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Welcoming
Cheetahs from
Botswana to
India, and what
lies ahead

IN FOCUS:
GLOBAL RECOVERY OF
TIGER POPULATIONS
AND ADAPTIVE
MANAGEMENT

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Active Management for Tiger Conservation: Lessons from India and a Global Capacity-Building Imperative

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India's tiger conservation journey is widely recognized as one of the most successful wildlife recovery stories in the world. With an estimated 3,682 wild tigers recorded during the 2022 All India Tiger Estimation, the country today supports nearly 70 percent of the global wild tiger population. This achievement reflects over five decades of sustained conservation efforts under Project Tiger, strong policy support from the Government of India, scientific management, and the collective contributions of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), State Forest Departments, the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), conservation organizations, local communities, and numerous partners.

Why Active Management Matters

While the increase in tiger numbers represents a remarkable accomplishment, the future of tiger conservation requires moving beyond traditional protection measures. Across India, several landscapes continue to face challenges arising from habitat fragmentation, local extinctions, low population densities, and isolated tiger populations. In many cases, protected areas possess suitable habitats and adequate prey populations but remain devoid of tigers due to loss of prey, habitat degradation, or demographic decline. Addressing these challenges requires a more proactive conservation approach—one that embraces active management as an essential tool for securing the long-term future of tigers.

Active management refers to a suite of interventions that may include reintroduction, supplementation, translocation, genetic rescue, habitat restoration, and intensive post-release monitoring. Rather than waiting for natural recolonization, active management seeks to accelerate ecological recovery by strategically moving individuals from healthy source populations to landscapes where tiger populations have declined or disappeared. Such interventions can restore ecological balance, improve genetic diversity, strengthen landscape connectivity, and establish new populations in suitable habitats.

Success Stories from India

India has emerged as a global leader in this field, demonstrating through several successful initiatives that tiger populations can be restored even after local extinction. Perhaps the most celebrated example is the recovery of Panna Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh. Following the local extinction of tigers in 2008, a carefully designed reintroduction programme was initiated in 2009. Tigers were translocated from healthy source populations, supported by intensive monitoring, habitat management, strong protection measures, and sustained institutional commitment. The results exceeded expectations. Within a relatively short period, Panna transformed

from a landscape without tigers into one supporting a thriving and breeding population that has now reached ecological carrying capacity. The Panna experience is widely regarded as one of the most successful large carnivore recovery programmes anywhere in the world.

A similar story unfolded in Sariska Tiger Reserve in Rajasthan. After the complete disappearance of its tiger population in 2005, Sariska became the focus of one of India's earliest tiger reintroduction programmes. Through careful planning, scientific monitoring, and adaptive management, tigers were successfully re-established in the reserve. Today, Sariska stands as a powerful demonstration that local extinction does not have to be permanent and that determined conservation action can reverse even severe setbacks.

The lessons learned from Panna and Sariska have since informed active management efforts across the country. New populations have been established or strengthened in landscapes such as Madhav, Ramgarh Vishdhari, Veerangana Durgavati, Similipal, Rajaji, Satpura, Sahyadri and Nawegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserves. These initiatives collectively demonstrate that active management can serve as a powerful instrument for expanding the tiger's range, enhancing ecological resilience, and maximizing the conservation value of protected areas.

Lessons from Challenges

At the same time, India's experience has also shown that tiger translocations are complex and challenging undertakings. Challenges relating to habitat readiness, prey availability, local community support, monitoring systems, socio-political factors, and conflict mitigation can significantly influence outcomes. These examples underline an important reality: successful tiger recovery depends not only on moving animals but also on ensuring that ecological, social, institutional, and logistical conditions are in place before any translocation is attempted.

The Current Need for Capacity Building

The increasing importance of active management creates an urgent need for systematic capacity building across all levels of conservation governance. Future tiger recovery programmes will require specialized expertise in habitat assessment, prey-base evaluation, population and habitat viability analysis, carrying-capacity estimation, veterinary protocols, genetics, telemetry, conflict mitigation, community engagement, and adaptive management. Many of these disciplines demand highly specialized knowledge and practical experience that are not uniformly available across all tiger landscapes.

The role of frontline forest staff will be particularly critical. Rangers, field biologists, veterinarians, monitoring teams, and protected area managers represent the first line of implementation for any translocation programme. Their ability to respond effectively to emerging challenges, collect and interpret monitoring data, engage with local communities, and implement adaptive management measures often determines the success or failure of reintroduction efforts. Building these capacities must therefore become a central pillar of future tiger conservation strategies.

Institutional Roles in Active Management

India possesses a strong institutional framework that can support the next generation of tiger recovery initiatives. Institutions such as the NTCA, State Forest Departments, and the Wildlife Institute of India have already played pivotal roles in developing India's expertise in tiger recovery. NTCA provides policy direction, technical guidance, funding support, and national oversight. State Forest Departments serve as the primary implementing agencies responsible for protection, habitat management, stakeholder engagement, and field-level execution. The Wildlife Institute of India contributes scientific assessments, training, monitoring protocols, and technical expertise. Conservation organizations and civil society partners further strengthen these efforts through community outreach,

capacity building, and independent technical support.

Capacity-Building Framework: Need of the Hour

As India continues to expand active management efforts, a structured national capacity-building framework could significantly strengthen future outcomes. Such a framework should focus on developing technical competencies in translocation planning, veterinary preparedness, telemetry, wildlife health, population monitoring, habitat restoration, conflict mitigation, and community engagement. Dedicated simulation exercises, field practicums, exchange programmes between successful and emerging tiger reserves, and multidisciplinary training modules can help create a cadre of highly skilled practitioners capable of leading future recovery efforts.

Importantly, capacity building must extend beyond conservation professionals alone. Local communities, elected representatives, media professionals, law enforcement agencies, veterinarians, researchers, and development planners all play important roles in determining the success of reintroduction programmes. Building awareness and fostering stakeholder ownership can significantly improve public acceptance and long-term sustainability of conservation interventions.

The Role of IBCA

This is where the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) can play a transformative role. As a global platform dedicated to the conservation of the world's big cats, IBCA is uniquely positioned to facilitate knowledge exchange, technical cooperation, and capacity building among range countries. India's experiences in Panna, Sariska, Madhav, Ramgarh Vishdhari, Rajaji, Similipal, and other landscapes constitute a globally significant repository of conservation knowledge that can benefit countries facing similar challenges across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

IBCA can serve as a catalyst for establishing international training



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programmes on tiger translocation and active management, facilitating expert exchanges, developing standardized best-practice guidelines, and creating communities of practice focused on species recovery. Through partnerships with NTCA, WII, State Forest Departments, academic institutions, and international conservation organizations, IBCA can help build a global network of practitioners equipped to undertake scientifically robust reintroduction programmes.

Furthermore, IBCA can facilitate South-South cooperation by bringing together conservation managers from different range countries to learn directly from India's experiences. The Alliance can also help document, package, and disseminate lessons learned from both successful and challenging reintroduction efforts, ensuring that future programmes benefit from decades of accumulated knowledge and practical experience.

Looking Ahead

The future of tiger conservation will increasingly depend on our ability to actively manage populations in a rapidly changing world. Climate change, habitat fragmentation, infrastructure development, and emerging socio-economic pressures will require conservation strategies that are adaptive, science-based, and forward-looking. Active management is no longer an exception in tiger conservation—it is becoming an essential component of long-term species recovery.

India's achievements in restoring tigers to landscapes where they had disappeared demonstrate what is possible when science, policy, institutions, and communities work together. By strengthening capacities, fostering innovation, and sharing its experiences globally through platforms such as IBCA, India can continue to lead the next generation of tiger conservation efforts. The lessons learned from Sariska, Panna, Madhav, Ramgarh Vishdhari, and other landscapes are not merely national success stories; they are valuable global models for securing the future of big cats and the ecosystems they inhabit.

Roaring Back: The Global Status, Recovery and Future of Wild Tigers

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Only a century ago, an estimated 100,000 wild tigers roamed across Asia, occupying forests, grasslands, wetlands and mountain ecosystems stretching from eastern Türkiye to the Russian Far East and the Indonesian islands. Today, the tiger occupies less than 8% of its historic range, and three subspecies—the Bali, Javan and Caspian tigers—have been lost forever.

Yet the story of the tiger is no longer only one of decline.

Through unprecedented political commitment, scientific management, international cooperation and community participation, the global wild tiger population has recovered to approximately 5,711 individuals across thirteen Tiger Range Countries (TRCs). Although the recovery remains uneven, it demonstrates that investments in habitat protection, law enforcement and local stewardship can successfully reverse population declines.

As an apex predator and umbrella species, the tiger plays a pivotal role in maintaining ecological balance, safeguarding biodiversity and securing ecosystem services that support millions of people.

Lessons from Tiger Range Countries

India— The Global Anchor of Tiger Conservation

India supports nearly two-thirds of the world's wild tigers, making it the global stronghold for tiger conservation. Since the

launch of Project Tiger in 1973, the country has expanded its network from just nine tiger reserves to 58 Tiger Reserves spread across diverse ecological landscapes. This remarkable conservation success has been underpinned by sustained political commitment, strong institutions, science-based management, legal protection and long-term investment in habitat conservation.



At the heart of this success is the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), which has established a robust institutional framework through standardized monitoring protocols, comprehensive Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for tiger management, conflict response, population estimation, translocation and emergency interventions. India now undertakes the world's largest country-wide scientific assessment of tigers, co-predators, prey and their habitats every four years, generating one of the most comprehensive wildlife datasets globally. Conservation efforts have also evolved beyond protected areas to a landscape-based approach, focusing on ecological connectivity, securing source populations, restoring corridors, mitigating human-tiger conflict and conserving Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves (ToTR) that now form an increasingly important component of India's wild tiger population. The launch of 'Amrit Kaal Ka Tiger Vision' (Tiger @2047) further reinforces India's long-term commitment to creating genetically secure,

climate-resilient tiger landscapes while integrating biodiversity conservation with sustainable development and community well-being. Importantly, the institutional systems, scientific monitoring protocols, landscape planning, habitat restoration approaches, veterinary expertise, translocation experience and adaptive management practices developed through five decades of tiger conservation are now directly supporting efforts on conservation of other species, such as India's cheetah reintroduction programme. This demonstrates how investments made for the recovery of one flagship species can generate lasting conservation dividends for the restoration of other threatened large carnivores and the ecosystems they inhabit.

Bhutan– Tigers from the Plains to the Himalayas

Bhutan's tiger populations occur across one of the world's widest elevational gradients—from subtropical forests to elevations exceeding 4,000 metres. Information





gathered from these landscapes has helped build a clearer understanding of tiger movement across the Himalayan region across Bhutan, India and Nepal. The country combines constitutional forest protection, biological corridor management and innovative long-term financing through mechanisms such as the Bhutan Trust Fund and Bhutan for Life. Bhutan's landscape approach ensures that tigers move freely across protected areas through a natural biological corridor network connecting protecting areas, while maintaining connectivity with neighbouring habitats in India.

Bangladesh– Conserving Tigers in the World's Largest Mangrove Forest

Conservation efforts have increasingly focused on strengthening protection through SMART patrolling, enhanced law enforcement, scientific monitoring using camera traps and genetic techniques, and habitat management across this unique coastal landscape. Recognizing the dual challenges of climate change and human–tiger interactions, Bangladesh has also expanded community-based conservation initiatives, conflict mitigation measures and transboundary cooperation with India for the long-term conservation of the shared Sundarbans ecosystem.

Nepal– Advancing Community-Based Tiger Conservation

Nepal has achieved one of the world's fastest documented recoveries of a large carnivore. By combining community forestry, strengthened anti-poaching enforcement, habitat restoration, regular camera-trap monitoring and local benefit-sharing, Nepal more than doubled its tiger population within little over a decade. Strong political commitment coupled with active participation of local communities has made Nepal one of the more encouraging examples of conservation progress.

Russia– Securing the Future of the Amur Tiger

Russia has led one of the world's most remarkable large carnivore recovery efforts

through decades of sustained conservation action. Strict legal protection, intensive anti-poaching measures, prey population management, habitat restoration and long-term scientific monitoring have enabled the Amur tiger population to recover and stabilize across the Russian Far East. Continuous investments in protected areas, ecological research and landscape connectivity have ensured that Russia remains the global stronghold for the Amur tiger and a model for science-based conservation of wide-ranging carnivores.

China– Restoring the Historic Range of the Amur Tiger

China has made significant strides in restoring habitat and securing the return of the Amur tiger to parts of its historic range. The establishment of the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park, combined with strengthened habitat protection, ecological restoration, prey recovery and enhanced law enforcement, has facilitated the natural recolonization of northeastern China by dispersing tigers from neighbouring Russia. Close transboundary cooperation between the two countries has strengthened monitoring, research and conservation planning, demonstrating how collaborative landscape management can restore viable populations across international boundaries.

