

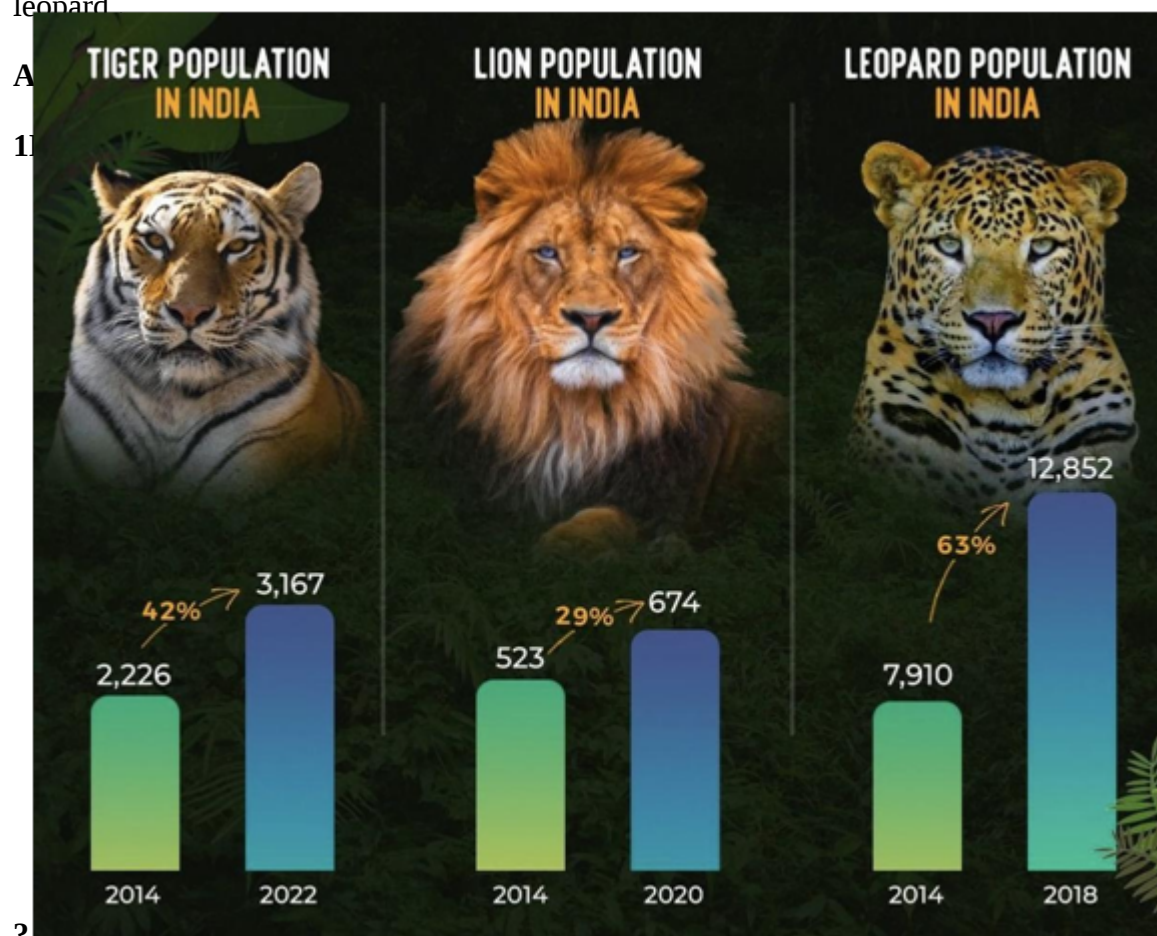


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The International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA)

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Why in News: Five decades after India launched 'Project Tiger' to check the dwindling population of the big cats and protect their natural habitat, Prime Minister of India recently unveiled a global alliance that will work towards the protection and conservation of six species besides the tiger — the cheetah, jaguar, leopard, lion, puma and snow leopard.



Status: Vulnerable

Population: Although lions aren't endangered at present, population numbers could drop in the absence of proper conservation efforts. The IUCN estimates that 23,000-39,000 lions remain in the wild. However, data suggests that that number may be closer to 20,000, as their population is in decline. The total population of lions in India is around 700, as per 2020 estimates.

