

Asiatic Lion Conservation - Achievements, Challenges and the Way Forward

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Asiatic Lion Conservation Latest News

- A recent analysis has highlighted that while the **Asiatic lion population has crossed 1,000**, its long-term survival depends on strengthening landscape-level conservation and addressing risks arising from its concentration in a single geographical region.

About Asiatic Lion

- The Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) is one of the world's most endangered large cat species and is found only in India in the wild.
- Once distributed across West Asia and northern India, the species is now confined to the **Gir landscape** in Gujarat.
- **Conservation Status**
 - **IUCN Red List:** Vulnerable

- **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972:** Schedule I
- **CITES:** Appendix I
- The Asiatic lion is slightly smaller than its African counterpart and is distinguished by a prominent fold of skin along its abdomen.

Recovery of the Asiatic Lion Population

- The recovery of the Asiatic lion is regarded as one of India's major wildlife conservation successes.
- Around six decades ago, the wild population had declined to nearly **100-150 individuals**. Continuous conservation efforts have resulted in the population increasing to **more than 1,000 lions** today.
- An equally significant development is that **nearly half of the lion population now lives outside protected areas**, indicating successful natural dispersal beyond Gir National Park and Sanctuary.

Landscape-Level Conservation

- Lion conservation has gradually evolved from a **protected-area approach** to a **landscape-level conservation strategy**.
- Instead of remaining confined to Gir National Park, lions now occupy a diverse range of habitats across the Saurashtra region, including:
 - Gir National Park and Sanctuary
 - Girnar hills
 - Mitiyala forests
 - Savarkundla-Liliya landscape
 - Coastal tracts extending towards Bhavnagar
- The surrounding agricultural fields, grasslands, riverbeds, and hilly terrain function as ecological corridors that facilitate the natural dispersal of lions.
- A key factor behind this success has been the acceptance of dispersing lions by local communities, enabling coexistence between humans and wildlife.
- The success of lion conservation has been supported by four major pillars:
 - Strong political commitment
 - Efficient forest administration
 - Sustained financial support
 - Cooperation of local communities

Major Conservation Challenges

- **Concentration in a Single Landscape**
 - The most significant challenge is that the entire wild population continues to remain concentrated within a single geographical landscape.
 - Such concentration exposes the species to the risk of catastrophic events that could affect the entire population simultaneously.
- **Disease Outbreaks**

- The vulnerability became evident in 2018, when more than 20 Asiatic lions died due to an outbreak of Canine Distemper Virus (CDV).
- Although the Gujarat Forest Department responded through disease surveillance, veterinary interventions, and improved monitoring, the outbreak demonstrated the risks associated with maintaining a geographically concentrated population.
- **Habitat Fragmentation**
 - As lions continue to expand outside protected areas, maintaining habitat connectivity has become increasingly important.
 - Rapid infrastructure development, urbanisation, and changing land use patterns can fragment wildlife corridors, making dispersal more difficult and increasing the likelihood of human-wildlife conflict.
- **Need for Long-Term Planning**
 - Conservation should not focus only on protecting Gir National Park but must also safeguard the wider network of habitats and movement corridors used by dispersing lions.

Need for a Second Free-Ranging Population

- One of the central arguments is the need to establish a **second free-ranging population** of Asiatic lions.
- At present, the species remains restricted to a single landscape despite repeated concerns expressed by wildlife scientists.
- Developing an alternative habitat would:
 - Reduce the risk from disease outbreaks
 - Protect the species against natural disasters
 - Improve long-term genetic security
 - Enhance the resilience of the wild population
- Resistance to creating such a second home continues despite growing scientific evidence supporting the need for geographical diversification.

Way Forward

- Future conservation efforts should focus on strengthening the gains achieved over the past six decades. Key priorities include:
 - Conserving wildlife corridors across the Gir landscape
 - Preventing habitat fragmentation due to infrastructure development
 - Strengthening disease surveillance and veterinary preparedness
 - Promoting continued coexistence between local communities and lions
 - Establishing a second free-ranging population to reduce ecological risks
 - Adopting a long-term landscape-based conservation strategy rather than limiting conservation to protected areas

Source: TH

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