

Betla National Park, Location, Geography, Flora, Fauna, Ecological Importance

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Betla National Park is the **only National Park in Jharkhand** and forms the core of the Palamau Tiger Reserve (PTR), one of the first nine tiger reserves established under Project Tiger. It is one of eastern India's most important protected areas and is known for its rich tropical deciduous forests, diverse wildlife, historical monuments, and significant contribution to tiger conservation.

About Betla National Park

Betla National Park was established to conserve the unique biodiversity of the **Chotanagpur Plateau**.

- **Location:** Betla National Park is located in the Latehar district of Jharkhand.
- **National Park Status:** It was notified as a National Park in 1986.
- **Area:** The park covers an area of 226.32 square kilometres.

In 1973-74, the area became part of the **Palamau Tiger Reserve**, one of the first nine tiger reserves established under **Project Tiger**.

The Palamau forests also hold a unique place in conservation history, as J. W. Nicholson, the then Divisional Forest Officer, conducted the world's first scientific tiger census using the pugmark method in 1932.

Betla National Park Geography

Betla National Park lies on the Chotanagpur Plateau, which is characterised by gently undulating terrain and tropical deciduous forests.

- The landscape consists of low hills, valleys, grasslands, streams, and dense forests, creating diverse habitats for wildlife.
- The park is drained by the **North Koel, Auranga, and Burha Rivers**, of which the Burha River is the only perennial river.
- The varied topography and river system support a wide range of ecosystems and contribute to the park's ecological richness.

Betla National Park Flora and Fauna

The park supports rich biodiversity because of its varied habitats and favourable climatic conditions.

Flora

- The forests are predominantly dominated by **Sal (*Shorea robusta*)**, which is the characteristic tree species of the region.
- **Other important plant species include** Bamboo, Bel (*Aegle marmelos*), Mahua, Kusum, Butea, Carissa, Capparis, and Wild Date Palm (*Phoenix sylvestris*).
- According to the **National Tiger Conservation Authority** (NTCA), the reserve contains five major forest types, including Moist Peninsular Sal Forests, Dry Peninsular Sal Forests, Northern Dry Mixed Deciduous Forests, Bel Forests, and Dry Bamboo Brake.

Fauna

- The **Bengal Tiger** is the **flagship species** of the park.
- **Other important mammals include** the Asiatic Elephant, Leopard, Gaur, Sloth Bear, Grey Wolf, Dhole (Indian Wild Dog), Four-horned Antelope (Chausingha), Sambar, Chital, Nilgai, Mouse Deer, Wild Boar, Indian Pangolin, Jungle Cat, Small Indian Civet, Rhesus Macaque, and Hanuman Langur.
- The reserve supports around 39 species of mammals and nearly 170 species of birds, along with several reptiles and butterflies.

Tiger Conservation Status

Betla National Park represents both the achievements and the continuing challenges of tiger conservation in India.

- The Palamau Tiger Reserve was **among the first nine reserves selected under Project Tiger**, highlighting its early conservation importance.
- The All India Tiger Estimation (2018) reported no resident tiger in the reserve.

- The 2022 All India Tiger Estimation confirmed the presence of one tiger through genetic analysis of scat samples, indicating the beginning of a gradual recovery.
- Current conservation efforts focus on improving habitat quality, strengthening the prey base, enhancing scientific monitoring, and protecting wildlife corridors to facilitate the natural dispersal of tigers.

Betla National Park Ecological Importance

Betla National Park plays a vital role in maintaining ecological balance and conserving biodiversity in eastern India.

- It protects extensive moist and dry tropical deciduous forests, which support numerous plant and animal species.
- It conserves the important catchment areas of the North Koel River system, helping maintain regional water security.
- It provides a secure habitat for several threatened mammals, birds, and reptiles.
- It also strengthens ecological connectivity between the forest landscapes of Jharkhand and neighbouring Chhattisgarh, facilitating wildlife movement.

Betla National Park Cultural Importance

Betla National Park is not only important for its biodiversity but also for its historical and cultural heritage.

- The historic **Palamu Fort** (Purana Kila and Naya Kila) is located near Betla National Park on the banks of the **Auranga River**.
- The reserve landscape also includes **Lodh (Budha Ghagh) Falls**, one of the highest waterfalls in Jharkhand.

Betla National Park Challenges

Betla National Park continues to face several conservation challenges despite sustained protection efforts.

- Historical **Left Wing Extremism (LWE)** affected wildlife protection, habitat management, and scientific monitoring for many years.
- Human settlements and livestock grazing around the reserve continue to exert pressure on forest resources.
- The recovery of the tiger population remains slow because of the historically low number of resident tigers.
- Habitat degradation, forest fires, and poaching continue to threaten wildlife and ecosystem health.
- Maintaining ecological connectivity with neighbouring forest landscapes remains essential for the long-term conservation of tigers and other large mammals.

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