

Tiger Conservation Roadmap: Restoring India's Struggling Tiger Reserves

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Tiger Conservation Roadmap Latest News

- Marking the 18th anniversary of tiger reintroductions at Sariska Tiger Reserve (Rajasthan), the Centre released two new assessments: a roadmap for managing tigers in the years ahead, and a document distilling lessons from 12 reintroduction initiatives across the country.
- The core message is a shift in focus — conservation must move beyond simply counting tiger numbers to reviving reserves that are struggling.
- As India's tiger population reaches 3,682, the Centre has identified 25 priority reserves for habitat recovery, prey restoration, and targeted reintroductions.

Tiger Numbers Are Rising — But Concentrated in Pockets

- India's tiger population has grown steadily, from **1,411 in 2006 to 3,682 in 2022**, across 58 tiger reserves spread over 85,000 sq km. But the headline number hides an uneven reality.

- Just 10-12 reserves account for about 36% of the total population. 12 reserves have fewer than three tigers each.
- Three reserves — Kawal, Kamlang, and Dampa — have **zero tigers**.
- This creates a two-sided problem. In high-density reserves, tigers disperse to forest edges, farmland, and mixed-use land, leading to human-wildlife conflict, greater dependence on livestock, and higher mortality from railways, roads, and canals.
- In low-tiger reserves, forests may be intact but prey is scarce — neither situation is ideal.

The Core Concept: Source vs. Sink Populations

- This is the analytical heart of the roadmap. Conservation is being reframed around the imbalance between two kinds of populations:
 - **Source populations:** reserves where habitat, prey, and tiger numbers are all high (e.g., Corbett, Bandipur, Kaziranga).
 - **Sink populations:** areas with no breeding tigers or poor connectivity to healthy forests.
- This unevenness threatens long-term conservation. The Centre's plan therefore calls for:
- Consolidating source populations in 13 tiger reserves.
- Priority interventions in at least 25 reserves, including reintroductions where fewer than five tigers remain.

Identifying 'Recipient Sites' — And Why It Matters

- Tiger population growth has held steady at about 6% annually, but the uneven spread means high-density regions bear the burden of managing dispersing tigers, conflict, and poaching — even as vast forests remain empty of tigers.
- The causes of this imbalance include forest fragmentation, tigers being discouraged from moving long distances, poor prey in sink areas, and human pressure.
- The **solution** lies in creating a well-connected landscape across reserves, territorial forests, and mixed-use areas to establish a metapopulation — enabling genetic exchange and reducing long-term extinction risk.
- To act on this, the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) built an **index** assessing each of the 58 reserves on habitat, prey, and tiger population.
- Based on this, 25 reserves were identified where at least one of these three factors is under stress.
 - The Central Indian and Eastern Ghats landscape has the largest number of reserves flagged for priority intervention.
 - The North Eastern Hills and Brahmaputra floodplains have extensive forests with strong recovery potential — if prey, protection, and connectivity improve.

Lessons from Past Reintroductions

- The second assessment reviews a decade-plus of reintroduction experience, with mixed results:
 - **Sariska (2008):** India's first reintroduction; first litter born in 2012.
 - **Panna (MP):** Reintroduced after a local wipeout; succeeded faster, with the first litter in 2010. Since 2009, ten translocations have been carried out overall.

- **Satkosia (Odisha):** An acknowledged failure. The project was rejected by local communities, faced livestock-predation resentment, and one relocated male tiger was killed in a snare trap.
- **Mukundara Hills (Rajasthan):** Progress was slow due to limited breeding success.
- **The key takeaway:** reintroduction is strictly a last resort, to be attempted only after rigorous scientific assessment of habitat, prey, protection, and — crucially — socio-economic conditions and local community acceptance.

Conclusion

- The roadmap marks a maturing of India's tiger conservation story. Having succeeded spectacularly in raising numbers — from 1,411 to 3,682 — the challenge has shifted from quantity to distribution.
- With a handful of reserves overcrowded and many others empty, the new strategy rightly targets habitat quality, prey recovery, and landscape connectivity to build a healthy metapopulation, rather than chasing headline counts.
- The reintroduction experience, from Panna's success to Satkosia's failure, underlines a vital lesson: ecological science alone is not enough — community acceptance and socio-economic realities ultimately decide whether tigers can return.
- Reintroduction, as the Centre stresses, must remain a carefully judged last resort.

Source: IE | PIB

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