

## PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

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The death of 21 Asiatic lions in Gujarat's Gir National Park in less than a month invites serious questions about the conservation of the big cats in their only habitat. For one, the park authorities must be called out for the way they have dealt with this episode. They initially blamed the deaths on infighting between lion prides. This explanation could have been a plausible one had the casualties not included three female lions.

Male lions are known to maul each other to death but they never harm females. The park managers have now found evidence of a "viral infection" in some blood and tissue samples of the dead animals. They have isolated 31 lions from the areas adjacent to the one in which the deaths have occurred. These animals are reported to be doing fine. But it would be wrong to conclude that the species is in good health.

More than 180 lions have died in Gir in the past two years. This is worrying given that lion deaths averaged around 60 between 2010 and 2015. Conservation authorities might take solace from the fact that Gir added more than 120 lions between 2015 and 2018. But greater numbers bring new vulnerabilities. Most scientific studies reckon that Gir can host about 300 lions, about half the current population. According to a CAG report tabled in the Gujarat Assembly in March, more than 50 per cent of the national park's lions have spilled out of the protected area. This brings with it the threat of speeding trucks and trains, open wells and live wires. More than 30 lions have perished to accidents in the past two years, according to the park's records.

In 2013, the Supreme Court directed the translocation of "some" lions from Gir to Kuno in Madhya Pradesh. The Gujarat government has, however, refused to part with the animals, arguing that MP has not gone by the IUCN's guidelines for translocation. MP's forest officials retort that Kuno satisfies all the conditions laid down by the Wildlife Institute of India — the agency mandated to monitor the relocation of Gir lions. The recent deaths of the big cats should be reason enough to end such politicking. Gir has lived under the shadow of an epidemic since 2012, when scientists from the Indian Veterinary Research Institute identified the Goat Plague (Peste Des Petits Ruminants) virus in a lion carcass. The wildlife authorities in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh should not forget that an epidemic caused by a virus wiped out more than a third of the lion population in Tanzania's Serengeti National Park in the 1990s.

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