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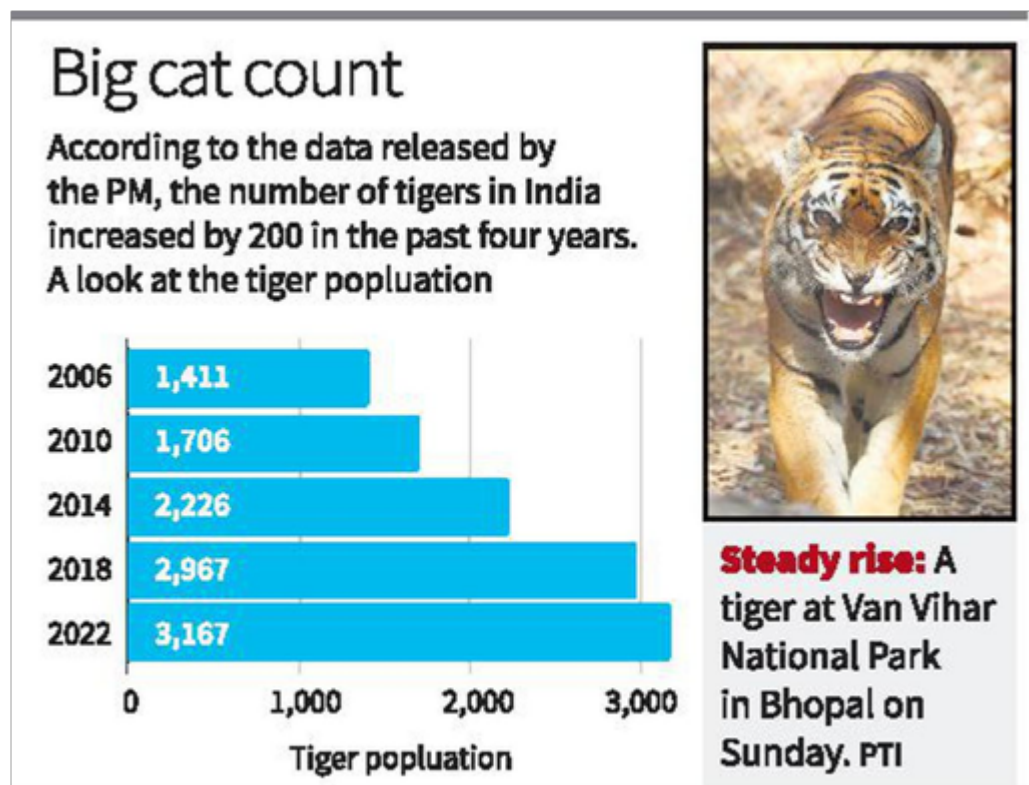
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Range: Previously, lions roamed throughout Africa and parts of Asia and Europe. The big cat is now found only in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, along with a critically endangered subpopulation in West Africa and a small population of Asiatic lions at the Gir National Park.

Threats: There has been a significant decline in lion ranges due to land use and climate change. According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), lions currently inhabit only 8% of their former ranges, while the rest live out of protected areas. A 2019 study revealed that targeted poaching of lions accounted for 35% of known human-related lion killings.

The Indian government launched the Asiatic Lion Project for long term conservation of the species

2TIGER



Status: Endangered

Population: Around 3,700-5,000 tigers were living in the wild worldwide, as per a 2022 assessment by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). As per WWF, tiger populations are stable or increasing in India, Nepal, Bhutan, Russia and China after years of decline.

Range: Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Thailand and Vietnam.

Threats: Tigers have lost 95% of their historical range, according to the WWF. The use of land by humans for agriculture and development poses a serious risk to their habitat. Tigers need wide home ranges as they are territorial. Smaller habitats put them at a higher risk of poaching as they venture beyond protected areas to establish their territories.

Climate change has emerged as another serious concern as rising sea levels threaten to wipe out forest areas. According to a WHO study, projected sea-level rise -- about a foot by 2070 -- could destroy nearly the entire Sundarbans habitat.

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Additionally, tiger 'farms' where the big cats are held captive for breeding and sale have emerged as a major obstacle to recovery and conservation efforts. More than 8,000 tigers are estimated to be held captive in East and Southeast Asia, as per the WWF.

3SNOW LEOPARD

Status: Vulnerable

Population: An estimated number of 4,000-6,500 snow leopards exist in the wild, with their population in decline, as per experts. In India, researchers estimate the total number to be between 400 and 700.

Range: Their habitat range extends across the mountainous regions of 12 countries across Asia — Afghanistan, Bhutan, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Threats: Besides the loss of natural habitat, snow leopards face the threat of poaching, a decline in natural prey species and retaliatory killings due to human-wildlife conflict. The snow leopard habitat range has declined due to climate change, human disturbances and increased use of grazing space.

