

# Now, overseas help for Asiatic lions in Gir



Raju Thakrar



Steve Mandel

HIRAL DAVE

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WHAT is common between Steve Mandel, founder and president of California-based Mandel Communication, and Raju Thakrar, an NRI businessman settled in London? Their interest for Gir Wildlife Sanctuary (GWS). When back home poaching and increasing accidental death cases of Asiatic lions have raised concern among nature lovers, though located miles away, these gentlemen have taken pain to visit the sanctuary and offer their share of help.

If Mandel has taken up the task to create awareness and raise support for Asiatic lions and GWS, Thakrar has extended help to start annual awards, first of its kind, for those working in the field of conservation and promotion of GWS. Mandel, who since January 2008 visited GWS twice, has begun the process to start a foundation in the US to raise support for Asiatic lions. He has named it Lions of Gir Foundation (LGF) and registration of the project is under process with local government. Mandel, also an author of the book *Effective Presentation Skills*, has already donated over Rs 1 lakh to Rajkot-based Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT), which has been carrying out the work of barricading open wells located in the periphery of GWS to prevent accidental deaths of lions.

"The Lions of Gir Foundation would work in co-ordination with WCT," said WCT chairman Kishore Kotecha, adding, "the Foundation would raise fund from the US

for the conservation and awareness activities to be carried out by the WCT".

The WCT is the only NGO working exclusively for conservation at GWS. It has set an objective to barricade all 9,000 open wells. So far 781 have been covered. Once the open well project is over, WCT would focus on conservation and awareness programmes with support from LGF. "Mandel came in my contact through internet. Together we camped at GWS twice to do an assessment of the situation. It was at end of his last February trip that Mandel proposed this idea of forming a foundation in the US and work in collaboration," said Kotecha.

Meanwhile, Thakrar, who is also a friend of Kotecha, is yet to visit GWS during his on-going trip to India, but has already donated Rs 1.5 lakh for the annual WCT awards to be launched from coming October. Thakrar has a reason: "To me GWS is the eighth wonder of the world. I think we must encourage people working for conservation of Asiatic lions and GWS. So I decided to extend help to start awards that would be given to those working specially for the GWS."

"This is first of its kind awards. So far, there has been little encouragement coming to people working to conserve and protect GWS," said Kotecha. The WCT awards will have five categories: for a student who has done extraordinary work in creating awareness, for an educator, two awards for frontline forest staff and one for any remarkable research or study of the year.