Malaysia– An Extraordinary National Response

Although the Malayan tiger remains Critically Endangered, Malaysia has responded with one of the most ambitious national recovery programmes in the world. Recognizing the urgency of the crisis, the Government introduced the Malayan Tiger Crisis Action Plan (2021–2030) built around nine strategic interventions. These include expanding anti-poaching patrols through the "Boots on the Ground" initiative, strengthening the Special Protected Area Response Team (SPARTA), establishing a National Tiger Task Force, creating specialized wildlife crime enforcement units, enhancing wildlife forensic capacity and increasing Ecological Fiscal Transfers to states supporting tiger habitats.

Complementing its national recovery programme, Malaysia established the Al-Sultan Abdullah Royal Tiger Reserve (ASARTR)—the first Tiger Reserve in South-East Asia—reflecting a bold commitment to landscape-scale conservation and providing a dedicated stronghold for the recovery of the Critically Endangered Malayan tiger through collaborative management and long-term habitat protection.

Thailand— A Stronghold for the Indochinese Tiger

Thailand now supports one of the most important breeding populations of the Indochinese tiger and has emerged as a key stronghold for the subspecies in Southeast Asia. Over the past decade, strengthened protection within the Western Forest Complex, intensive SMART patrolling, improved prey recovery and science-based monitoring have resulted in increasing tiger numbers. The Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary and Dong Phrayayen–Khao Yai Forest Complex have become internationally recognized examples of successful tiger recovery.

Indonesia— Securing the Future of the Sumatran Tiger

Indonesia is the sole remaining home of the Critically Endangered Sumatran tiger, the last surviving island tiger after the extinction of the Bali and Javan tigers. Conservation efforts are focused on safeguarding populations across key landscapes in Sumatra through strengthened protected area management, habitat restoration, anti-poaching patrols, wildlife crime enforcement and community-based conflict mitigation. The country has expanded the use of SMART patrolling, camera-trap monitoring and scientific population assessments while enhancing collaboration among government agencies, conservation organizations and local communities. Protected landscapes such as the Leuser Ecosystem, Kerinci Seblat National Park, Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park and Way Kambas National Park remain globally significant strongholds for the species.

Indonesia's continued commitment to conserving these interconnected forest landscapes is critical not only for the survival of the Sumatran tiger but also for safeguarding one of the world's richest repositories of tropical biodiversity.

Countries Requiring Continued Global Support

Despite encouraging progress, recovery remains uneven.

Myanmar retains only a very small remnant population, while Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam have lost their breeding tiger populations. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, has embarked on an ambitious reintroduction programme using Amur tigers as ecological surrogates for the extinct Caspian tiger, representing a landmark effort to restore tigers to landscapes from which they disappeared decades ago.

Common Challenges Across Tiger Range Countries

While conservation contexts differ, nearly all Tiger Range Countries face a common set of challenges:

- Illegal wildlife trade and organized poaching.
- Snaring, particularly across Southeast Asia.
- Habitat fragmentation caused by roads, mining and infrastructure.
- Declining prey populations.
- Human–wildlife conflict.
- Climate change impacts, especially in coastal ecosystems such as the Sundarbans.
- Maintaining ecological connectivity and genetic exchange between isolated tiger populations.

Addressing these challenges requires coordinated action across landscapes that extend beyond political boundaries.

The Road Ahead

The recovery of wild tigers demonstrates that extinction is not inevitable. Where governments invest in science, strengthen institutions, empower local communities and secure long-term financing, tiger populations respond.

Building on Current Successes will require continued efforts towards:

- Consolidating gains in successful landscapes.
 - Accelerating recovery programmes in Southeast Asia.
 - Restoring degraded habitats and ecological corridors.
 - Scaling up landscape-level conservation through regional cooperation, knowledge exchange and multi-sectoral coordination.
 - Strengthening transboundary cooperation among Tiger Range Countries.
 - Investing in community-centred conservation and sustainable livelihoods.
 - Expanding conservation finance models and ecosystem-based approaches.
- Sharing knowledge, technology and best practices through multi-country platforms such as the Global Tiger Forum and International Big Cat Alliance.

The tiger remains more than an endangered species—it is a global symbol of healthy ecosystems, resilient landscapes and humanity's ability to restore nature when collective action is matched with long-term commitment.

The future of the tiger will not be secured by one country alone, but through the collective commitment of all Tiger Range Countries to protect landscapes, strengthen partnerships and invest in people and nature together.

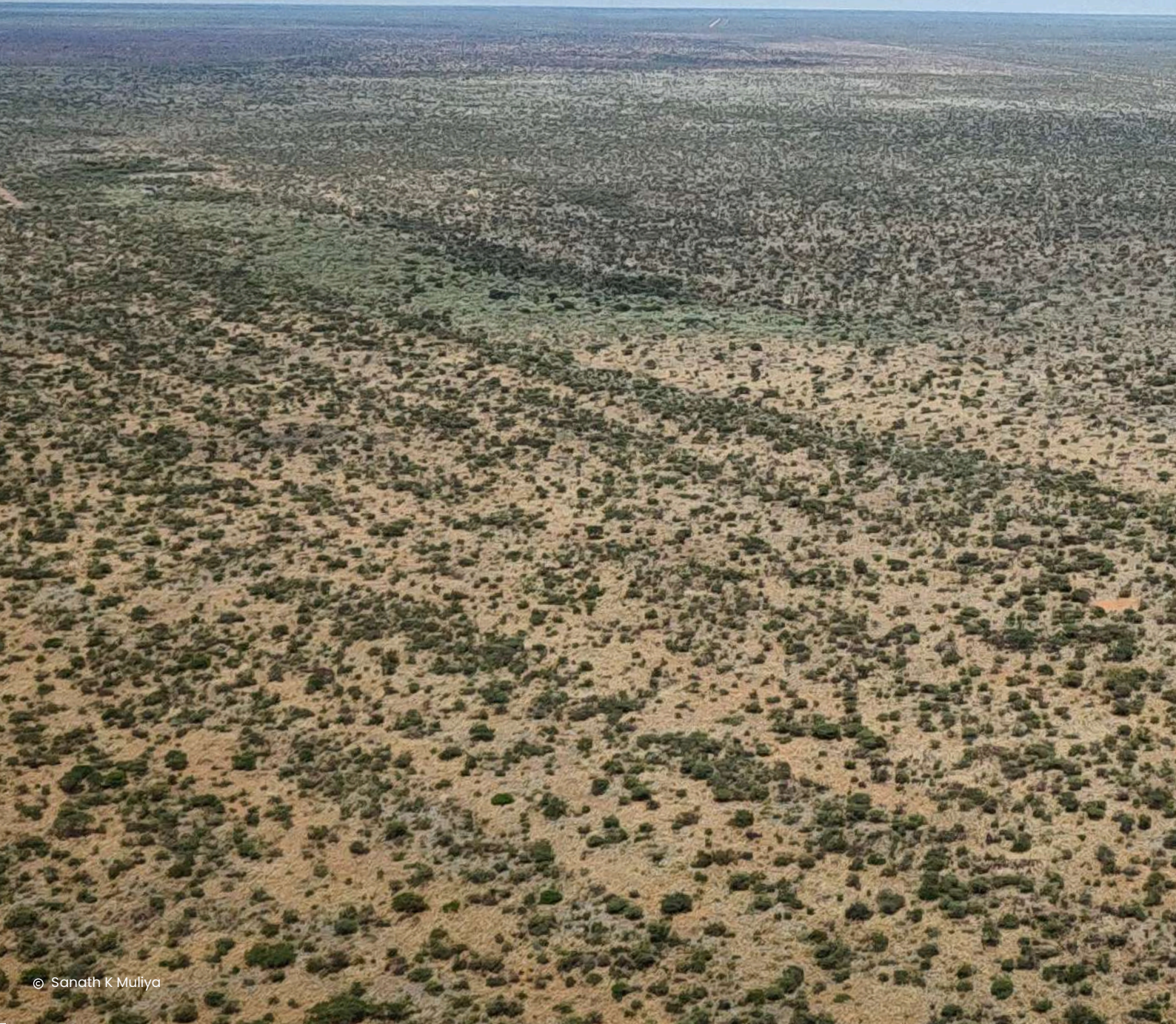


Into the Kalahari: A Field Story from Botswana for India's Cheetah Rewilding Effort

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T

he Kalahari does not reveal its secrets easily.

Across the vast grasslands and thorn-scrub of western Botswana, the horizon stretches endlessly under a shimmering African sky. Here, cheetahs move like ghosts across a landscape that seems empty at first glance, appearing only briefly before melting back into the wilderness. Finding them is difficult. Capturing them safely is even harder.

Yet, in the weeks leading up to the next chapter of India's Project Cheetah, a small team of wildlife professionals from Botswana and India set out into this landscape with a shared mission, to identify, capture, and prepare a new batch of cheetahs for their extraordinary journey to India.

What followed was a story of long days under the African sun, unpredictable field conditions, scientific precision, international cooperation, and an unwavering commitment to conservation.

A Vision Beyond a Species

Launched in 2022 by the Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Project Cheetah was conceived not merely as the reintroduction of a species, but as an ambitious ecological restoration programme. Its vision extends beyond establishing a viable cheetah population in India. The project seeks to support the recovery of grassland ecosystems, enhance biodiversity conservation, generate scientific knowledge on large carnivore translocation and management, and create socio-economic opportunities for local communities through conservation-linked development and ecotourism.

In this sense, Project Cheetah represents an integrated approach to conservation, one that combines species recovery, ecological restoration, scientific innovation, and community engagement. The programme also marked the beginning of an

unprecedented international conservation partnership. The first group of cheetahs arrived from Namibia in September 2022, followed by another batch from South Africa in February 2023. These historic translocations represented one of the world's few transcontinental reintroduction efforts involving multiple governments, wildlife authorities, veterinarians, field biologists, and logistical teams.

Every successful release into India's reintroduction sites has been preceded by months of meticulous planning, spanning scientific assessments, veterinary protocols, diplomatic engagements, transportation logistics, and adherence to stringent animal welfare and biosecurity standards. Three years after its launch, Project Cheetah has entered a new and significant chapter.

Looking Towards Botswana

As India's growing cheetah population began establishing itself, strengthening the programme's genetic foundation emerged as an important conservation priority. Additional founder animals would not only enhance genetic diversity but also contribute to the long-term viability and resilience of the reintroduced population.

Botswana, home to one of Africa's most significant cheetah populations and globally recognised for its conservation expertise, was a natural partner in this endeavour. In alignment with the project's long-term conservation objectives, the Government of India formally approached the Government of the Republic of Botswana in February 2025 to explore the possibility of sourcing additional cheetahs. This followed initial diplomatic engagements facilitated through the Indian High Commission in Botswana. The process was formally initiated by the Hon'ble Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, Shri Bhupender Yadav, who addressed a formal communication to his counterpart, His Excellency Mr. Boipuso Wynter Mmolotsi, Minister of Environment and Tourism, Government of the Republic of Botswana.

The response was both encouraging and historic. The Government of Botswana extended a formal invitation to an Indian delegation to visit the country and engage in detailed discussions regarding the proposed transfer of cheetahs for their reintroduction into their historical range in India.

Accordingly, a high-level delegation comprising representatives from the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change and the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) undertook a working visit to Botswana from 8th to 12th September 2025, following due approval from the competent authorities. The delegation was led by Shri Sushil Kumar Awasthi, Director General of Forests & Special Secretary, Government of India, along with senior officials from the Government of India and NTCA. The entire process was facilitated by the Indian High Commission in Botswana under the leadership of His Excellency Mr. Bharath Kumar Kuthati, High Commissioner of India to Botswana.

conservation partnership between the two nations.

Wildlife does not recognise political boundaries, and neither can the challenges of conserving it. Species recovery programmes today demand scientific collaboration, diplomatic goodwill, and partnerships that transcend geography. Project Cheetah has become one such example, bringing together expertise from across continents in pursuit of a common conservation goal.

Somewhere across Botswana's seemingly endless grasslands, nine elusive cheetahs awaited their human counterparts. Finding them would be the beginning of another remarkable journey.

