



Before you begin

We all connect to forests in different ways. For some of us, forests are homes for tigers and places to protect wildlife. For others, forests give wood for our stoves, grass for our goats, and income from our knowledge of the land. Many of us would like to visit forests to see the wildlife that we otherwise only read about. Some of us may already know people whose lives and work depend on forests.

Here are stories of different people connected to a forest in India. As you read each story, imagine you are walking into the forest with the person in it—sometimes on a paved road, sometimes on a narrow goat path, and sometimes through tall, dry grass. All the while, keeping an ear out for signs of a tiger nearby. As you read, think about:

- How does each person depend on the forest?
- How is this forest changing?
- Who is helped by these changes?
- Who faces difficulties because of them?

Each story is followed by its own questions. But the stories are all interconnected—just like the lives of the people in them. So, read all the stories before you think about the questions. Discuss them with your friends and teacher. Remember: For many of these questions, there may not be just one 'right' answer.



A forest produce gatherer

In summer, Sukmati wakes before sunrise to walk with other women to the nearby forest. This is the season when mahua trees flower. The women spread cloth under the trees to collect flowers that have fallen overnight. Later, the harvest is dried and sold at the *haat* (local weekly market). Sukmati carries them in a basket woven from bamboo gathered from the forest. With her earnings, she buys salt and cooking oil. Each week, Sukmati also gathers dry, fallen branches for the *chulha* (clay stove) on which she cooks. Before each monsoon, she collects dry grass to rethatch the roof of her mud house. When food is scarce, she digs for wild tubers or gathers fruits, edible leaves, and mushrooms. Sukmati knows what she can find where in every season.

In recent years, large parts of the forest have been fenced off. Forest watchers no longer allow villagers to enter many areas. She must walk farther and spend more time collecting the produce her family depends on. Some years, Sukmati walks through forest patches blackened by summer fires before new grass begins to grow again. While moving through the forest, she watches for signs of tigers.

- Sukmati depends on the forest for cooking fuel, food, roofing grass, and income. Why might protecting forests matter differently to her than to someone like Noor who is only visiting for a short time?
- Many products used in cities come from forests, including timber, paper, and medicines. Sukmati collects only fallen branches for fuel. Why is it important to ask whether the scale of the two kinds of human use affects forests in the same way?
- Sukmati knows where to find different plants, flowers, mushrooms, and tubers in each season. Shankar is hired as a forest watcher because he knows this landscape. Why might this kind of local knowledge be important for both people and forests?



A goat herder

Lalsu's day begins by taking his goats to graze at the forest edges. He looks for patches of green and water holes. These are the only places his goats can find food during dry months when grazing near the village is scarce. Without them, the family must buy expensive fodder. He must be careful because wild animals, including tigers, come to drink from the same water holes. These days, he sees deer less often than before. Forest officials claim goats harm the forest by feeding on young stems. But Lalsu's family has grazed animals here for generations and knows which areas to avoid in different seasons. As the goats move through the forest edge, their droppings act as manure, helping fresh plants grow.

Some traditional paths now pass through fenced forest areas, while tar roads cut across others. Lalsu avoids certain forest patches at dusk, especially where tiger movement has increased. A week ago, another herder lost a goat to a tiger. Losing even one animal is a big loss for the family. He sold two goats to pay for his father's treatment from a snakebite last year. Goats are also sold to buy rice, oil, and school notebooks, or to repay debts during difficult months.

- Forest officials say goats damage young plants. But Lalsu says that goat droppings help plants grow. Can both be right? What else should we know before deciding how grazing should be managed?
- Lalsu sees fewer deer than before, while tiger movement near villages has increased. What might this suggest about changes happening inside the forest?
- Many people living far from forests use milk, leather, meat, roads, and electricity every day. How might the demands made by people in towns and cities affect families like Lalsu's?



A forest watcher

Shankar's day often begins before sunrise. Carrying a *lathi* (a bamboo stick), a water bottle, and a small cloth bag, he patrols the forest. He walks long distances (almost 25 km) daily, looking for forest fires, poachers' traps, injured wildlife, or stray cattle. Some villagers are angry with him for stopping them from grazing animals or cutting wood in protected areas. Shankar sometimes patrols near railway tracks and roads that cut through the forest. At night, animals crossing these stretches can be injured or killed by speeding vehicles and trains. In recent years, Shankar has been asked more often to monitor tiger movement near villages and farms outside the reserve boundary.

