

Why Population Growth Alone Can't Save Asiatic Lions in Gujarat

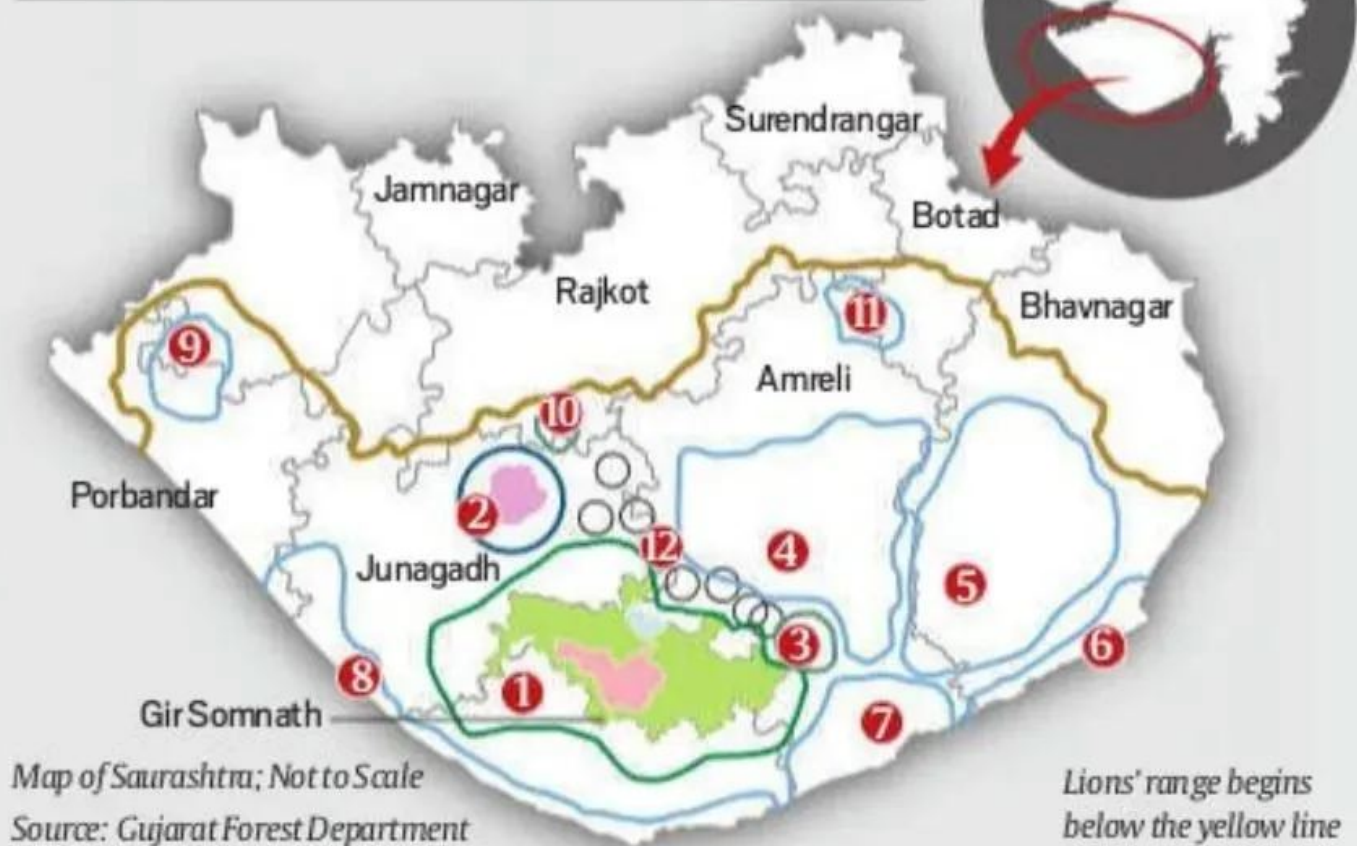
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Asiatic Lion Conservation Latest News

- The latest lion population estimate in Gujarat shows **891 Asiatic lions**, marking a 32% increase since 2020. Their geographical range has expanded by 17%, now covering 35,000 sq km across 58 talukas in 11 districts.

WHERE LIONS ROAM



The population of lions in Gujarat has grown rapidly over the past decade

		2015	2020	2025
1	Gir NP, Pania WLS, & surroundings	315	344	394
2	Girnar WLS	33	56	54
3	Mitiyala WLS	8	16	32
4	Savarkundla WLS, Liliya & surroundings	80	98	125
5	Bhavnagar mainland	37	56	103
6	South-eastern coast	18	67	94
7	South-western coast	32	20	25
8	Bhavnagar coast	0	17	15
9	Barda WLS	0	0	17
10	Jetpur	0	0	6
11	Babra-Jasdan	0	0	4
12	Corridors	0	0	22
	Total	523	674	891

NP: National Park, WLS: Wildlife Sanctuary; Source: Gujarat Forest Department

- However, experts stress that while the numbers are encouraging, sustaining this success will require continued and enhanced conservation measures beyond mere population counts.