Searching an Ocean of Grass

The capture landscape lay in Botswana's Ghanzi District, a vast mosaic of private ranches, cattle farms, and open savanna stretching across hundreds of square kilometres. At first glance, it appears deceptively empty. But hidden within this



The Indian delegation during consultations with His Excellency Mr. Boipuso Wynter Mmolotsi, Hon'ble Minister of Environment and Tourism, Government of the Republic of Botswana

The visit facilitated detailed consultations with Botswana's wildlife authorities, on-ground assessments of cheetah habitats and management practices, and evaluations of the veterinary and logistical protocols necessary to ensure a safe and scientifically robust translocation. Those consultations yielded results. Botswana formally agreed to gift cheetahs to India in support of this landmark conservation initiative, further strengthening the growing

seemingly endless expanse is one of Africa's most important cheetah populations. Unlike protected reserves where wildlife densities are relatively high, cheetahs in this landscape occupy immense home ranges. Finding a single individual can be like searching for a needle in a haystack, except the haystack stretches all the way to the horizon.



Walk-through Cage traps Deployed for Capturing Cheetah based on field observations from DWNP, Game Ranch and CCB Staff

There are no guarantees in wildlife conservation. A day in the field can mean travelling hundreds of kilometres without a single sighting. Patience is not merely a virtue here, it is a necessity.

Days often began before sunrise.

As the first light spread across the Kalahari, pilots, veterinarians, researchers, trackers, and wildlife officers gathered around maps, satellite imagery, and radios before heading into the field.

Aircraft took to the skies to search for fresh sightings while ground teams followed spoor and intelligence shared by local ranchers and wildlife monitors. Every piece of information mattered, a fleeting glimpse near a waterhole, fresh tracks crossing a farm road, or reports of cheetahs moving through neighbouring properties.

Hours could pass without success. The landscape would remain silent except for the distant calls of birds and the hum of an aircraft tracing patterns across the sky.

Then, suddenly, a distant shape would emerge from the grass – A cheetah!

In an instant, the pace would change. Radios would come alive.

Coordinates would be relayed. The careful choreography of a wildlife capture operation would begin to unfold.

What appears effortless in photographs is, in reality, a remarkable exercise in teamwork and precision. Every capture is the culmination of countless decisions made in real time, balancing speed with caution and scientific objectives with animal welfare. The safety of the animal remains paramount, guiding every action from the moment it is sighted. For the field teams, these brief moments of success are the reward for days of perseverance. Somewhere amidst an ocean of grass, another chapter in the remarkable story of Project Cheetah was waiting to be written.

Capture of cheetahs

Capturing a free-ranging cheetah demands far more than speed. It requires precision, coordination, and above all, trust. Once an animal was located from the air, the helicopter crew carefully manoeuvred into position. Every decision had to be made quickly, but never hastily. Wind conditions, terrain, vegetation cover, and the animal's behaviour could influence the operation within seconds.

A successful darting procedure marked only the beginning. As the immobilisation drugs gradually took effect, ground teams raced to the location. Veterinarians, trackers, and support staff worked together

with remarkable efficiency, each person knowing exactly what needed to be done. What appeared seamless was the result of years of experience and countless hours of preparation. The animal's breathing, heart rate, body temperature, and overall condition were continuously monitored. Morphometric measurements were recorded, diagnostic samples collected, and the cheetah was carefully transferred into a specially designed transport crate that ensured both safety and comfort.

Every capture followed the same principle: move swiftly, minimise stress, and place animal welfare above all else. By the time the ninth cheetah was safely secured, it marked more than the completion of a field operation. It was the successful conclusion of one of the most challenging phases of the translocation process and the beginning of the next chapter in their extraordinary journey to India.

Teamwork Across Borders

What made the operation particularly remarkable was the diversity of expertise involved. The Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), Botswana, led the identification of suitable animals and coordinated field operations, while



Captured cheetahs being carefully handled and monitored by the ground team following successful immobilisation



researchers from Cheetah Conservation Botswana (CCB), private ranch owners, and trackers contributed invaluable ecological knowledge and field intelligence. Vet and Agric Consultants & Wild Assist Africa, led by Dr. Erik Verreynne, India's designated technical partner for the Botswana translocation, played a pivotal role in facilitating cooperation and coordination among all stakeholders involved in the operation.

The veterinary component was jointly supervised by Dr. Erik Verreynne of Botswana and the Dr. Sanath K. Muliya, as the Nodal Veterinary Officer for Project Cheetah, India, supported by a dedicated team of wildlife professionals who ensured that every stage met the highest standards of animal welfare and disease management. More than a technical exercise, the operation became a partnership built on mutual respect, shared experience, and a common purpose, a shared conservation vision for the future of the cheetah.

Quiet Work Behind the Scenes

While dramatic images of helicopter captures often attract attention, much of conservation happens quietly. Following temporary holding at Ghanzi, the cheetahs undertook a nearly 700-kilometre journey across Botswana to Mokolodi Nature Reserve near Gaborone. Transporting large carnivores over such distances demands meticulous planning, with every crate, vehicle, route, and contingency measure carefully considered long before the journey began.

At Mokolodi, a dedicated quarantine facility had been upgraded specifically for the operation. Double fencing, improved water infrastructure, reinforced security barriers, visual screens, and stringent biosecurity measures transformed the facility into a safe temporary home for the incoming animals.

Here, the cheetahs entered the final stage before export. Veterinarians monitored appetite, hydration, movement, and behaviour, while diagnostic testing, vaccinations, and repeated health assessments ensured that each animal met the requirements for international translocation. The work was methodical and often repetitive, yet indispensable to the success of the translocation.

A Shared Conservation Journey

On 14 November 2025, during her State Visit to Botswana, the first-ever State Visit by an Indian President to the Republic of Botswana, the Hon'ble President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, formally received the cheetahs from His Excellency Advocate Duma Gideon Boko, President of the Republic of Botswana. The ceremony marked an important diplomatic milestone and symbolised the growing partnership between the two nations. Beyond cheetah conservation, it opened avenues for deeper cooperation in biodiversity conservation, wildlife management, scientific exchange, and capacity building.

**Upgraded Quarantine Facility at Mokolodi
Nature Reserve, Gaborone**



Hon'ble President of India, Smt. Droupadi Murmu, during her State Visit to Botswana, formally received the cheetahs from His Excellency Duma Gideon Boko, President of the Republic of Botswana



For many members of the field team, it also marked the culmination of months of planning and weeks of intensive work in the Kalahari. Behind every animal standing quietly in quarantine was a story of early mornings and long flights, dusty roads and radio calls, veterinary examinations, logistical challenges, and countless hours of teamwork. Most importantly, it was a story of trust, a trust between two nations united by a shared commitment to conservation.

The final leg of this remarkable journey began on the evening of 27 February 2026, when the cheetahs departed from Sir Seretse Khama International Airport, Gaborone, aboard the Indian Air Force's mighty C-17 Globemaster aircraft. The technical team, headed by Dr. Sanjayan

Kumar, Inspector General of Forests, National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), accompanied the cheetahs on their 16-plus-hour journey to their new home in India. Joining the team for this historic translocation was His Excellency Mr. Bharath Kumar Kuthati, High Commissioner of India to Botswana, whose steadfast support was instrumental in facilitating the India-Botswana conservation partnership. The team further included Dr. Bilal Habib, Nodal Officer, Project Cheetah, Wildlife Institute of India (WII); Dr. Sanath K. Muliya, Nodal Veterinary Officer, NTCA Project Cheetah; Dr. Erik Verreynne, Vet and Agric Consultants, Botswana; Dr. Andrew John Frazer, The Metapopulation Initiative, South Africa; Dr. Mmdi Ruben, Senior Veterinarian, Department of Wildlife and National Parks

(DWNP), Botswana; Mr. Knosi Nkape, Biologist, DWNP, Botswana; and Dr. Akash Balmik, Veterinary Officer, Madhya Pradesh Forest Department.

The aircraft landed safely at Gwalior on 28 February 2026, marking yet another historic milestone for Project Cheetah. The translocation was made possible in no small measure by the exceptional support extended by the Indian Air Force at every stage of the operation. From the meticulous loading of the cheetahs aboard the C-17 Globemaster at Gaborone and ensuring optimal in-flight conditions during the 16-plus-hour journey, to the seamless ground operations at Gwalior, the professionalism and efficiency of the Air Force personnel were exemplary. The subsequent transfer of the animals to Kuno National Park aboard the MI-17 helicopter was executed with equal precision and care, reflecting the Indian Air Force's unwavering commitment to supporting one of India's most ambitious conservation initiatives.

Later that day, all nine cheetahs were ceremonially released into their quarantine bomas at Kuno National Park by the Hon'ble Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Shri Bhupender Yadav, bringing to fruition months of planning, international collaboration, and dedicated field efforts spanning two continents. The milestone also reflected his steadfast support and continued guidance for Project Cheetah, which has remained central to advancing

India's vision for ecological restoration and cheetah conservation.

No conservation story is ever written by a single individual or institution. Behind every successful translocation lies the quiet work of countless hands. The political vision and will, the support of policymakers, the dedication of field biologists and veterinarians, the precision of pilots and aircrew, and the commitment of protected area managers preparing to welcome new life into the wild have all made Project Cheetah what it is today. From the grasslands of Botswana to the protected areas of central India, from diplomatic engagements and scientific collaborations to the seamless efforts of the Indian Air Force and the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, every step of this journey has been made possible through collective endeavour.

For now, somewhere in the forests and grasslands of Kuno, nine cheetahs have begun the next chapter of their remarkable journey. Their story is still being written. And it stands as a reminder that when science, stewardship, and collective will come together, even the boldest conservation dreams can once again find their place in the wild.

The India-Botswana joint field team with NTCA officials and the Indian Air Force C-17 Globemaster crew following the successful landing of the cheetahs at Gwalior



Shri Bhupender Yadav, Hon'ble Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change releasing a Cheetah from Botswana into quarantine boma at Kuno National Park





From Botswana to India - A Historic Partnership for Conservation

बोत्सवाना से भारत - संरक्षण की ऐतिहासिक साझेदारी

"Kuno National Park"

M-STrIPES based analysis of seasonal water availability, water quality, and wildlife presence in Periyar Tiger Reserve, Kerala



Alby J. Mattathil¹

¹Periyar Tiger Reserve, Thekkady, Kerala

Surface water availability is a critical ecological component influencing wildlife distribution and activity in tropical forest landscapes, particularly in regions characterised by strong seasonal variation in rainfall. In the Western Ghats, monsoonal patterns result in pronounced temporal fluctuations in surface water, with marked reduction in water availability during dry months. Under such conditions, natural waterholes and perennial water sources assume increased ecological importance, often functioning as

focal points for wildlife presence and movement. In addition to availability, the observable quality of surface water can vary seasonally due to factors such as reduced inflow, sedimentation, organic matter accumulation, and repeated use by wildlife. Changes in water availability and quality may influence how different species are recorded around water sources, especially during periods of water stress. Understanding these seasonal patterns is therefore important from both ecological and management perspectives, particularly for planning water resource

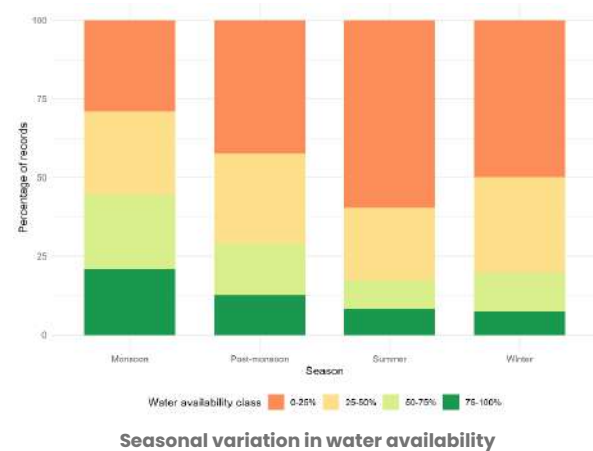
maintenance, patrol prioritisation, and mitigation of potential conflict situations near forest boundaries.

Periyar Tiger Reserve, located in the southern Western Ghats, is one of the largest and most ecologically significant protected areas in Kerala, covering an area of approximately 925 km². The reserve supports a diverse assemblage of large mammals and is characterised by varied terrain, rainfall gradients, and seasonal hydrological dynamics. Administratively, the reserve is managed through two forest divisions comprising five forest ranges, each differing in topography, vegetation, and availability of surface water. Such spatial heterogeneity makes systematic monitoring of water resources particularly important for effective management. Forest departments increasingly rely on digital patrol based monitoring systems to document field observations in a systematic manner. The M-STriPES (Monitoring System for Tigers – Intensive Protection and Ecological Status) patrol application is one such platform widely used in Periyar Tiger Reserve for recording spatially explicit field data, including observations related to water sources, habitat condition, and wildlife presence during routine patrols.

