

Vantara Colombia Hippo Crisis: How Vantara Colombia Hippo Crisis Solution Could Reshape Wildlife Conservation

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Vantara Colombia Hippo Crisis Latest News

- Vantara, a 3,500-acre wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centre in Jamnagar, Gujarat, owned by Anant Ambani (son of Reliance chairman), has offered to relocate and care for 80 hippos that were otherwise set to be euthanised.

Origin of Colombia's Hippo Population

- Colombia's hippos trace back to four animals—three females and one male—imported in 1981 by Pablo Escobar for his private zoo at Hacienda Nápoles.
- After his death in 1993, the estate was abandoned, allowing the hippos to escape into the Magdalena River basin, where they reproduced rapidly, growing to an estimated population of around 170 today.

Why Colombia Decided to Cull Hippos

- Colombia declared *Hippopotamus amphibius* an **invasive species** in 2022 after rapid population growth became a major ecological concern.
- Earlier efforts like sterilisation, launched in 2021, proved costly, labour-intensive, and largely ineffective, especially since dominant males mate with multiple females.
- Scientific research further highlighted the urgency, showing that the rising population and high management costs left only a limited window for control.
- Experts concluded that even with relocation efforts, some level of culling would be unavoidable.

Ecological Impact: Why Colombia's Hippos Need Control

- Peer-reviewed research highlights that Colombia's hippos are significantly altering local ecosystems.
- A 2020 study found that hippo-inhabited lakes showed disrupted ecosystem metabolism, increased nutrient loading from waste, and a shift in aquatic life, with phytoplankton increasingly dominated by harmful cyanobacteria.
- These changes indicate serious ecological imbalance, underscoring the need for population control.

Challenges in Relocating Hippos

- Moving hippos is extremely difficult due to biological, logistical, and financial constraints.
- **Tranquilising** them is risky because of their thick skin and proximity to water, where sedated animals can easily drown.
- Studies have shown high mortality during capture, often due to **capture myopathy**—a stress-induced condition.
- Additionally, their massive size (up to 3,000 kg) makes transport complex and costly, with expenses running into tens of thousands of dollars per animal.
- Also, peer-reviewed consensus is that no single intervention — sterilisation, translocation, or culling — is sufficient on its own, and that the window for combined intervention is narrowing each year.

Can Vantara Accommodate 80 Hippos

- Vantara's Greens Zoological Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, spread over about 650 acres, has sufficient space to house 80 hippos, as the minimum enclosure requirement would take only around 18 acres.
- However, practical challenges remain.
 - Hippos live in social groups led by dominant males, so the animals would need to be divided into multiple separate enclosures rather than housed together.
 - Additionally, Jamnagar's hotter and drier climate would require continuous freshwater management to replicate their natural habitat, making long-term care more complex.

CITES and Concerns Over Wildlife Transfers to India

- The **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)** reviewed India's handling of wildlife imports after inspecting Vantara and found gaps in due diligence while issuing permits for endangered species.
- It initially recommended halting further import permits until procedures improved and animal origins were verified.
- However, this recommendation was later reversed after countries like the US, Japan, Brazil, and India argued that the move was premature.

Source: TH

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