

TIGER NUMBERS ON THE RISE

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - Wildlife related issues

An increase from 62 to 287 tigers in eight sites in India over next 30 to 50 years is possible. |
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At a time when tiger deaths dominate national news, a new study offers hope for wild tiger populations across countries by showing that under optimal conditions, tiger numbers can triple in 18 sites across the world, including eight in India.

These are Anamalai-Vazhachal (in Tamil Nadu-Kerala), Sathyamangalam (Tamil Nadu), Balaghat (Madhya Pradesh), Achanakmar (Chhattisgarh), western Rajaji and Nandhaur (Uttarakhand), Manas (across Assam-Bhutan) and Valmiki (across Bihar-Nepal). Currently, these regions support an estimated 62 tigers which could rise to 287 over the next 30-50 years: an increase of more than four times in India alone.

The study, published in *PLOS ONE*, was conducted by 49 conservationists of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) across 10 tiger-range countries. They compiled the best available information — including the occurrence and abundances of tigers and their prey from available scientific studies, the connectivity of the protected areas and availability of protected buffer forests nearby as well as human disturbances including fragmentation through the Human Footprint Index. These were used for developing site-specific and ecologically realistic targets and timelines for the recovery of tiger populations in 18 tiger global “recovery sites”.

The results reveal that while the 10 tiger-range countries currently support 165 tigers, they could harbour 585 individuals. This rise could happen over 15-20 years in three sites including Uttarakhand's Western Rajaji where natural prey is adequate, and over 30-50 years in the other areas where prey numbers would need to first recover.

While some tiger populations are already doing better (Manas, for instance, has over 30 tigers now), others such as western Rajaji are not, wrote lead author Abishek Harihar, a scientist with Panthera and NCF-India, in an email to *The Hindu*.

This new assessment could guide planning for tiger recovery globally and help inform more effective, integrated approaches to tiger conservation, he said.

Tackling growing incidents of human–tiger conflict in these areas would be crucial to aid this increase, according to the study. It also adds that the goal of doubling tiger numbers from about 3,200 to about 6,000 by 2022 may have been an “ambitious goal” that the signatories of the Global Tiger Recovery Program took on.

“As we move towards the [TX2] goal, we must recognise that global efforts put into tiger recovery is aimed at the long-term survival of tigers in the wild, way beyond 2022,” said Joseph Vattakaven, coordinating author and tiger biologist from WWF, India.

This study affirms the need for tiger-range governments to take a holistic, long-term view towards tiger recovery which must include plans for revival of prey animals and other wildlife at the site- level, said Dr. Rajesh Gopal, Secretary General of the Global Tiger Forum (an inter-governmental international body that works towards protecting tigers) in a press release.

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