

AN INITIATIVE TO SAVE THE STRIPED HYENAS OF INDIA

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They whoop, rumble, low, and laugh, when they are excited or on sensing danger. But not so much in the last few years when hyenas are rarely heard. Hyenas have almost vanished in to thin air. Not much loved, the striped hyenas or *Hyaena hyaena* of India are staring at an uncertain future. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has categorised it as 'Near Threatened' species on a global scale. After a gap of five years, the largest-ever range mapping and assessment of the hyenas is being done by IUCN involving several regional partners.

To create the latest range maps on the species distribution in the Eastern Ghats region, the Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society (EGWS) is assisting IUCN Hyaena Specialist Group as a local collaborator. The process of range mapping is unique as people people from across Eastern Ghats belt can report sightings of the species.

A mammal of the Carnivora order and Hyaenidae family, hyenas, like wild dogs, are top predators that compete with other species in the unforgiving landscapes of India, Central Asia, North and East Africa and West Asia. Till about two decades ago, the striped hyenas were a common sight in the wild and semi-arid lands. Today, its numbers are likely to be around 5,000 globally, a drop from about 14,000 not too long ago.

"Their population has taken a severe beating. Apart from habitat destruction, retaliatory killings due to popular beliefs and conflicts with other aggressive species like the jackal are some the reasons behind their current status," says Murthy Kantimahanti of EGWS. Often misunderstood and viewed as dangerous or destructive, hyenas are poisoned or captured forpreying on livestock. "With the populations of other large carnivores declining, so does the food they leave behind that striped hyenas scavenge," explains Murthy.

During the range mapping of the species, EGWS will be gathering direct as well as indirect (faeces, conflict reports) evidences across the region. While it is still too early to provide any analysis or insights, the project has a lot of potential. "We are using an app called iNaturalist to get information on hyena-ecology, conservation and human-interactions from several locations," says Murthy.

IUCN assessments are important as they determine the status of species, ascertain risks and identify priority locations for conservation. "The ongoing assessment will be one of the major ones involving people and we implore all nature lovers, wildlife enthusiasts and citizens to report the occurrence of striped hyaenas (direct sightings, historical records, mortalities, spoor, scat or conflict incidents)," says Murthy.

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