

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

A supremely bad decision...

The Supreme Court in New Delhi has just made a ludicrous decision that could be the final nail in the Indian tiger's coffin. It has decided that there will be no tourism in the core zones of any of India's tiger reserves.

Conservationists have been calling for tiger tourism to be regulated properly for years, but this blanket ban would be complete and utter madness.

For a start, tourists make great deterrents: tigers are less likely to be killed by poachers in areas where lots of people are watching. They are also the best way to give tigers and their forest homes a serious economic value, providing local people with a livelihood that gives them an incentive to keep the Endangered big cats alive and well.

Without tourism you get corruption and neglect, instead of accountability, media scrutiny and political support. It is no coincidence that the highest tiger densities are found in places with lots of tourists – national parks such as Corbett, Bandhavgarh and Kaziranga – and the lowest where tourists are absent.

Official figures suggest that India's tiger population has increased from 1,411 just a few years ago in 2007 to 1,706 in 2010. But I don't

believe a word of it. The threats haven't diminished, so how can tiger numbers have increased? In truth, the population is almost certainly plummeting faster than anyone can actually count – independent experts claim that the real figure is closer to 800.

So why on Earth do some conservation groups continue to quote inflated numbers? Are they afraid of upsetting the Indian government? Or to admit bad news?

A watched tiger is never poached.



“*The Supreme Court's decision is a smokescreen to hide the state's failure to protect India's tigers.*”

The Supreme Court's decision is a smokescreen to hide the state's failure to protect India's tigers. If it doesn't wise up, the last person to see a wild tiger in India – in the not-too-distant future – will do so through the sights of a gun.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.