” he said.

First tiger park

With the tiger population across the globe and mainly in India witnessing a drop in the 1970s, an expert team from Britain met then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi with an appeal to start a tiger project. At her behest, a committee was formed under the ministry of environment and forest and the Project Tiger was initiated. The committee comprising veteran wildlife lensman and naturalist Madhaviah Krishnan toured the country in early 1973 to form tiger reserves.

“The committee members toured the south and visited Mudumalai in Tamil Nadu, Wayanad in Kerala and Bandipur in Karnataka. Bandipur impressed them the most as it was a marvellous habitat for tigers with grasslands, thick forests and waterholes. We had developed waterbodies and watch towers which the team examined,” Neginhal said.

The committee chose Bandipur to be the first tiger park in south India. Neginhal prepared the management plan for the operation of the sanctuary by June 1973 with approval from the Karnataka government. On November 17, 1973, the Bandipur Tiger Project was inaugurated by then chief minister Devaraj Urs alongside forest minister KH Patil. “It was a great moment in the history of the state and the Bandipur Tiger Reserve went on to become world famous,” he added.