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Record of Sloth Bear (*Melursus ursinus ursinus*, Shaw, 1791) from Aravalli District, Gujarat

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ABSTRACT

Sloth bear is amongst the four bear species found in India, mostly occurring in the lowland forests with patchy distribution throughout its range. The habitat is highly fragmented in Gujarat state of western India, restricting the natural dispersal of bears within the landscape. During our regular field survey, we found an evidence of sloth bear presence in an area where it was not reported since last few decades. The area is located between two forest patches with dry deciduous vegetation where the recent record of sloth bear indicates that this area can be a potential corridor for sloth bear dispersal and needs further monitoring and conservation.

Key Words: Sloth Bear, Vagheshvari, Sign Surveys, Interviews, New Record.

INTRODUCTION

Bears are symbolized by eight species in the world, among those Sloth bear *Melursus ursinus ursinus*, Shaw 1791 is endemic to Indian subcontinent only. In Gujarat, Sloth Bears are considered to be found in northern and north-eastern districts like Banaskantha, Sabarkantha, Dahod, Vadodara and Narmada districts (Table 1). Recently with the help of forest staffs, we have reported sloth bear presence in Aravalli district of Gujarat. Sloth bear is vulnerable according to IUCN 2016, listed as Schedule I under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Appendix I of CITES.

Sloth bear mainly prefers low land and hilly terrain of dry deciduous forests (Brander, 1982; Phillips, 1984; Sukhadiya *et al.*, 2013), preferably feeds on termites, black ants, red ants, honey, some fruits like *Ziziphus* spp., *Aegle marmelos*, *Cassia fistula*, *Semecarpus anacardium*,

Ficus spp, *Diospyros melanoxylon*, *Buchanania lanzan*, *Bridelia squamosa*, *Schleichera oleosa*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Psidium guajava*, *Mangifera indica*, *Arachis hypogea* and flowers like *Madhuca indica*. It was also observed to consume animal matters (Laurie and Seidensticker, 1977; Gokula *et al.*, 1995; Baskaran *et al.*, 1997; Joshi *et al.*, 1997; Akhtar *et al.*, 2004; Mewada and Dharaiya, 2010; Palei *et al.*, 2014).

In mid July, the forest field staff of Aravalli forest division has reported that they were observed a female sloth bear with cubs in the Vagheshvari forest round of Aravalli division during their routine forest patrolling. The area is politically known as Vagheshvari beat of Vagheshvari round, part of Bhiloda range of Aravalli wildlife division. This zone is geographically located at 23.843729° N latitude, 73.217246° E longitude at outer most



Fig 1. Habitat type of Vagheshvari forest area.



Fig 2. Sloth bear scat, containing seeds of Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*).

range of Polo reserved forest of Sabarkantha district, carries mixed deciduous vegetation (Fig. 1). Polo forest is continuously connected with Udaipur district Rajasthan state. Vagheshvari area has hilly terrain, containing *Tectona grandis*, *Pongamia pinnata*, *Alangium salvifolium*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Butea monosperma* etc plant species. Recently people are developing the crops of Green gram (*Vigna radiata*) and Watermelon (*Citrullus lanatus*) mainly in this area.

As the presence of sloth bear was never reported in this area earlier, an extensive survey was carried out in the area through sign survey to counter check the presence of sloth bear. The entire area have been surveyed through strip transect to collect the signs of sloth bear such as scats, pugmarks, claw marks on the tree as well as interviewing the local people and forest dwellers.