The Recovery of the Asiatic Lion: A Journey in Phases

• From Near Extinction to Steady Growth

- In the 1960s, Asiatic lions were fewer than 200, confined to the Gir forest, which was given special protection.
- The population grew slowly and remained under 300 until 1995, when lions began moving beyond forest boundaries.

• Doubling the Range, Modest Gains (1990-2005)

- Between 1990 and 2005, the lion's habitat range expanded from 6,600 sq km to 13,000 sq km, yet population growth was limited — from 284 to 359 (a 26% rise).

• A Surge in Numbers (2005-2020)

- The next 15 years saw the range double again to 30,000 sq km, with already settled satellite populations contributing to a significant 88% rise in numbers — from 359 to 674.

• Recent Trends and Methodological Gaps

- The latest estimates confirm the growth pattern and mark only the second time (after 2015) that the population growth outpaced range expansion.
- However, concerns remain, as the absence of standard error margins in the data makes the estimates scientifically less robust.

Asiatic Lions: Expanding Territory, Limited Habitat

• New Territories, Same Challenges

- In the past five years, Asiatic lions have moved into three new regions — Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, Jetpur, and Babra-Jasdan.
- Their spread across 358 locations and the rise to nearly 900 individuals led to the IUCN upgrading their status from “critically endangered” to “endangered” in 2008.

• Disproportionate Growth vs. Range Expansion

- While the lion's range expanded by 430% since 1990, their population rose by only 214%.
- This disparity reveals that area expansion hasn't translated proportionally into population growth.

• Shortage of Protected Wilderness

- The Saurashtra peninsula lacks sufficient protected areas beyond Gir National Park and a few small sanctuaries like Pania, Girnar, Mitiyala, and Berda.
- As these reach carrying capacity, lions increasingly wander into wastelands, farmlands, and plantations, relying on fragmented patches of natural vegetation.

• Lions Outside Forests

- Only 56% of Gujarat's lions were found in forested zones.
- In 2020, data showed a stark contrast in population density — 15.2 per 100 sq km in forests vs. 1.65 in non-forested areas — highlighting the unsuitability of much of the expanded range for sustainable habitation.

Living on the Edge: Challenges of Lions in Human-Dominated Landscapes

- **Non-Forest Habitats Pose Risks**

- Lions increasingly inhabiting areas near human settlements face unsafe conditions.
- While officially unreported, many lion deaths occur from electrocution, drowning in wells, or being shot in self-defence, indicating retaliatory killings.

- **Pride and Proximity**

- Unlike leopards, lions are widely tolerated in Gujarat, considered symbols of pride.
- Their frequent rescues and medical interventions make them accustomed to human presence — but this over-familiarity can turn dangerous.
- Experts warn that many lions in human-dominated habitats show aggression.
- Unprovoked attacks have been reported, making the situation ecologically unstable and socially fragile.

- **Limits of Social Carrying Capacity**

- Co-existence is viable only when humans and lions share time or space—not both. Frequent encounters in shared areas raise tensions and risks.

- **Temporary Peace and Precarious Diet**

- Current peace is maintained through awareness campaigns, media involvement, compensation for livestock loss, and availability of wild prey like boars.
- However, many lions also feed on dumped livestock carcasses, which increases disease risk due to contamination and contact with village dogs.

Future of the Pride: Relocation and Habitat Challenges for Asiatic Lions

- **Delay in Supreme Court-Directed Relocation**

- Despite a 2013 SC order mandating the relocation of Asiatic lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh within six months, the move has been delayed for over 12 years.
- Gujarat had assured compliance seven years ago, but the transfer remains unfulfilled.

- **Project Lion and New Site Identification**

- Launched in August 2020, Project Lion initially proposed seven sites across Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan for lion relocation.
- However, by July 2022, the government restricted assessments to sites within Gujarat only.

- **Natural Dispersal vs. Habitat Constraints**

- Lions have naturally expanded to Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the proposed sites, but its limited size (<200 sq km) can support only a small number of lions, insufficient for long-term conservation.

- **Urgent Need for Safe, Suitable Habitats**

- With ambitions to double the lion population to 2,000, experts stress the need for larger, quality forest habitats away from human settlements.

Asiatic Lion Conservation FAQs

Q1. Why are lion numbers in Gujarat rising?

Ans. Government conservation efforts and natural dispersal helped increase the Asiatic lion population to 891 in Gujarat.

Q2. Why is population growth alone insufficient?

Ans. Lion range expanded faster than numbers, stressing habitats and increasing human-animal conflict in non-forested areas.

Q3. What are the relocation delays?

Ans. Despite a 2013 SC order, Gujarat hasn't shifted lions to MP, citing habitat reassessment within its borders.

Q4. What risks do lions face in human areas?

Ans. Lions near villages risk electrocution, attacks, and disease from feeding on dumped carcasses or livestock.

Q5. What's needed for long-term lion survival?

Ans. Creating new, protected habitats outside Gujarat is essential to reduce conflict and prevent epidemics in lion populations.

Source: IE | IE

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