The present work constitutes an analysis of one year (2024-2025) of waterhole related data recorded through the M-STriPES patrol application in Periyar Tiger Reserve. The analysis focuses on seasonal variation in water availability, water quality, and associated wildlife presence across the reserve. The data were not collected as part of a structured experimental or survey design, but represent systematic observations made during routine patrols across different administrative units. Accordingly, the analysis is descriptive in nature and aims to identify broad temporal and spatial patterns, rather than infer causality or species level habitat preferences.

Seasonal variation in water availability

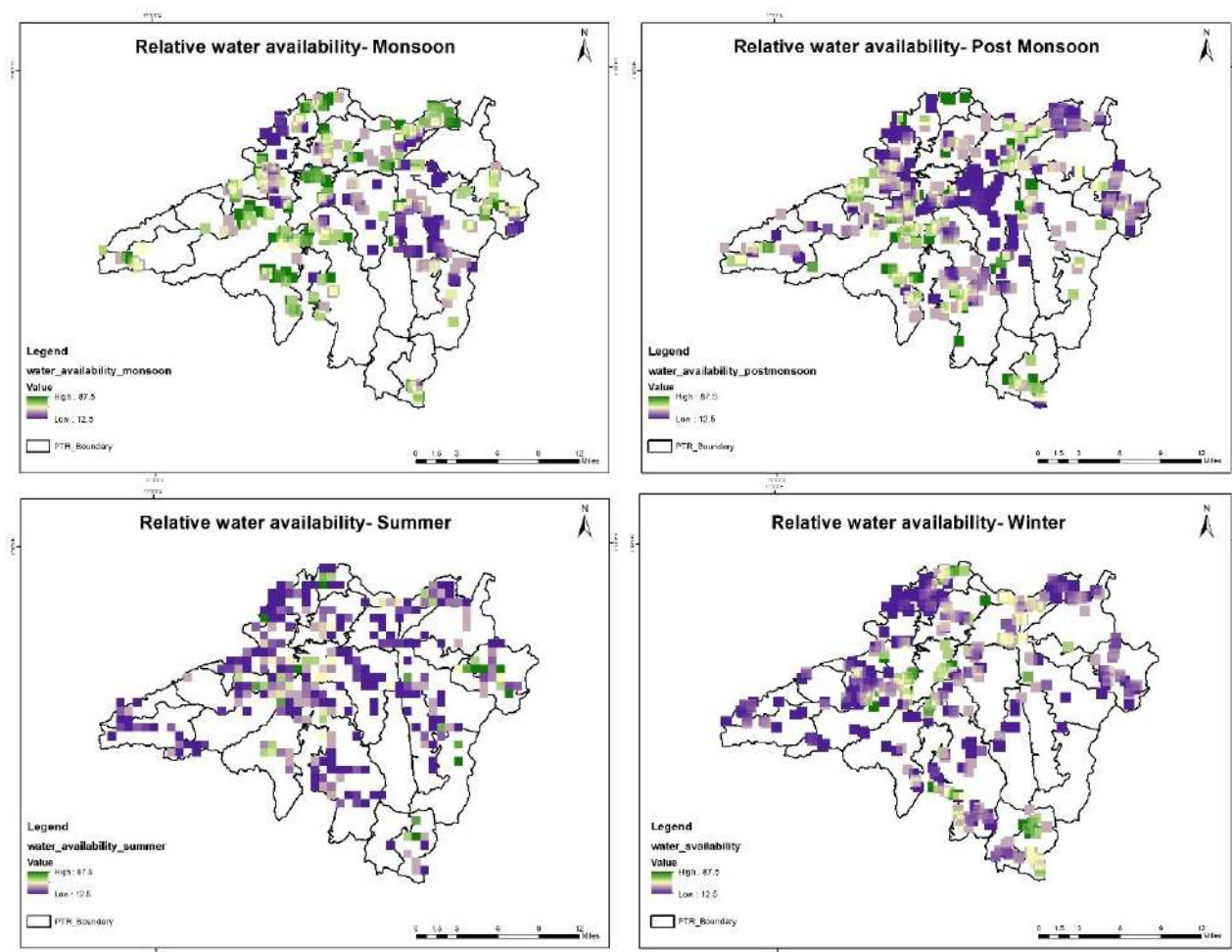
Season-wise analysis of water availability classes indicates clear temporal variation in waterhole conditions across the year. During the monsoon season, waterholes with moderate to high water availability (50-100%) together constituted a substantial proportion of records, while waterholes with very low availability (0-25%) accounted for roughly one-third of observations.



In the post-monsoon period, a shift towards lower availability was evident, with an increase in the proportion of waterholes falling under the 0-25% class and a corresponding decline in higher availability classes. The summer season showed the greatest dominance of low availability waterholes, with the majority of records classified under the 0-25% availability class and only a small fraction under the 75-100% class.

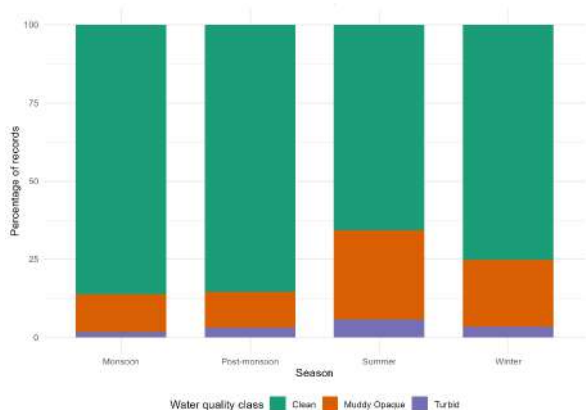
Seasonal variation in recorded water quality

Across all seasons, the majority of waterholes were recorded as having clean water. During the monsoon and post-monsoon periods, muddy-opaque and turbid conditions were relatively limited. In contrast, the summer season showed an increased proportion of muddy-opaque and turbid waterholes, indicating a seasonal decline in observable water condition.



Relative water availability in Periyar Tiger Reserve during the a) Monsoon, b) Post monsoon, c) Summer and d) Winter

Winter exhibited partial improvement compared to summer, with a higher proportion of clean water records. Water quality classifications were based solely on ocular field observations recorded during routine M-STripES patrols and do not represent measured physico-chemical water quality parameters. The results therefore reflect relative, observer based seasonal patterns in water condition.

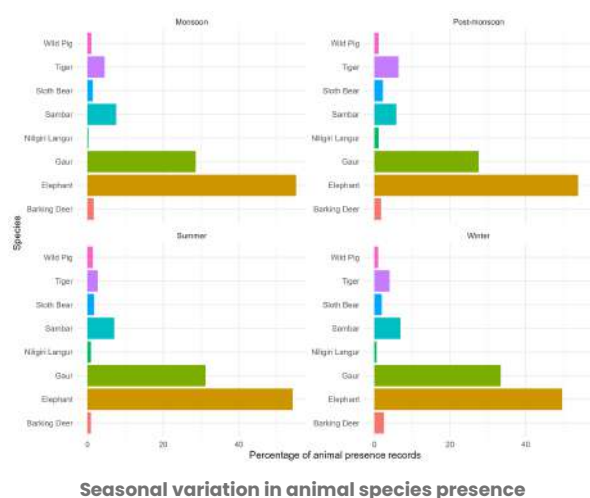


Seasonal variation in water quality

Major animal species recorded

During the monitoring period, elephant and gaur consistently formed the majority of animal presence records at waterholes, both overall and across all seasons. This pattern remained largely unchanged during monsoon, post-monsoon, summer, and winter, indicating that these two mega herbivores were regularly associated with recorded water sources irrespective of seasonal variation in water availability.

Other species such as sambar deer and tiger were recorded at waterholes in relatively lower but stable proportions across seasons, while sloth bear, barking deer, wild pig, and Nilgiri langur contributed only a small fraction of the records. Seasonal changes in the relative contribution of species were limited, suggesting that the composition of animal



presence at waterholes remained broadly consistent throughout the year, even as water availability and quality varied seasonally.

These observations are based on routine M-STripES patrol records and reflect relative frequency of occurrence at waterholes rather than seasonal shifts in abundance or habitat preference. When interpreted alongside seasonal variation in water availability and quality, the results indicate that dominant water source associated species continue to utilise available water sources across seasons, including during periods of reduced water availability.

Animal presence in relation to water availability classes

Across all major species, a higher proportion of animal presence records was associated with waterholes classified under lower water availability categories (0-25% and 25-50%) compared to higher availability classes (50-75% and 75-100%). This pattern was consistently observed for elephant, gaur, sambar deer, tiger, sloth bear, barking deer, wild pig, and Nilgiri langur. For most species, more than half of the recorded presences occurred at waterholes with $\leq 25\%$ water availability, while records declined progressively with increasing availability class. Observations at waterholes with high water availability (75-100%) formed the smallest proportion of records across species. This trend likely reflects the relative frequency and spatial distribution of low availability waterholes during patrols. The results indicate that

animal presence at waterholes was commonly recorded even under reduced water availability conditions, emphasising the importance of partially filled waterholes as functional resources during the monitoring period. These findings are based on M-STripES patrol observations and represent relative occurrence patterns, not intensity of use or species-specific water dependency.

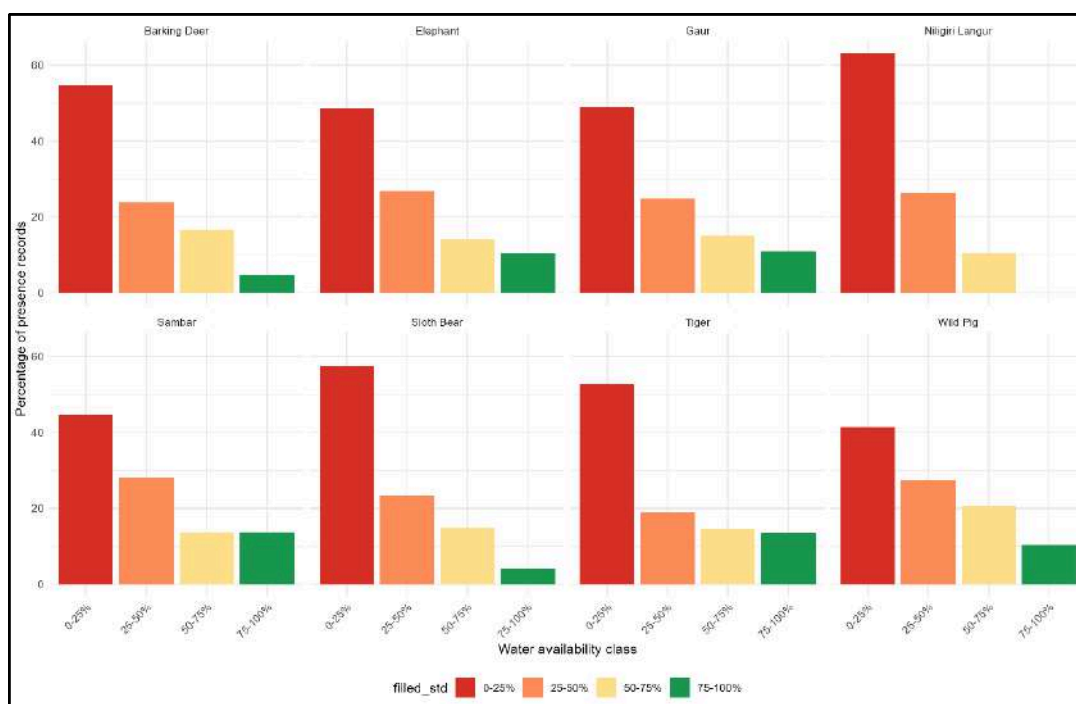
Animal presence in relation to water quality classes

Across all major species, the majority of animal presence records were associated with waterholes classified as Clean. For elephant, gaur, tiger, sloth bear, barking deer, wild pig, and Nilgiri langur, clean waterholes accounted for roughly 70-100% of recorded presences, indicating their dominant availability and use during patrol observations.