Shankar was hired for this job because he is from a nearby village and knows the landscape well. But his job is not permanent. He earns about six thousand rupees a month, but his salary has been delayed for two months. He sometimes stays for several days in a bare, one-room anti-poaching log hut deep in the forest, lit only by a dim solar lamp. Each night, before sleeping, he checks the floor and mat for scorpions or snakes that may have entered through gaps in the wood while seeking shelter from the heat. Patrolling can be risky. Last year, a watcher in a nearby range was injured in a wild animal attack. Even so, Shankar continues his rounds every day because his family depends on his income.

- Shankar is a villager himself, yet his neighbours are angry with him. How do you think it feels to be caught between your job and your community?
- Shankar stops villagers from grazing animals in the forest. But he also patrols near roads and railway tracks where animals are often killed by vehicles. Which of these seem more dangerous to you? What factors decide which activities in a forest are restricted and which are allowed?
- Shankar's job is to 'protect' the forest. Yet his job is not permanent and his salary is often delayed. What does this say about how much we value forest watchers?
- Shankar is now asked to monitor tiger movement outside reserve boundaries more often than before. What does this tell you about the health of the forest?



A student visitor

Noor had read about Project Tiger in her science textbook, so she was excited when her school announced a visit to a nearby tiger reserve. But the forest was not as silent as she had imagined. Jeeps moved up and down the safari route carrying tourists with large cameras and binoculars. Noor noticed plastic bottles and snack wrappers by the roadside. At first, she kept asking, “Will we see a tiger?” The guide pointed out pugmarks on the ground and explained that one had passed through the area earlier.

As they moved further into the forest, Noor saw a road cutting through the trees and power lines overhead. In some places, there were fences, and in others, she saw open patches where trees had been cleared. Her teacher had explained that tigers are quiet, solitary animals that need large, connected forests to move, hunt, and find mates. Looking at the broken landscape, Noor wondered how easily these animals could move across these spaces and cross these barriers. By the end of the visit, Noor had not seen a tiger. But she had started to notice how the forest is used and changed in many different ways.

- Noor saw tourists leaving plastic and jeeps making noise. How might these affect tigers? Why are tourists allowed in ‘protected’ areas while people like Sukmati and Lalsu are often kept out?
- The textbook says tigers need ‘connected forests,’ but Noor notices roads and power lines cutting through the forest. Why are such infrastructure projects allowed to fragment tiger habitat?
- Shankar protects forests every day, but he does not fully benefit from the tourism or attention tiger reserves receive. Who gains the most from wildlife conservation, and who carries most of the burden?
- Noor wonders how animals cross the fences she sees. How might these physical barriers affect a tiger looking for a mate, Sukmati in her search for mahua flowers, and Lalsu in his access to grazing land?

After reading

Think about: All four people in these stories have different relationships with the forest. Who did you relate to most, and why? How did your feelings for that person shape your answers to the questions at the end of each story?

Discuss: As forests change because of conservation policies, roads, tourism, energy projects, and climate pressures, both wildlife and people are affected in different ways.

- a) **The meaning of 'protection':** If a forest is 'protected' from a woman gathering fallen mahua flowers, but not from a tar road or power line, what is actually being protected?
- b) **Shared risks:** A tiger kills Lalsu's neighbour's goat, and a snake bites his father. These are some risks Lalsu faces every day. Does a person in a city who wants to 'save the tiger' share any of these risks? Why or why not?
- c) **The role of knowledge:** Who do you think understands tiger movement better: a scientist who spends 2–3 months each year using camera traps and GPS to map it, or people like Lalsu, Shankar, and Sukmati who walk through the forest every day and use their senses to notice small changes in the forest itself? How might the knowledge of these two groups differ? Why is one often listened to more than the other? What might happen if a new forest law draws on knowledge from only one of them?
- d) **Power and fairness:** Often, people living far away have the most power to make rules for the forest, while those living in or near it face the most risks. How can we make conservation fairer for both the people and the wildlife who call the forest home?

Your turn: Have you seen or met someone who gathers produce from a forest, grazes animals near them, or works to protect them? Create a fifth story card based on someone in your own area or your own experience. How would you write their story? What questions would you ask other children to think about?

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