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Shri H. S. Panwar (1937–2026)
Visionary Conservationist, Institution Builder, and Founder Director of the Wildlife Institute of India

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The Indian conservation community lost one of its most distinguished pioneers with the passing of Shri H. S. Panwar on 29 May 2026. A recipient of the Padma Bhushan, former Director of Project Tiger, architect of modern protected area management in India, and Founder Director of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Shri Panwar leaves behind a legacy that has profoundly shaped wildlife conservation, protected area management, and conservation capacity building in India and beyond.



Shri H. S. Panwar
22.03.1937 - 29.05.2026

Shri Panwar belonged to a generation of conservation leaders who combined vision with action. At a time when wildlife conservation was still emerging as a national priority, he played a pivotal role in establishing scientific approaches to protected area management and strengthening institutional frameworks for biodiversity conservation. His contributions extended from field-level species recovery and habitat management to national policy, institution building, and international conservation cooperation.

Among his most celebrated achievements was the recovery of the hard-ground barasingha in Kanha National Park, Madhya Pradesh. When the species had declined to critically low numbers, Shri Panwar championed an integrated conservation strategy involving habitat restoration, scientific management, and community engagement. The remarkable recovery of the species stands today as one of India's greatest conservation success stories and remains a lasting testament to his foresight and commitment.

As Director of Project Tiger, he provided leadership during a crucial phase in the evolution of India's flagship conservation programme. His efforts helped strengthen the foundations upon which India's globally acclaimed tiger conservation success has since been built. He understood that effective wildlife conservation required not only protected areas and policies but also capable institutions and skilled professionals.

It is perhaps in institution building that Shri Panwar's legacy shines most enduringly. As the Founder Director of the Wildlife Institute of India, he laid the intellectual, professional, and ethical foundations of what has become one of the world's leading institutions dedicated to wildlife research, conservation training, and capacity development. The Institute that he nurtured in its formative years continues to influence generations of wildlife managers, scientists, researchers, and conservation practitioners across India and many other countries.

For those fortunate enough to work with him, Shri Panwar was much more than an accomplished conservation leader. He was an inspiring mentor who invested deeply in people. He believed in identifying potential, empowering young professionals, and encouraging them to take responsibility. Many conservation leaders of today trace important milestones in their professional journeys to the confidence and opportunities he provided during their formative years.

I had the privilege of knowing Shri Panwar for nearly four decades. My association with him began in the mid-1980s when he selected me, a young Indian Forest Service officer, to join the Wildlife Institute of India. Looking back, that decision became one of the defining turning points of my professional career. He not only provided opportunities but also instilled values that shaped my approach to conservation, leadership, and public service.

I was later fortunate to work closely with him once again in Sri Lanka, where he headed a UNDP-GEF programme aimed at strengthening the capacity of protected area professionals. These years revealed yet another dimension of his personality. Despite his international stature and numerous achievements, he remained remarkably humble, approachable, and generous with his time and wisdom. His leadership style was characterised by quiet confidence, intellectual rigour, and unwavering integrity.

One conversation with Shri Panwar remains deeply etched in my memory. Fascinated by his extraordinary ability to pursue multiple ambitious goals simultaneously and deliver results of exceptional quality, I once asked him the secret of his success. His reply was simple yet profound: "Set impossible targets and then pursue them relentlessly. Success will be yours." Over the years, I came to realise that this was not merely advice; it was the philosophy by which he lived his life. Every major achievement of his distinguished career reflected this conviction. It was also a lesson that inspired and guided many of his students and colleagues, including myself.

The true measure of Shri Panwar's life lies not only in the awards he received or the positions he held, but also in the institutions he built, the species he helped conserve, the protected areas he strengthened, and the countless individuals he mentored. His influence continues to be reflected in India's conservation landscape and in the work of generations of professionals who benefited from his guidance and vision.

As we mourn his passing, we also celebrate a life of extraordinary purpose and service. The forests he helped protect, the wildlife populations he helped recover, the institutions he established, and the conservation ethic he championed will continue to inspire future generations.

Shri H.S. Panwar was not merely a conservationist; he was a nation-builder in the truest sense of the term. His vision transformed Indian wildlife conservation, and his legacy will endure for decades to come.

May his noble soul rest in eternal peace.

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