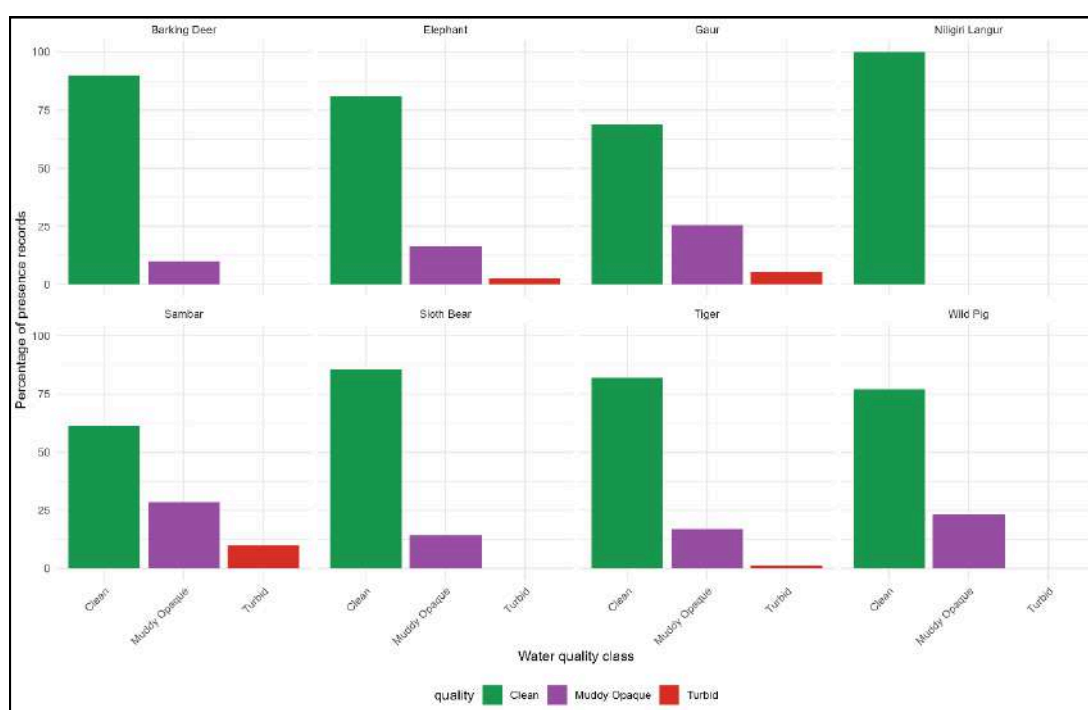
Muddy Opaque waterholes contributed a smaller but consistent proportion of records across species, while Turbid waterholes accounted for only a marginal fraction of observations and were largely absent for several species. Sambar showed relatively higher use of muddy opaque water compared to other species, though clean waterholes still dominated its records. Water quality classification was based on ocular assessment recorded during M-STripES patrols and does not represent physico-chemical measurements. The observed patterns therefore reflect relative occurrence of animals at visually assessed water quality conditions and should be interpreted as indicative associations rather than evidence of water quality preference.

Management implications

This analysis shows that routine M-STripES patrol data, though not collected as a formal ecological study, can reliably capture seasonal patterns in water availability, water quality, and wildlife use of waterholes. Clear seasonal shifts were evident, with reduced water availability and increased concentration of animal presence during summer, indicating



Animal presence in relation to water availability



Animal presence in relation to water quality

dependence on a limited number of functional water sources. The consistent use of waterholes with higher availability and visually clean water by multiple species highlights their importance as critical dry season resources. Such sites warrant priority attention for protection and maintenance, as their failure could have disproportionate impacts on wildlife movement and survival. From a

management standpoint, this approach provides a practical, low-cost tool for tracking water resource status across large areas using existing patrol data. Regular analysis of these records can support timely management decisions related to summer water management, habitat maintenance, and monitoring of emerging stress points, especially under increasing climatic variability.



Strengthening the Shadows of the Vindhyas: A Strategic Technical Blueprint for the Supplementation of Gaur from Satpura Tiger Reserve to Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve



© L. Krishnamoorthy

Rakhi Nanda¹

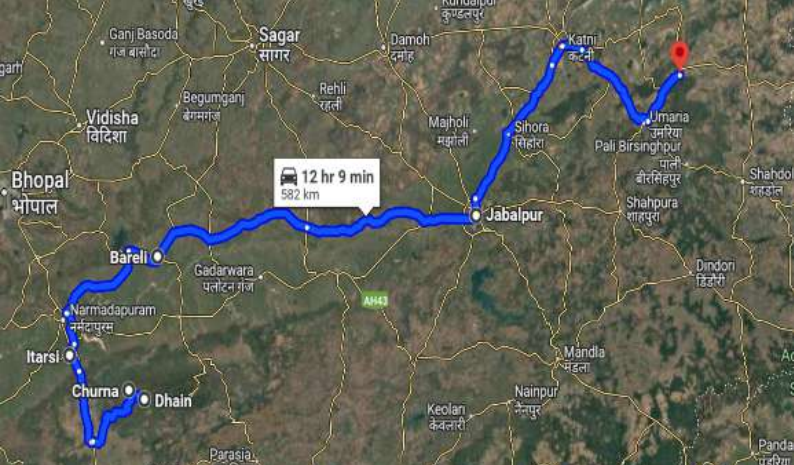
¹Satpura Tiger Reserve, Narmadapuram, Madhya Pradesh

This article details the multi-year conservation effort to genetically revitalize the Indian Gaur (*Bos gaurus*) population in Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve (BTR) through translocation from Satpura Tiger Reserve (STR). Following the local extinction of Gaur in BTR in 1998 and a successful reintroduction from Kanha in 2011, this project addressed the emerging threat of inbreeding depression. Executed in two meticulous phases between 2025 and 2026, the translocation of 50 individuals serves as a best-practice model for large-

scale herbivore population management, combining advanced veterinary science, inter-agency collaboration, and rigorous field execution.

Introduction and Project Rationale

The Indian Gaur, the world's largest wild bovine, serves a critical ecological role as a mega-herbivore and a primary prey species for large carnivores. Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve witnessed the local extinction of its native Gaur population by 1998 due to habitat fragmentation and hunting. While 50 Gaurs were reintroduced from Kanha



Tiger Reserve in 2011-12, the population grew to approximately 170–190 individuals by 2024 but remained genetically isolated.

The primary objective of the Satpura-to-Bandhavgarh project was genetic supplementation. Relying on a single gene pool from the Kanha population posed a long-term risk of inbreeding depression. By introducing genetically distinct individuals from Satpura, the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department (MPFD) and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) aimed to improve the genetic health, viability, and long-term survivability of the BTR population.

Habitat Suitability and Source Population Study

Habitat Assessment: Previous ecological studies in BTR confirmed the landscape's high suitability, with Gaurs showing a strong preference for grasslands, riverine forests, and bamboo. The availability of perennial water sources and abundant forage (112 species of food plants) supported a healthy growth rate in the resident population, justifying the addition of more individuals.

Source Population (Satpura Tiger Reserve): STR was selected as the source due to its thriving population of several thousand Gaurs.

- **Health Screening:** Before capture, 30–40 dung samples were collected from various STR herds and tested at the School of Wildlife Forensic and Health (SWFH), Jabalpur, to ensure the source population was free from infectious diseases and parasites.
- **Social Profiling:** Herds were monitored to select a demographic mix (38 females and 12 males) while ensuring capture did not disrupt resident social bonds.

Detailed Planning and Team Structure

Planning was initiated on a "war footing" a month before operations began. A multidisciplinary task force was established to oversee implementation.

The "Indian Gaur Translocation Guidelines" were developed to standardize protocols for all 210 officials involved. Key specialized teams included:

- **Tracking & Darting Teams:** Consisting of skilled mahouts and veterinarians using captive elephants to approach and sedate Gaurs.
- **Animal Lifting & Stretcher Teams:** Trained to carry sedated animals (often weighing up to 1,000 kg) using specialized stretchers.
- **Logistics & Route Planning:** A 593–650 km transit route was mapped with designated emergency care and feeding points at places like Itarsi, Katni, and Dhamokhar.

Practice and Mock Drills

Success relied on the precision of the team.

- **Drug Standardization:** Wildlife Health Officers practiced darting to refine dosages of anesthesia.
- **Elephant Habituation:** Captive elephants were used to habituate wild herds, allowing the darting team to get within a 20–30 meters range.





- **Dry Runs:** Route mock drills were conducted to familiarize drivers with the 16–18 hours transit journey and the protocols for monitoring animals in transit.

Phase I Execution: February 2025

The first phase was conducted from February 20th to 23rd, 2025.

- **Capture:** 23 Gaurs (18 females and 5 males) were captured from grasslands including Sridhana and Kankdi.
- **Release:** 22 individuals were successfully released into a specialized soft-release enclosure in BTR for acclimatization.
- **Scientific Insight:** During the soft-release monitoring of Phase I, researchers documented the first evidence of allonursing (a female nursing a non-filial calf) in wild Gaur, highlighting the species' social flexibility during translocation.

Phase II Execution: January 2026

Building on Phase I, the second phase was executed from 21st to 25th January, 2026.

- **Operations:** This phase consisted of translocation of 27 Gaurs (22 females and 5 males).

- **Total Count:** With the conclusion of Phase II, the target of supplementing the landscape with 50 genetically distinct Gaurs was achieved.
- **Technology:** Captured individuals were fitted with VHF radio-collars or GPS-LORA devices to track their integration with the resident herds.

Best Practices and Outcomes

The project established several benchmarks for wildlife management:

1. **Soft-Release Protocols:** Holding animals in enclosures allowed them to recover from tranquilizers and bond as a new herd before entering a landscape with high tiger density.
2. **Advanced Telemetry:** The use of GPS and LORA technology provided real-time data on movement patterns and habitat use.
3. **Collaborative Governance:** The synergy between STR and BTR management ensured a seamless transition of responsibility.

Conclusion

The translocation of Gaur from Satpura to Bandhavgarh is a triumph of evidence-based conservation. It has successfully bridged genetic gaps, bolstered a growing population to nearly 200 individuals, and provided new scientific insights into bovine social behavior. This project stands as a testament to the commitment of the Satpura Tiger Reserve and its partners in ensuring the "Giants of the Wilderness" continue to thrive in the Central Indian landscape.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the Government of Madhya Pradesh, under the leadership of the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests & Head of Forest Force, the Chief Wildlife Warden, Madhya Pradesh and APCCF Wildlife for their vision, guidance, and unwavering support in successfully implementing the gaur translocation programme from Satpura Tiger Reserve to Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve during February 2025 and January 2026.

I sincerely thank the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, particularly Dr. Parag Nigam and his team, for their scientific leadership and technical guidance throughout the project.

I express heartfelt appreciation to the officers, frontline staff, forest watchers, and veterinarian of Satpura Tiger Reserve, as well as the veterinarians of the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department, the Wildlife Conservation Trust (WCT), and all the Tiger Reserves of Madhya Pradesh that pooled their expertise, manpower, and resources for the successful execution of this challenging conservation initiative. Their dedication, teamwork, and tireless efforts made this landmark genetic supplementation programme for Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve possible.



All India Tiger Estimation 2026: India's Largest Wildlife Monitoring Exercise Enters a New Era

Bilal Habib¹, Vishnupriya Kolipakam¹, Ujjwal Kumar¹, Ayan Sadhu¹, Ujjwal Kumar¹, Deb Ranjan Laha¹, Jayanta Bora¹, Vaibhav C. Mathur^{2,3}, Sanjayan Kumar² & Sanjay Kumar²

¹Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun

²National Tiger Conservation Authority, New Delhi

³Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, New Delhi

T

he tiger is more than a flagship species — it is a barometer of the health of India's forests." This conviction has anchored India's conservation journey for over five decades, and it finds

its fullest expression once every four years, when the country undertakes the All India Tiger Estimation (AITE). In January 2026, field teams across the country began the Sixth Cycle of this exercise — the world's largest scientifically designed wildlife monitoring programme. Coordinated by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in association with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and implemented by State Forest Departments, AITE 2026 carries forward twenty years of a shared national commitment to science-based conservation and collaborative governance.

Two Decades of an Evolving Exercise

Since its inception in 2006, the All India Tiger Estimation has grown from a periodic population count into a comprehensive ecological audit of India's forests. Conducted every four years — 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018 and 2022 — each cycle has deepened the exercise's scope, adding new indicators and covering more ground. The 2022 cycle assessed 51 tiger reserves and returned an estimate of 3,682 tigers, close to three-quarters of the world's wild tiger population — a number that placed India unambiguously at the centre of global tiger conservation. The Sixth Cycle expands this

canvas further still, bringing 58 tiger reserves under assessment and extending, for the first time, into landscapes not traditionally counted among India's tiger geographies.

Preparations began well before the first camera trap was deployed. The formal commencement of AITE 2026 was marked by a meeting of State Nodal Officers, convened by NTCA and WII at Dehradun, which reaffirmed a shared vision: to conduct the most scientifically rigorous and operationally efficient wildlife monitoring exercise the country has yet attempted. The emphasis, from the outset, went beyond counting tigers — the exercise was designed to generate reliable ecological intelligence capable of guiding conservation strategy for years to come.

