

'INDIA CAN'T HANDLE MORE BIG CATS'

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While conservation efforts are aimed at increasing the tiger count in India, global experts and officials in the government suggest that India must also prepare for a new challenge — of reaching the limits of its management capacity.

Officially, India had 2,226 tigers as of 2014. An ongoing census is expected to reveal an update to these numbers. But Rajesh Gopal, head of the Global Tiger Forum, said that India's current capacity to host tigers ranged from 2,500-3,000 tigers.

Moreover, said another official, 25-35% of India's tigers now lived outside protected reserves.

With dwindling core forests as well as the shrinking of tiger corridors (strips of land that allow tigers to move unfettered across diverse habitat), officials said there were several challenges — alongside the traditional challenges of poaching and man-animal conflict — to India's success at tiger conservation. Recent attempts at translocating tigers to unpopulated reserves, such as Satkosia in Orissa, have ended badly, with one of the tigers dying.

Mr. Gopal was speaking at a conference of representatives from a group of countries who've signed a declaration to double tiger numbers by 2022, organised by the National Tiger Conservation Authority. Barring China, all other tiger-range countries — Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Myanmar, India and Nepal — were part of the conference in New Delhi on Monday.

Another official, involved in the ongoing census said the report — expected to be made public in May — will also, for the first time, discuss challenges of having a thriving tiger population.

"Overall, given the low availability of prey in some reserves, this is the capacity that can be supported. However, there are vast tracts of potential tiger habitat that can be used to improve prey density, develop tiger corridors and therefore support a much larger population," said Y. Jhala of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII).

Over 10,000 tigers

K. Ullas Karanth, director, Centre for Wildlife Studies, however, said, "I would estimate the potential carrying capacity for tigers in India at 10,000 to 15,000, not the 3,000 we already have. When tiger recovery efforts began 50 years ago we had about 2,000 tigers.. If after all this effort and expenditure, we are satisfied with just 3,000 tigers, it points at a serious management problem: needlessly huge amount of money is being dumped repeatedly on the same 25,000-30,000 sq. km area where tigers are already at saturation densities, while other areas with potential for future recovery are starved of key investments."

Since 2006, the WII has been tasked with coordinating the tiger estimation exercise. The once-in-four-years exercise calculated, in 2006, that India had only 1,411 tigers. This rose to 1,706 in 2010 and 2,226 in 2014 on the back of improved conservation measures and new estimation methods.

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