4JAGUAR

Status : Near threatened

Population: As per WWF estimates, the global jaguar population is around 1,73,000.

Range: Their population is distributed across 18 countries, with most of them in the Amazon rainforest and the Pantanal in South America. Brazil accounts for half of the wild jaguars in the world.

Threats: Like tigers, jaguars need larger territories to survive. Besides fragmented habitats, deforestation and agricultural activities have resulted in a decline in their range. Estimates show that jaguars have already lost an approximately 50% of their historic range. Illegal hunting and trade have also played a role in their population decline.

5CHEETAH

Status: Vulnerable

Population: Cheetah numbers have declined from an estimated 15,000 in 1975 to less than 7,000. The species was declared extinct in India in 1952.

Range: The big cat is endemic to the savannahs of Africa. Initially, they were found in Africa, India, Pakistan, Russia, Iran and the Middle East. Currently, the majority live in east and southern Africa.

Threats: Cheetahs have reportedly lost 76% of their historic range in Africa. Besides the loss of habitat, the species suffers due to human-wildlife conflict, climate change, loss of prey and illegal trafficking.

6PUMA

Status : Near threatened

Population: The total breeding population of pumas is estimated at around 50,000 and is on a declining trend.

Range: Also known as a mountain lion, the puma is found in habitats ranging Canada through the U.S. and Central and South America.

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Threats: The species faces threats of loss of habitat and prey, besides human-wildlife conflict.

LEOPARD

Status : Near threatened

Population: Around 2,50,000 leopards exist globally, while their population is estimated at around 13,000 in India.

Range: Africa, parts of the Middle East and Asia, including India and China.

Threats: Like other big cat species, leopards globally face the threat of habitat loss, poaching for body parts and harm due to human intervention. In India, the biggest threat is an increasing conflict with humans. Several leopards have died due to road accidents in protected areas.

About International Big Cat Alliance

Origin

PM Modi first proposed an international group against poaching and illegal wildlife trade while releasing the country's tiger census report to mark Global Tiger Day in 2019.

Speaking at the event, the PM reiterated the country's commitment towards animal protection and conservation.

He highlighted the threat of a "decreasing and disturbed habitat" and illegal trade as he sought to bring together heads of government of tiger range countries in an alliance to "erase demand and firmly curb poaching and illegal trade in Asia."

Taking the lead, the central government set up the International Big Cat Alliance, which PM Modi has termed an "extension to the spirit" of his proposal.

About IBCA

The International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) will reach out to "range" countries that are home to the seven big cats to strengthen efforts to conserve these denizens in the wild

Notably, the alliance will provide a platform for the member nations to share knowledge and expertise and extend support to recovery efforts in potential habitats

IBCA will also assist existing species-specific inter-governmental platforms to boost conservation efforts.

Role of IBCA

Broadly, the alliance will focus on the protection of seven major cat species and work with countries harbouring these big cats to stop the illegal wildlife trade.

As per preliminary information, the global bloc will include as many as 97 range countries. However, unlike the Global Tiger Forum, it will work towards the conservation of natural habitats of the lion, snow leopard, puma, jaguar and cheetah, along with the tiger.

IBCA will facilitate the mobilisation of financial and technical resources for the overall ecosystem dealing with big cat species while implementing the conservation and protection agenda that has emerged from the experiences of other countries

The IBCA and translocation of big cats

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The alliance will synergise and speed up efforts in the translocation of big cats. Last year, eight cheetahs arrived in India from Namibia, seven decades after they became “functionally extinct” in the country.

The ambitious project to reintroduce cheetahs in India was the first intercontinental transfer of wild cats into the country since Independence.

In February this year, 12 more cheetahs were translocated from South Africa. The government plans to translocate 12 big cats annually for the next eight to 10 years.

After the translocation of cheetahs, the government expressed a desire to launch similar initiatives to move big cats.

The Centre is already in talks with Cambodia, where the tiger was declared extinct in 2016 due to poaching and habitat loss. India, meanwhile, is home to over 3,000 tigers, which is more than 75% of its global population, as per the latest government estimates.

The tiger population was 1,411 in 2006, 1,706 in 2010, 2,226 in 2014, 2,967 in 2018 and 3,167 in 2022. While the latest data recorded a significant increase since 2018

Conclusion

Protection of wildlife is a universal issue. International Big Cat Alliance is our endeavour for the protection and conservation of the big cats. Together, we will save these species from extinction and create a safe and healthy ecosystem