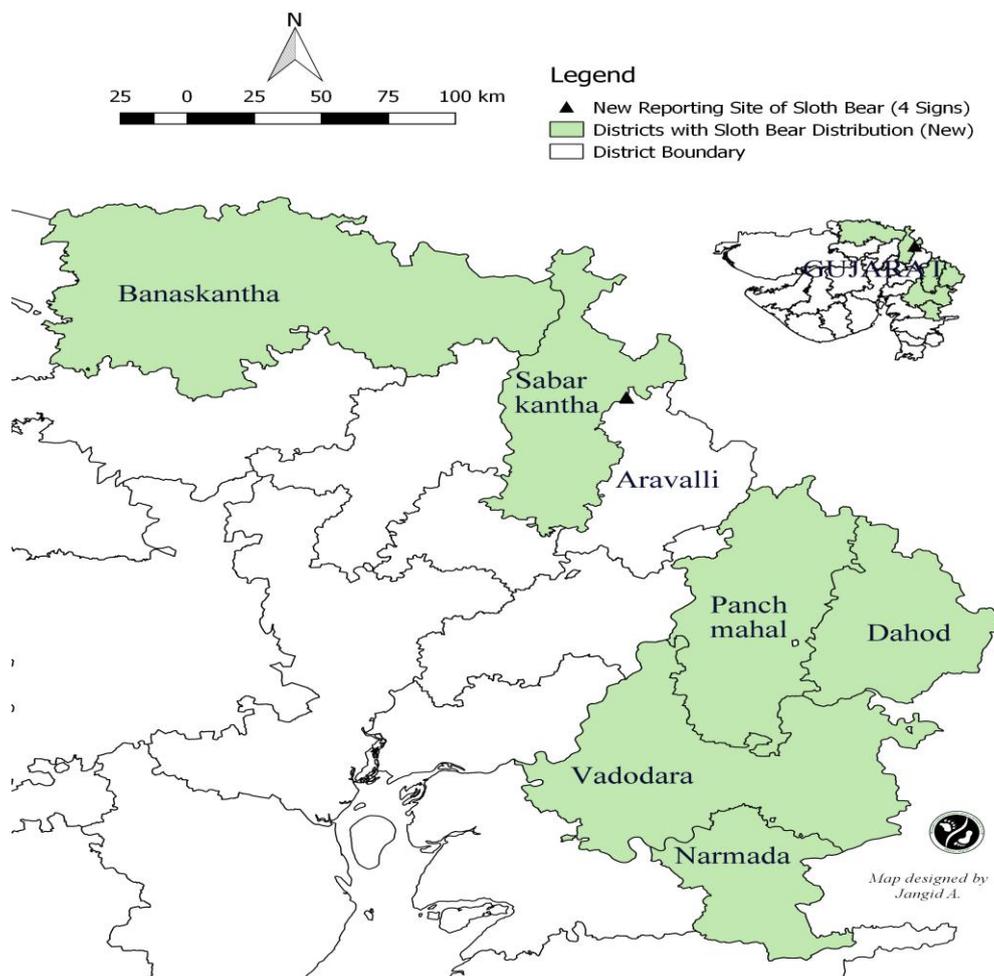


Fig 3. Sloth bear distribution range in Gujarat state with current reported site in Aravalli district.

During the survey two scats of sloth bear were found. The scat contents were checked and found with watermelon seeds (Fig. 2). Forest dwellers were inquired and they confirmed the regular movement of sloth bear in this area. Fresh pugmarks and claw marks on the tree were not found during the survey. The locals while asked for the occurrence of sloth bear in the area, they reported that, a female bear with two cubs is using this habitat since last six to seven years; however, any conflict with humans have not been recorded. The surveyed forest round of Bhiloda range of Aravalli forest division is close to Polo forest, where good population of sloth bear is already

reported. The presence of bear in this area is an indicator of expansion of its distribution range in north-east Gujarat and a result of their natural dispersion. This forest patch should be regularly monitored as an important corridor for Sloth bear movement and natural dispersion. The area should also be given a special attention for habitat improvement through planting tree species of bear food preference and constructing some artificial water bodies to prevent human-bear interactions in future. The Vagheshvari forest area can be developed as a potential sloth bear corridor and should also be included in the sloth bear corridor conservation project for more conservation actions (Fig 3).

Table 1: Occurrence of sloth bear in different districts of Gujarat including the current report.

No.	Locality	District	Latitude	Longitude	Reference
1.	Jassore Sloth Bear Sanctuary	Banaskantha	24.440215°	72.517358°	Garshelis <i>et al.</i> , 1999
2.	Balaram- Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary	Banaskantha	24.306426°	72.780678°	Dharaiya & Goyal, 2012
3.	Polo Reserved Forest	Sabarkantha	24.010221°	73.287309°	Mewada & Dharaiya, 2010
4.	Ratanmahal Sloth Bear Sanctuary	Dahod	22.565829°	74.101561°	Garshelis <i>et al.</i> , 1999
5.	Jambughoda Wildlife Sanctuary	Vadodara	22.360336°	73.667060°	Dharaiya & Goyal, 2012
6.	Shoolpaneshwar Wildlife Sanctuary	Narmada	21.760469°	73.795905°	Garshelis <i>et al.</i> , 1999
7.	Vagheshvari	Aravalli	23.843729°	73.217246°	Current Report

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