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Big Cats

A magazine by IBCA on wildlife conservation

NHRC India Secretary General
Bharat Lal writes on
Asiatic Lion Habitat Recovery

Saving the Elusive
Snow Leopard
of the Himalayas



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Akagera, Rwanda's
Model National Park



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IBCA & Planetary
Boundaries Framework



P 28

Pantanal: Close-ups of
Jaguars of Brazil



Virtual Reality in Maasai Land

A Maasai man in Amboseli National Park, Kenya, experiences the wonder of virtual reality for the first time, while others wait their turn beneath the acacia. A Canadian crew visited to film the traditional nomadic culture and everyday rhythms of the community — blending technology and tradition in a moment of quiet connection

PHOTO BY GEORGINA GOODWIN



Population Estimates Show the Way



Technology is often considered a game-changer. In wildlife conservation, it has indeed become a critical research tool helping evolve better strategies and even addressing human-animal conflicts. Now animal movements can be tracked via GPS, while habitat monitoring can be done with drones. Camera traps now document the everyday lives of even some of the most elusive animals while AI can help predict poaching threats. Extensive data produced with the help of technology is enabling us save endangered species.

In India, researchers used camera traps in 1,971 locations for 180,000 trap nights in the first ever population assessment of snow leopards conducted during a five-year period starting 2019 in the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions. Until recently, the snow leopard habitat range in India was undefined. Thanks to the scientific data gathered through a robust survey, presented in the form of a report 'Status of Snow leopards in India', we now know that India has a stable population of snow leopards (718). We also know what are the potential risks to their habitats. This survey will play a critical role in better landscape management for the species under threat globally. Read more about the report in our cover story.

Another recent population estimate, that of the Asiatic lions in India has given a lot of hope to conservationists. A special story examines the key factors that helped the impressive growth of numbers.

Wildlife conservation is expensive business. In Akagera National Park, Rwanda, a public-private partnership has become a successful model of reviving species, sustaining various operations of the park and in supporting communities with income-generation activities. In this issue, we offer a report based on a visit to the park.

We continue to showcase some breathtaking and fascinating images of several talented photographers, including some incredible women who have been following big cats and other species for decades in Latin America.

This issue also deliberates on how IBCA can play a role in maintaining planetary boundaries that ensure health of our planet. An international alliance, Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme, has contributed to increasing tiger numbers globally. Both species protection and community empowerment went hand-in-hand in their strategy. Survival is a birthright of all species. 🐾

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MALVIKA KAUL

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Cover Images: Snow Leopard in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh, India. Photograph by Sourav Mondal.

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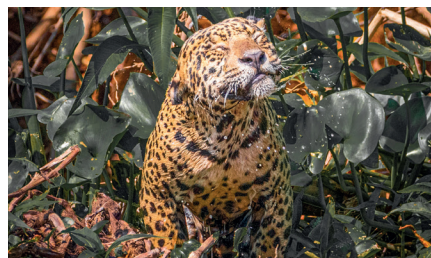
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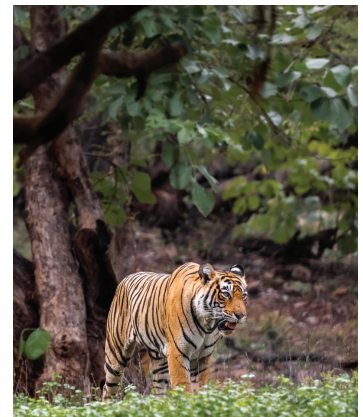
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Bharat Lal
pg 18
Bharat Lal is the Secretary General of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), India. He is the Founder Mission Director of the National

Jal Jeevan Mission, a programme to ensure clean tap water to every rural household in the country. He has been involved at the highest-level of policymaking and is well-known for his innovative thinking and problem-solving approach. His long association with forests and wildlife has given him deep insights into India's conservation issues. He has co-authored two books, *Tigers and Tribes: A Silent Conversation* and *Hidden Treasures: India's Heritage in Tiger Reserves* that exhibit the conservation ethos of tribal communities and their contribution towards sustaining the rich biodiversity of India.



Ramesh K Pandey
pg 06
Ramesh K Pandey is Additional Director General of Forests (Wildlife) and Director, Wildlife Preservation, at the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change with the government

of India. He was awarded the WWF-PATA Award and the UNEP Asian Environmental Enforcement Award (2019) for his contribution to wildlife conservation. He began his professional journey as an officer with the Indian Forest Service and has worked as Inspector General (Forests) Project Tiger, and Director Project Elephant (2021-2025). He is well-known for his field work in tiger landscapes of Uttar Pradesh, India, and was Field Director of Dudhwa Tiger Reserve.



Dr S P Yadav
pg 06
Dr S P Yadav is the Director General of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA). In his 35-year long career, he has worked for more than a

decade at the National Tiger Conservation Authority and at the Global Tiger Forum. He has also served as Director of Wildlife Institute of India, Member Secretary of Central Zoo Authority. He has recently been conferred the International Crystal Compass Award by the Russian Geographical Society for his contribution to Project Tiger in India. He has co-authored two books, *Tigers and Tribes: A Silent Conversation* and *Hidden Treasures: India's Heritage in Tiger Reserves*.

Our Contributors for this Issue



Dr Kausik Banerjee
pg 22
Kausik Banerjee is a Lead Specialist with the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA). A carnivore biologist dedicated for the

past two decades to conserving the apex predators for their intrinsic value and their critical roles in maintaining ecological balance and the overall health of ecosystems. His work on Asiatic lions, tigers and leopards involved a combination of science, advocacy, policy, and community engagement.



Phurba Lhendup
pg 24
Phurba Lhendup leads IUCN's Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme (ITHCP) as Coordinator in Gland, Switzerland. He has contributed to the global efforts

to safeguard endangered tiger populations as a team member of the Species Conservation Action Team of IUCN. With nearly 24 years of experience, he is adept at navigating complex challenges in biodiversity protection, protected area management, community engagement, wetland and river basin.



Elisa Facchini
pg 24
Elisa Facchini is a Programme Officer at the IUCN headquarters in Gland, Switzerland, where she supports the management of the Integrated Tiger Habitat

Conservation Programme (ITHCP) within the Species Conservation Action Team. She has degrees in environmental sciences and development studies. Before joining IUCN, she worked in Myanmar, leading a conservation project in Lampi Marine National Park, in the Myeik Archipelago. She has also supported education and income-generating initiatives in Nepal.



Mihir Bhatt (Max)
pg 12
Mihir Bhatt is a visual artist based in Kigali, Rwanda. He has led several creative teams and executed innovative campaigns. He is also an avid wildlife photographer

recording some of the most amazing moments in various wildlife parks of Rwanda. Mihir often volunteers as a conservation activist supporting Akagera National Park in big cat preservation.



Mariza Freitas
pg 28
Mariza Freitas is a wildlife photographer focussed on using her art to raise awareness about importance of environment and wildlife conservation. She has won several national and

international photo contests in recent years. Many of her visual explorations focus on the beauty and strengths of the Brazilian jaguar that survive in Pantanal of Mato Grosso. Based in Rio de Janeiro, Mariza donates part of the profits of her work to NGOs in Brazil and Africa.



Sourav Mondal
pg 06
Sourav Mondal is a naturalist and wildlife photographer. He has a degree in Zoology and has spent more than 10 years in the Himalayas searching for red pandas, snow

leopards and other Himalayan wildlife. