

Forest officer Sasmita braves odds, wins UN award

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A female forest officer from India, Sasmita Lanka has received the United Nation's Asia Environmental Enforcement Award. This is the first time that an Indian female officer has received this award.

Lanka, who is a divisional forest officer in Athgarh, Odisha, received the award under the 'Gender Leadership and Impact' category for her work in help in busting international pangolin smuggling rackets in the state.

Lanka deployed informers across her jurisdiction to receive tip-offs on such illegal activities. To bust the racket, she offered a reward for information about suspects. Within a month, she rescued a pangolin from one village, and began cracking down on other gangs. Investigations revealed the presence of an active smuggling and poaching network that had not been on the radar, probably for years, and also the extent to which it threatened the very existence of the pangolins in the area.

Braving threats to her life, the 47-year-old officer arrested 28 racketeers, including eight smugglers, rescued five pangolins, seized one dead one, and recovered five kilos of pangolin scales. She was responsible for all the legal action taken against the smugglers between August 2019 and April 2020 during her stint in the Athagarh and Khunpunni forest range. Lanka also conducted many awareness campaigns among locals about the illegal trade of pangolins.

In 2019, one of the winners was Ramesh Kumar Pandey, Field Director, Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, India, under the 'Impact' category. In April 2019, Pandey led a team from the reserve to arrest a notorious poacher who was wanted by both India and Nepal in 11 cases of tiger poaching incidents and had links with criminal network trading in tigers across the India-Nepal border. Pandey was also aided by the M-STrIPES App (Monitoring System for Tigers-Intensive Protection and Ecological Status), a mobile application to strengthen patrolling and surveillance of tigers in India.

The Asia Environmental Enforcement Awards publicly recognize and celebrate excellence in enforcement by government officials and institutions or teams combating transboundary environmental crime. The Awards are given to individuals and/or government organizations/teams that demonstrate excellence and outstanding leadership in enforcement of national laws to combat transboundary environmental crime. The thematic scope of the Awards covers any transboundary environmental crimes, such as illegal trade in wildlife, illegal trade in chemicals or waste, including

plastic, all of which become increasingly significant in the COVID-19 response and recovery era.

The theme of the 2020 Awards was fighting transboundary environmental crime. The 2020 awards mark the fifth round and this year recipients were chosen who have demonstrated excellence and leadership in one or more of the following categories: collaboration, impact, innovation, integrity, and gender leadership. There is also a separate category for Africa-Asia cooperation in the area of illegal trade in wildlife. The Awards are limited to nominees from Asian countries geographically served by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) Regional Office.

The 2020 Awards will be given by UNEP, in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the Secretariat of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL) and the World Customs Organization (WCO).

According to the UN, transboundary environmental crime presents a serious threat in the region. Illegal trade in wildlife undermines conservation efforts, harms economies, devastates livelihoods, and compromises ecosystems on which humans depend. It also takes place on the routes between Africa and Asia at significant scale.

The Asia region is as well one of the main destinations for illegally traded chemicals and waste. Millions of tonnes of hazardous waste and harmful chemicals are transported to and within Asia, having disastrous effects for human health and the environment. Governmental authorities working on environmental enforcement issues are on the front-line of efforts to combat transboundary environmental crime. The 2020 Awards will recognize and celebrate their critical role in doing so.

Any government official and/or government institution or team working on fighting transboundary environmental crime in Asia or on fostering Africa-Asia cooperation in the area of illegal trade in wildlife for that category, is eligible to be nominated. Relevant agencies and individuals may include, for example: customs, police, wildlife and forestry authorities, environmental agencies, multi-agency taskforces, specialized agencies, judges and/or public prosecutors. Teams within government institutions (e.g. units, branches, divisions etc.) are also eligible. Recipients may be awarded in their individual capacity or as representatives of institutions/teams. Self-nomination is permitted.

Source: <https://www.gulftoday.ae/opinion/2021/02/09/forest-officer-sasmita-braves-odds-wins-un-award>