

## VET INSTITUTE, AMBULANCES MOOTED IN RS. 98 CRORE LION CONSERVATION PLAN

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Three months after at least 20 lions in Gujarat succumbed to a virus, the Centre and the Gujarat government have announced a Rs. 97.85 crore Asiatic Lion Conservation Project at a press conference here on Friday.

A key outcome of the project is to have a dedicated veterinary institute, “lion ambulances”, and back-up stocks of vaccines that may be required. There are close to 600 lions in Gujarat, according to State forest officials at the meeting. However, there has been no move yet to translocate lions to a location outside Gujarat.

“There is a committee of experts from both States examining the suitability of Madhya Pradesh as a potential lion reserve. Secondly, we also have to comply with certain guidelines of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (on selecting suitable habitat, translocation),” said Rajiv Kumar Gupta, Additional Chief Secretary, Gujarat.

### No progress

The Kuno-Palpur Wildlife Sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh was identified to be the most suitable for reintroducing the species, according to a Supreme Court-appointed technical expert committee, but there has been no progress on the proposal.

The SC in April 2013 had ordered the translocation of some lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh within six months, but this hasn't happened. This was ordered after several recommendations by expert groups, including the Wildlife Institute of India. It emphasised that the long-term survival of the lion as a species was best served if they could be present outside Gujarat, too, so that they are protected against, say, a forest fire, a disease, or calamities.

While the lion deaths of last year brought these questions to the fore, they also pointed to the stark reality of lion numbers rising to an extent that several of them were now found outside protected areas and involved in human-animal conflict as well as in increasing contact with domestic animals as well as feral dogs, from where they could have contracted the virus.

“We are not closed to the idea and will do anything required for the protection of this species,” said Environment Minister Harsh Vardhan.

The Gujarat government, on its part, has envisaged a ‘Greater Gir’ that includes, other than the existing Gir National Park, sanctuaries in Girnar, Pania and Mitiyala.

Key aspects of the conservation project include undertaking “habitat improvement” measures, making more sources of water available, creating a wildlife crime cell, and a task force for the Greater Gir region.

It would also involve having in place a GPS-based tracking system, which would look at surveillance tracking, animal and vehicle tracking. There would also be an automated sensor grid that would have magnetic sensors, movement sensors and infra-red heat sensors.

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