Building an Army of Field Scientists

The defining strength of AITE 2026 has been its investment in people. Recognising that the quality of scientific data rests entirely on the competence of those collecting it, NTCA and WII launched an extensive Regional Landscape-level Training of Trainers (ToT) programme ahead of field implementation. Rather than centralising training, the programme adopted a cascading model: Master Trainers were trained intensively at the landscape level and then entrusted with training frontline staff within their own states.



**Training of Trainers
(ToT) in the five
tiger landscapes of
India**



**Training of Trainers
(ToT) in Sikkim and
Gujarat**



**Frontline forest
staff and
researchers
conducting sign
surveys, camera
trapping and
genetic data
collection on field**



Between September and November 2025, these ToT workshops ran across India's five major tiger landscapes — the Shivalik Hills and Gangetic Floodplains, Central India and the Eastern Ghats, the Western Ghats, the Sundarbans, and Northeast India. Each workshop paired classroom instruction with field demonstration, building fluency in carnivore sign surveys, line transect sampling for prey estimation, habitat assessment, camera trap deployment, and the use of digital platforms such as the M-STripES Ecological and Polygon applications. Participants also worked hands-on with GPS-based navigation, equipment handling, and data validation — the unglamorous rigour that ultimately determines whether a national dataset holds together.

The results speak for themselves: more than 35,000 frontline forest personnel have since been trained by the cascading Master Trainer network — one of the largest capacity-building exercises in wildlife monitoring undertaken anywhere in the world. Forest guards, foresters, range officers and wildlife biologists are now implementing a single, common protocol across landscapes as ecologically distinct as mangrove swamp and alpine forest, a consistency that is itself a scientific achievement.

New Ground: Gujarat and Sikkim Join the Count

The Sixth Cycle has also widened the geography of India's tiger monitoring programme. Gujarat and Sikkim have joined AITE for the first time, following confirmed photographic evidence of tiger presence in both states. Gujarat's inclusion carries particular resonance: the state had not returned a verified tiger record since 1989 and was formally dropped from the tiger-range list in the 1992 enumeration. Its reinstatement followed the establishment of territory by a young tiger — barely four years old — along the Ratanmahal landscape on the Gujarat–Madhya Pradesh border from early 2025 onward, continuously monitored by state forest authorities before NTCA restored the state's

tiger-range status. Gujarat now stands alone among Indian states in hosting all three big cats — lion, tiger and leopard.

To support their first participation, NTCA and WII organised capacity-building programmes tailored to each region's ecology. In Gujarat, officers from eleven forest divisions were trained at Ratanmahal Wildlife Sanctuary under the Vadodara Wildlife Division, covering the full suite of AITE protocols — camera trapping, carnivore sign surveys, habitat sampling and digital field data collection. In Sikkim, officers underwent specialised training at Gangtok, adapting standard protocols for tigers, co-predators, prey and habitat characteristics specific to the Himalayan landscape. These efforts ensure that as India's tiger monitoring footprint expands, it does so without compromising the scientific rigour that has defined the exercise since 2006.

A Survey of Unprecedented Scale

The scale of field implementation is, by any measure, without precedent. Teams have moved through dense forest, mountain terrain, riverine floodplains, grassland and mangrove to gather ecological data, establishing more than 50,000 camera-trap stations across tiger-bearing forests and adjoining landscapes — the largest coordinated camera-trap survey ever attempted, and one expected to surpass previous global records for both the number of stations deployed and the volume of images generated. AITE already holds a Guinness World Record for its scale from an earlier cycle; the Sixth Cycle is set to extend that record further.

These images amount to far more than a tiger count. They document leopards, dholes, sloth bears, ungulates and a wide range of smaller carnivores, together forming one of the richest biodiversity datasets assembled anywhere. Combined with sign-survey data, prey estimation, habitat assessment and geospatial analysis, the exercise produces a composite picture of ecosystem health across India's forests — not a single number, but a national ecological ledger.

Technology remains central to holding this scale together. Widespread use of the M-STripES application enables real-time digital recording in the field, reducing transcription error and enabling faster validation. Standardised protocols ensure that data gathered in the Sundarbans mangroves, the Himalayan forests of Sikkim, the sal forests of Central India and the evergreen tracts of the Western Ghats remain scientifically comparable, despite the enormous ecological range they span.

From the Field to the Laboratory

While field sampling continues in several landscapes, analysis is already underway at an equally demanding scale. Roughly 150 researchers, scientists and technical experts are currently processing the volume of information the survey has generated – more than five crore camera-trap images received so far. AI-assisted image classification, expert verification and statistical modelling are being layered together to ensure the final population estimates meet the standard the exercise has set for itself over five previous cycles.

The final report of the Sixth Cycle is expected in 2027. Beyond an updated tiger count, it will offer a detailed accounting of prey abundance, habitat quality, corridor

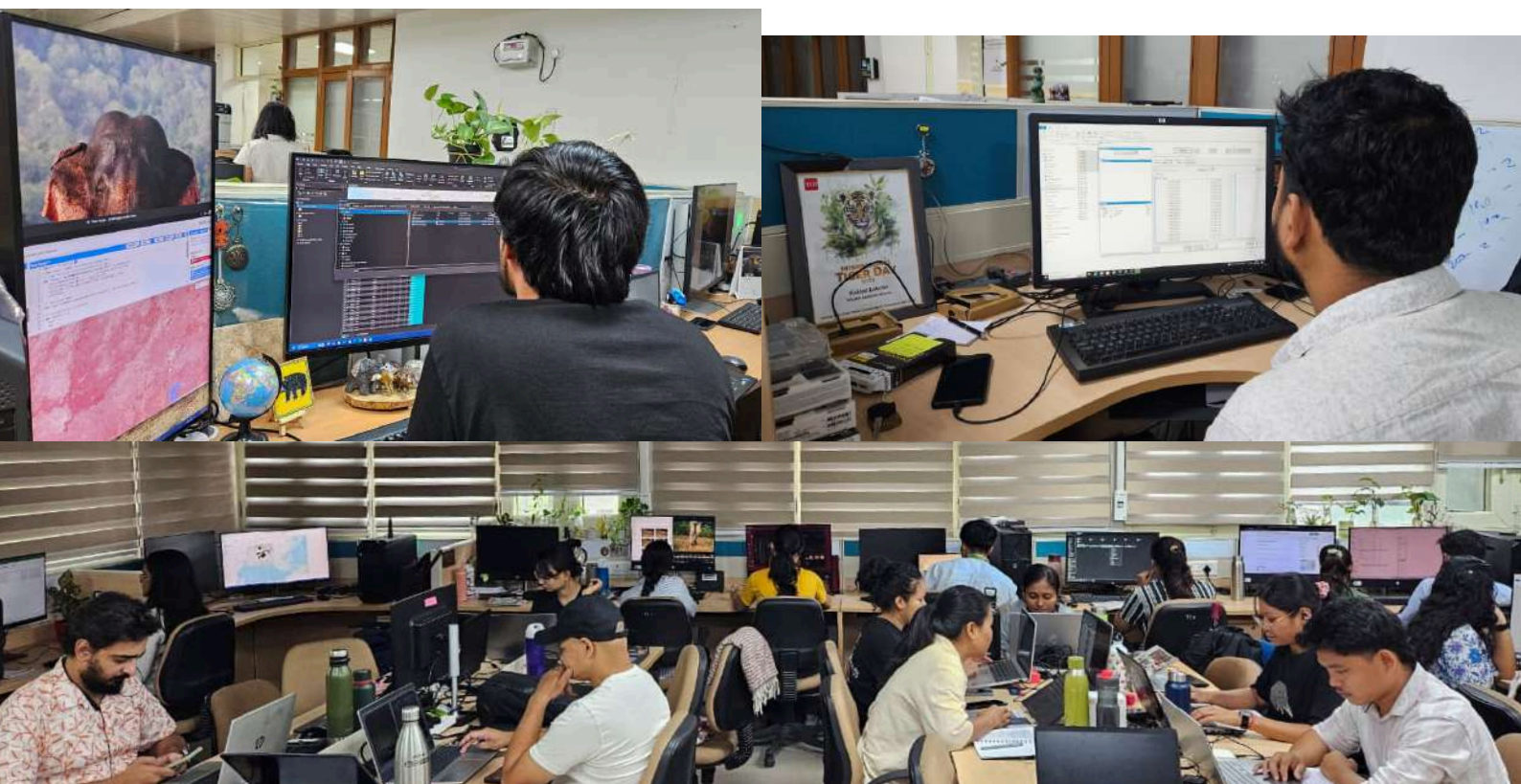
functionality, landscape connectivity and the broader ecological condition of India's forests – findings that will shape conservation investment, management planning and policy for the next four years and beyond.

A Collective Undertaking

The achievement of AITE 2026 lies not only in its scale but in the collaboration that makes that scale possible. Thousands of frontline forest personnel, hundreds of scientists, officers from every tiger-range state, and institutions across the country have converged on a single scientific framework in pursuit of a shared purpose: securing the future of India's wildlife heritage. It is a working demonstration that conservation succeeds when grounded in sound science, sustained institutional collaboration, and disciplined field stewardship.

As India moves toward the completion of another historic estimation cycle, AITE 2026 stands as a marker of national commitment and scientific maturity – from the first field staff entering the forest at dawn to the quiet, careful work of analysts sifting through millions of images. Together, they reaffirm India's place at the centre of global tiger conservation, and its enduring resolve to ensure that the tiger continues to define the landscapes it has shaped for generations.

Processing and analysis of field data



When the Cheetah Returned. So did the Wild

How Project Cheetah is Reviving India's Forgotten Grasslands and Their Extraordinary Wildlife

Bipin C. M¹, Sanath K Muliya^{1,2}, Vaibhav C. Mathur^{2,3}, Sanjayan Kumar², Sanjay Kumar², Vishnupriya Kolipakam¹ & Bilal Habib¹

¹Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun

²National Tiger Conservation Authority, New Delhi

³Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, New Delhi

"When we bring back the cheetah, we are also bringing back our grasslands, our biodiversity and our ecological heritage." This tenet has remained at the heart of Project Cheetah since its inception.

O

n 17 September 2022, when Hon. Prime Minister of India released the first eight cheetahs into Kuno National Park, the world celebrated the return of a species that had disappeared

from India over seventy years ago. The images depicting the event of the day were historic, a spotted cat once declared extinct in India running once again on Indian soil, representing one of the most ambitious wildlife restoration initiatives in modern times with the world's first inter-continental wild-to-wild conservation translocation of a large carnivore. Yet, the true ambition of Project Cheetah was always far greater than the return of a single species.

The cheetah was chosen not merely because a natural heritage of the nation was lost from India, but also because of what it represents ecologically. As an apex predator of grasslands, savannahs, scrublands and open dry forests, the cheetah occupies ecosystems that have remained among India's most neglected habitats for centuries. Bringing back the cheetah necessitates restoring the very landscapes that support it—their prey, ecological processes and the extraordinary biodiversity that coexists alongside them.

The project has embarked on a remarkable journey to restore this lost living heritage, not merely as a species introduction, but as a catalyst for the restoration of neglected open forest and savanna ecosystems.

In many ways, Project Cheetah was envisioned as India's Project Tiger for reviving grasslands and Open Natural Ecosystems. Today, four years later, the emerging story from the initial two cheetah release sites, Kuno National Park and Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary suggests that this vision is turning into reality. Project Cheetah has made significant strides in establishing viable populations of free-ranging cheetahs in India. Since its inception, 29 founder cheetahs have been translocated to Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh; eight from Namibia in September 2022, twelve from South Africa in February 2023, and nine from Botswana in February 2026.

As of June 2026, India sustains a population of 52 cheetahs, reflecting encouraging population growth at the release sites. Of the 29 founder cheetahs, 20 continue to survive and are healthy. Importantly, the project has recorded the birth of 49 India-born cubs, of which 32 have survived,

including individuals that have now reached adulthood and sub-adulthood, demonstrating the successful proliferation of cheetahs in the release sites. In November 2025, Mukhi, the first India-born female cheetah, delivered a litter of five cubs, marking another important milestone for the programme. While 49 cheetahs currently occupy the Kuno landscape (26 adults, 3 sub-adults and 23 cubs), three have been successfully translocated to Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary in 2025, signalling the beginning of the next phase of Project Cheetah and the gradual expansion of the species into suitable habitats within its historical range.

The greatest beneficiaries of Project Cheetah may not be the cheetahs alone. The return of the cheetah has brought with it unprecedented investments in habitat restoration, scientific monitoring, prey augmentation, wildlife health surveillance landscape-level protection and inclusive conservation. As India's grasslands, scrublands and open dry forests recover, they are increasingly providing refuge not only to cheetahs but also to a remarkable assemblage of species that share these habitats. From elusive carnivores such as the caracal, Indian wolf and ratel (honey badger) to the endangered dhole and the critically endangered forest owlet, the ecological dividends of Project Cheetah are beginning to extend far beyond its flagship species.

