

NEXT STEPS AT GIR

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

The magnificent Asiatic lion is under threat. Twenty-three lions have died in as many days in the eastern part of Gujarat's Gir sanctuary. While mass mortalities in wildlife are always a cause for concern, this case is even more worrisome as the big cat population in Gujarat is the last of the Asiatic lions in the wild.

In 2013, the Supreme Court had issued an order that lions from Gujarat be relocated to the Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh as a check against the threat of epidemic. But even wild animals are subject to State politics. Gujarat has been unwilling to part with its lions, calling them "its pride" in an affidavit.

Following the series of deaths, preliminary reports said that the cats have been killed by disease, most likely to be infectious. Some others have died due to poisoning and infighting. On October 3, the Supreme Court, noting that the death of so many lions was a serious matter, asked the Central government to look into it.

In its 2013 order, the Supreme Court had said: "Asiatic lion, it has been noticed, has been restricted to only one single habitat, i.e. the Gir National Forest and its surrounding areas and an outbreak of possible epidemic or natural calamity might wipe off the entire species. A smaller population with limited genetic strength are more vulnerable to diseases and other catastrophes in comparison to large and widespread population." The court also noted how 30% of the lion population in Tanzania's Serengeti was killed due to an outbreak of canine distemper, a viral disease that affects animals. Gujarat's response to this was that lions are now spread over the Greater Gir region and this reduces the threat. It has also had an intense, managerial response to the disease — when ill, lions are routinely picked up, medically treated, and then released.

Wildlife conservation concerns itself with maintaining ecological processes and reducing threats to endangered species. It does not entail treating wild animals for disease (in the way domestic animals are) as this can go against the processes of natural selection. Treating wild animals appears to be a caring thing to do. But it is not conducive to the 'natural' process of life and death, and ultimately compromises immunity. Another celebrity example of this kind of management was Machli, the tigress from Ranthambhore in Rajasthan. Known as the world's most photographed tigress, she lived for 20 years before her death in 2016. This is because she was treated medically, and often fed artificially.

To be fair to Gujarat, the lines of what comprises wildlife conservation are getting blurred. When wild animals go extinct locally, they are reintroduced — as in the case of tigers in Sariska, Rajasthan. When hungry, they are fed artificially, and even provided salts as supplements, an example being the Hangul (Red deer) population in Dachigam, Jammu and Kashmir. In other parts of India, wild animals are funnelled through artificial trenches, barriers and fences. This is wildlife conservation in the age of man, where protected areas sometimes resemble zoos.

Yet even the most flexible of conservationists would agree that intensive artificial medical treatment of wild animals does not augur well for long-term sustainability. The role of wildlife managers should be to reduce unnatural threats, not unnaturally prolong life. While Gujarat has done a good job of conserving its lions, it should also turn its attention to reducing the drivers of disease, which includes controlling feral dog populations.

Gujarat submitted before the Supreme Court that one of the reasons it did not want to part with the lions was because there are metapopulations in the State. Metapopulations may be geographically separate but have interactions and an exchange of individuals. Gujarat had said to the Supreme Court, "Current Asiatic lion population is not a single population confined to one place." It consists of "metapopulation spread over several locations within the Greater Gir Region", adding that "good conservation practices and intensive wildlife healthcare, has lead to epidemic free regime". Crucially though, these areas are connected to each other and this does not address the main concern of creating geographically distant populations.

Undoubtedly, after the lion deaths, Gujarat should work towards colonising new habitats outside the Gir landscape within the State. However, there are spatial limitations in this industrialised State. An option is the Barda wildlife sanctuary. But Barda is close to Gir, and this cannot be confused with creating isolated populations. It would simply mean increasing suitable lion range from its present, much smaller area.

Finally, there is no getting around the fact that a geographically separate population of Asiatic lions needs to be created. A good track record for lion conservation does not in any way preclude a good long-term strategy.

Neha Sinha is a wildlife conservationist. The views expressed are personal

Sign up to receive our newsletter in your inbox every day!

Please enter a valid email address.

Last week Ram Kadam, a BJP MLA from Maharashtra, told the men in an audience that if they were interested in women who didn't reciprocate the feeling,

Our existing notification subscribers need to choose this option to keep getting the alerts.

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com

Crack