As envisioned, the project is emerging not merely as a species recovery programme, but as one of India's most significant contemporary efforts at rewilding its forgotten Open Natural Ecosystems.

"The cheetah may have returned first, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it has not returned alone."

Restoring India's Forgotten Ecosystems

Long before the cheetah disappeared from India in the early 1950s, it coursed through the country's vast Open Natural Ecosystems - grasslands, savannas, scrublands and open dry forests that stretched across much of the subcontinent. These landscapes supported an extraordinary assemblage of wildlife and sustained intricate ecological relationships between predators, prey and people. Yet, unlike India's forests, these ecosystems received little conservation attention over the decades. Colonial land-use policies classified them as "wastelands", a misconception that unfortunately persisted long after Independence. As a result, millions of hectares of productive grasslands and scrub forests were transformed for agriculture and other developmental purposes, often overlooking their immense ecological values and ecosystem services.

Vast grasslands of Kuno National Park, Madhya Pradesh



Chinkara



© Sumit Patel

Wolf



© Project Cheetah

Ratel



Dhole



© Moulik Sarkar

Caracal



The consequences of this systemic neglect have been profound. Several species uniquely adapted to these open ecosystems have suffered dramatic declines and now survive in fragmented populations across their former ranges. The critically endangered Great Indian Bustard and lesser florican, the elusive caracal and the Indian wolf have all witnessed significant contractions in their distributions and populations. Even the blackbuck, the cheetah's principal historical prey species in India continues to face conservation challenges across many parts of its range. For far too long, India's grasslands and savannas were perceived as degraded forests awaiting plantations rather than ancient, evolutionarily unique ecosystems harbouring specialised and irreplaceable biodiversity.

It is this understanding that forms the very foundation of Project Cheetah. The programme was never envisioned merely as an exercise in bringing back a charismatic species lost from India's wildlife heritage. Rather, its larger purpose has always been ecological restoration, to re-establish the functional role of the cheetah within representative ecosystems of its historical range while catalysing the conservation of the landscapes upon which countless other species depend. In this regard, ~17,000 km² of mostly contiguous habitat patches under the administration of the State Forest Departments in the landscape surrounding/connecting Kuno and Gandhi Sagar has been delineated as a first step, for prioritising restoration of biodiversity values, enhancing environmental benefits, scientific management and inclusive approach through strategic conservation investments. The Government of India's vision for Project Cheetah extends beyond species recovery to restoring grassland and savanna ecosystems, strengthening biodiversity conservation, improving ecosystem services, enhancing climate resilience through carbon sequestration, generating sustainable livelihood opportunities through ecotourism and community participation, and contributing meaningfully to global cheetah

conservation and future species restoration programmes. In many ways, the cheetah is both the flagship and the impetus of this larger conservation vision. Its return necessitates the restoration of prey populations, the protection of habitats, investments in scientific monitoring and strengthened landscape-level management. Simply put, restoring cheetahs means restoring landscapes and when landscapes recover, nature often returns more generously than we imagine.

Conservation Beyond a Single Species

Successful conservation programmes invariably benefit far more species than their flagship animals. Tiger conservation saved large swathes of India's forests, rhino protection safeguarded the floodplains of the Brahmaputra, and elephants helped conserve migratory corridors spanning entire landscapes. The greatest conservation successes are therefore seldom measured solely by the recovery of a single species, but by the health and resilience of the ecosystems they help restore. Project Cheetah is increasingly demonstrating similar ecological dividends across India's open natural ecosystems. It is a comprehensive narrative of ecological renaissance.

Perhaps no species illustrates this better than the finding the elusive caracal in cheetah release sites. Once distributed across the semi-arid grasslands and scrub forests of the Indian subcontinent alongside the cheetah, the caracal has suffered severe population declines owing to habitat loss, fragmentation and the gradual disappearance of the open habitats upon which it depends. Today, it remains one of India's least studied wild cats and frequently escapes even intensive wildlife surveys. Yet, in a remarkable development, the species has now been documented from both of India's Project Cheetah sites. Camera traps installed in Gandhi Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary photographed a caracal in July 2025, representing the first confirmed photographic evidence of the species in Madhya Pradesh in nearly two decades. More recently, the species has also been documented from the Kuno



landscape in June 2026, reaffirming the immense conservation value of these recovering habitats for one of India's most threatened and enigmatic felids.

The significance of these records extends far beyond the rediscovery of a single species. Caracals are highly adapted to precisely the kinds of ecosystems that Project Cheetah seeks to restore such as the grasslands, scrublands and open dry forests supporting diverse prey communities. Their presence across both Project Cheetah landscapes is therefore symbolic of something much larger: the gradual ecological recovery of habitats that have long remained neglected within India's conservation discourse.

Equally remarkable has been the recent sightings of the endangered forest owl within the Kuno landscape in February 2026. Few species embody the power of rediscovery as dramatically as the forest owl. Believed extinct for over a century after disappearing from scientific records in 1884, the species was rediscovered in central India only in 1997 and remains one of the country's rarest birds. Its continued survival depends upon suitable woodland habitats containing mature trees, healthy prey populations and relatively intact ecological conditions. Its occurrence within the broader Kuno landscape serves as an important reminder that landscape restoration transcends taxonomic

boundaries. Protecting habitats for large mammals inevitably creates ecological opportunities for birds, reptiles, insects and countless lesser-known species that share these ecosystems.

Kuno's ecological story, however, extends well beyond its birds and wild cats. Wildlife monitoring efforts have confirmed the presence of dholes, the endangered Asiatic wild dog within the landscape, contributing towards rebuilding the complex carnivore assemblage characteristic of healthy ecosystems. Alongside cheetahs, leopards and striped hyenas, the dhole represents an important ecological player, regulating prey populations and maintaining ecosystem balance across the landscape. The co-occurrence of multiple large carnivore species is itself indicative of improving habitat quality and adequate prey availability.

Recent scientific investigations have further revealed the presence of species that have long remained hidden from conventional wildlife surveys. Intensive camera trapping and ecological studies are increasingly improving our understanding of Indian wolves and ratels or honey badgers inhabiting these landscapes. Both species are notoriously difficult to study owing to their secretive behaviour and elusive nature. Wolves occupying semi-arid ecosystems frequently remain undetected despite extensive field surveys, while honey badgers are among India's least documented carnivores.





Their increasing documentation is therefore not merely the consequence of chance encounters but reflects unprecedented investments in scientific monitoring, habitat restoration and ecological research undertaken as a part of Project Cheetah.

Bringing Back the Wild

Effective conservation is never about a single species. At its very best, it is about restoring relationships and interactions; between predators and prey, people and landscapes, science and stewardship. The most enduring conservation successes are seldom measured merely by the number of animals they save, but by the resilience of the ecosystems they help restore and the countless forms of life that quietly benefit from them.

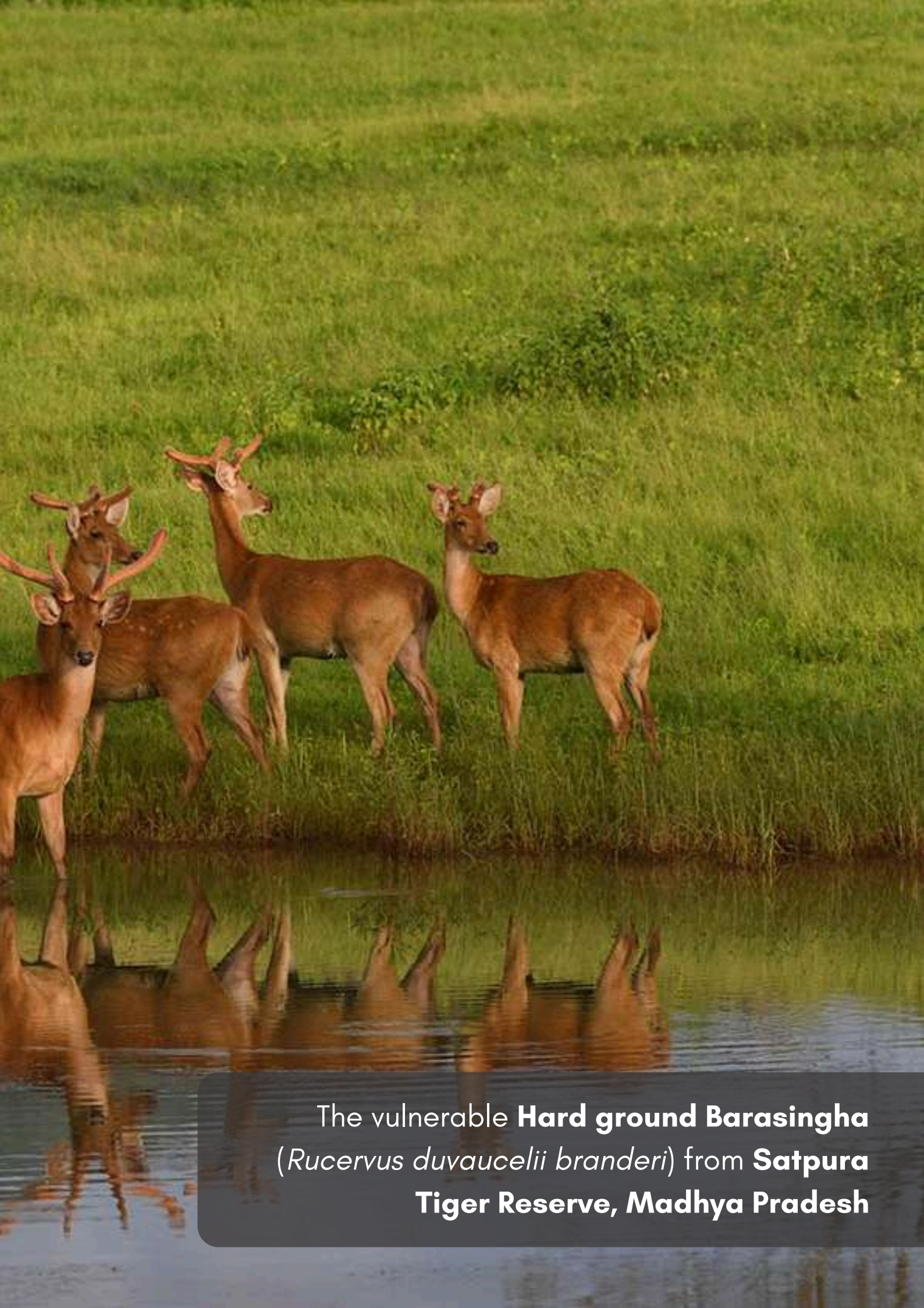
The cheetah may have been the species that brought global attention to India's forgotten grasslands, scrublands and open forests, but it is increasingly evident that

Project Cheetah's greatest contribution may ultimately lie elsewhere. It lies in the silent return of a caracal after decades, in the call of an endangered forest owl from the woodlands of Kuno, in the movements of wolves and honey badgers captured through scientific inquiry, and in the presence of dholes reclaiming their ecological role within recovering ecosystems. Most importantly, it lies in the restoration of landscapes that had long remained neglected in India's conservation narrative.

Four years ago, India brought back the cheetah. Today, it is becoming increasingly clear that we are bringing back something much larger. We are restoring ecological processes, reviving Open Natural Ecosystems and rediscovering/facilitating the extraordinary biodiversity they support. The cheetah may have returned first, but it has not returned alone.

"The return of the cheetah marks not the end of a conservation story, but the beginning of a larger one, the story of bringing India's lost wild back to life."





The vulnerable **Hard ground Barasingha**
(*Rucervus duvaucelii branderi*) from **Satpura**
Tiger Reserve, Madhya Pradesh



Conference of Chief Wildlife Wardens and Field Directors: Strengthening the Future of Tiger Conservation

The Conference of Chief Wildlife Wardens of Tiger Range States and Field Directors of Tiger Reserves, held on 7–8 February 2026 in Alwar, Rajasthan, provided an important platform for reviewing the progress of tiger conservation and charting future priorities for strengthening management across India's tiger landscapes.

The conference was chaired by the Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Shri Bhupender Yadav, and brought together Chief Wildlife Wardens, Field Directors, senior officials of the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), and scientists from the Wildlife Institute of India.

Marking over fifty years of tiger conservation in India, the Hon'ble Minister emphasized that the milestone presents an

opportunity to comprehensively review the evolution of conservation policies and management practices. He called for an assessment of the decisions taken during the previous meetings of the NTCA, to identify policy measures that have been successfully implemented, those requiring revision in light of emerging conservation challenges, and those needing renewed focus. The exercise, he noted, would help develop a consolidated policy framework capable of addressing the evolving needs of tiger conservation in the coming decades.

The conference focused on several critical aspects of tiger conservation, including All India Tiger Estimation 2026, protection and patrolling mechanisms, active management of tiger populations, rescue and rehabilitation infrastructure, management of human–wildlife interactions, utilisation of funds under Project Tiger, and strengthening of Tiger

Conservation Foundations. Deliberations also covered issues related to tiger mortality investigations and improving administrative, financial, and technical support systems to meet field-level requirements more effectively.

The conference also reviewed India's ongoing wildlife recovery initiatives. Referring to Project Cheetah, the Hon'ble Minister highlighted the successful implementation of the world's first intercontinental translocation of a large carnivore and noted the encouraging progress of the programme, including the emergence of the third India-born generation of cheetahs. He also informed participants about the proposed arrival of an additional batch of cheetahs from Botswana, further strengthening the programme.

Highlighting India's growing leadership in global wildlife conservation, the Minister spoke about the establishment of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) under the leadership of the Hon'ble Prime Minister. With an expanding membership and increasing collaboration with leading international organisations, the Alliance is emerging as a global platform for big cat conservation while contributing towards addressing broader environmental challenges, including biodiversity loss, climate change, and land degradation. Recognising the increasing movement of

tigers and other wildlife beyond protected areas, the conference underscored the importance of strengthening rescue and rehabilitation systems. The Minister stressed the need to establish a standardised framework for rescue, rehabilitation, and temporary transit/treatment facilities to ensure timely veterinary care and professional management of injured, orphaned, or conflict-affected wild animals.

On the occasion, the Hon'ble Minister also released the latest edition of STRIPES, NTCA's outreach journal, and distributed prizes to the winners of the painting competition organised by the National Museum of Natural History, recognising the importance of engaging young minds in wildlife conservation.

During the conference, participants exchanged experiences, discussed operational challenges, and shared best practices from across the country's Tiger Reserves. The deliberations reinforced the importance of strengthening coordination between policymakers, scientists, and field managers, ensuring that India's tiger conservation programme continues to evolve through adaptive management, scientific knowledge, and collaborative governance. The conference concluded with a renewed commitment to securing India's tiger landscapes and sustaining the remarkable conservation gains achieved over the past five decades.



National Workshop on Tiger Re-introduction: Shaping India's Roadmap for Tiger Recovery



The National Workshop on "Tiger Re-introduction: Opportunities & Challenges" was held on 28 June 2026 at Sariska Tiger Reserve, Alwar, Rajasthan, bringing together policymakers,

wildlife managers and scientists to deliberate on the future of tiger recovery in India. The workshop was inaugurated by the Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Shri Bhupender Yadav, reaffirming the Government of India's commitment to science-based and adaptive management of tiger populations in line with the vision of Amrit Kaal Ka Tiger Vision 2047.

On the occasion, the Hon'ble Minister released three important publications—the Road Map on Active Management of Tigers in India, the Booklet on Reintroduction and Recovery of Tigers in India, and the Annual Report of Project Cheetah. These publications provide strategic guidance for active management of tiger populations, recovery of tiger-deficient landscapes, and future species restoration initiatives.

The workshop brought together Chief Wildlife Wardens and Field Directors from tiger-bearing States, representing both source populations and tiger-deficient landscapes identified as potential sites for supplementation and recovery. The technical session, chaired by the ADGF (Project Tiger) and Member Secretary, (NTCA), served as a platform for sharing scientific knowledge, field experiences, and management perspectives on accelerating tiger recovery across suitable landscapes.

The technical deliberations commenced with a presentation by the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) Tiger Cell, which introduced the Road Map for Stocking Tiger-deficient Areas: Framework for Active Management of Tiger Reserves in India.

A special session on Project Cheetah showcased India's successful cheetah reintroduction programme—the world's first intercontinental translocation of a large carnivore—and highlighted valuable lessons in planning, translocation, monitoring, habitat management, and stakeholder coordination that can inform future wildlife recovery programmes.

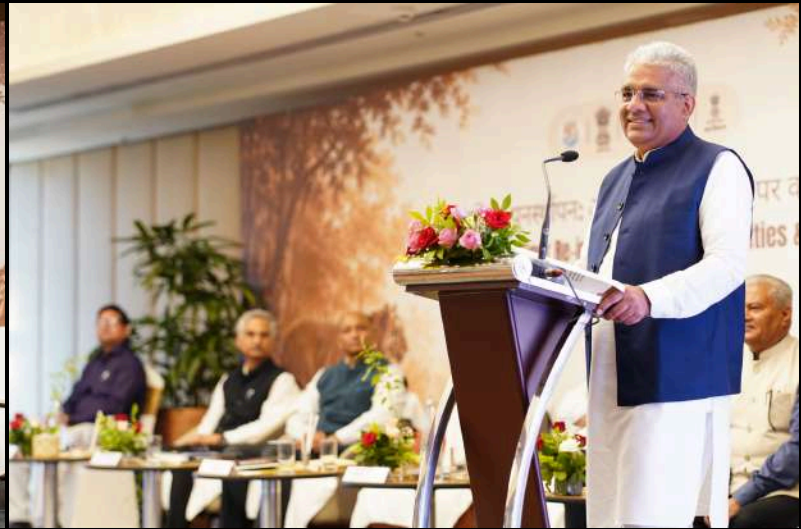
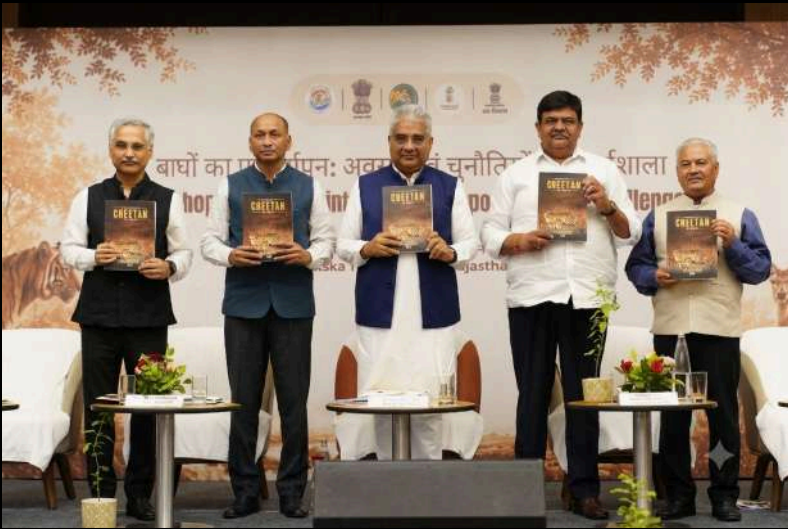
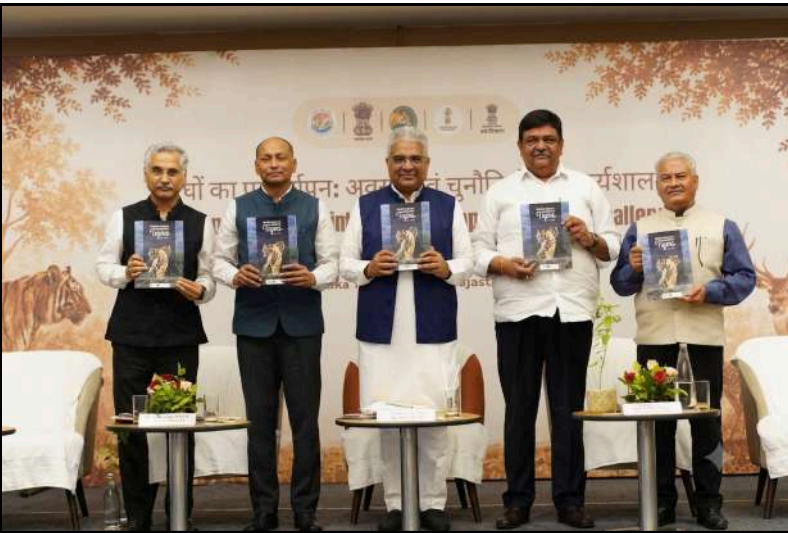
An important feature of the workshop was the presentation of case studies by Chief Wildlife Wardens and Field Directors from Sariska, Mukundara Hills, Panna, Veerangana Durgavati, Satkosia, Similipal, Rajaji, Sahyadri, and Navegaon–Nagzira Tiger Reserves. These case studies documented experiences from tiger reintroduction, supplementation, and recovery programmes, highlighting achievements, operational challenges, habitat restoration efforts, post-release monitoring, protection measures, community participation, and adaptive management practices.

Representatives from Buxa, Achanakmar, Udanti-Sitanadi, Indravati, Palamau, and other low tiger density reserves presented the preparedness of their landscapes for future recovery initiatives. Discussions focused on habitat improvement, prey augmentation, strengthening protection mechanisms, enhancing landscape connectivity, and creating ecological conditions necessary for successful tiger recovery.

The workshop concluded with the prioritization of five Tiger Reserves where focused tiger recovery interventions will be undertaken including habitat restoration activities and prey augmentation, followed by the reintroduction of tigers. Following the workshop, participants visited Sariska Tiger Reserve to observe habitat management practices and conservation interventions

that have enabled the successful recovery of its tiger population over the past eighteen years. The visit provided valuable field insights and reaffirmed the

importance of scientific planning, strong protection, and collaborative management in restoring viable tiger populations across India's diverse landscapes.



29th Meeting of the National Tiger Conservation Authority

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The 29th meeting of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) was held on 9 July 2026 at the Central Academy for State Forest Service (CASFOS), Coimbatore,

under the chairmanship of the Hon'ble Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Shri Bhupender Yadav. Bringing together Members of Parliament, senior officials of the Ministry, expert members, and representatives from States, the meeting served as an important platform to review ongoing conservation initiatives and deliberate on strategic priorities for strengthening tiger conservation across the country.

In accordance with the directions of the Hon'ble Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change during the 28th meeting of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), two significant NTCA publications were released during the meeting. The first, "Roadmap to Rescue: Strategic Roadmap for Establishment of Temporary/Transit

Facilities for Rescue-Rehab-Release of Wild Animals in Tiger Landscapes", provides a comprehensive framework for establishing temporary and transit rescue facilities across tiger landscapes, recommending standards for infrastructure, veterinary support, equipment, staffing, and site selection. The second publication, "STRIDES 2026: Status of Tiger Reserves – Infrastructure, Development, Ecological & Social Parameters", presents a comprehensive assessment of governance, habitat management, community participation, infrastructure, conservation interventions, and developmental indicators across all 58 Tiger Reserves, identifying key strengths, gaps, and priority areas to further strengthen reserve management and tiger conservation.

A major focus of the deliberations was the growing significance of socio-demographic factors in shaping future conservation strategies. The Hon'ble Minister emphasized the need for adaptive management approaches that respond to changing





demographic realities and the developmental aspirations of communities living in and around tiger reserves. He stressed that effective and sustainable conservation requires a balanced approach that safeguards wildlife while addressing the needs and aspirations of local communities, ensuring that conservation and development progress hand in hand.

The Authority also underscored the importance of making local communities active partners in conservation through inclusive decision-making, capacity building, and collaborative management. Community participation was recognised as a cornerstone of effective conservation, strengthening both wildlife protection and sustainable livelihoods.

Another important area of discussion was the status of rivers and water resources in tiger landscapes. A presentation by Hon'ble

Member of Parliament Shri Rajiv Pratap Rudy highlighted the challenges posed by declining groundwater levels and changing hydrological conditions. The members deliberated on scientific measures to improve water security through watershed conservation, habitat management, groundwater recharge, and restoration of natural water bodies. Healthy water systems were recognised as fundamental to sustaining prey populations, tiger habitats, and overall ecosystem resilience. The meeting concluded with a renewed commitment to strengthening inter-agency coordination, promoting community-centric conservation, and adopting climate-resilient management practices. As India continues to lead global tiger conservation, the deliberations reinforced the importance of science-based management, collaborative governance, and inclusive conservation approaches in securing the future of the country's tiger landscapes.





A **Greater One-horned Rhinoceros** (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) and Jungle Myna in a mutualistic association, **Orang Tiger Reserve, Assam**

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GLOBAL TIGER DAY



Global Tiger Day is celebrated every year to raise awareness about tiger conservation and the importance of protecting their natural habitats. It encourages people around the world to work together to ensure a safe future for these magnificent big cats.

29 JULY
2026



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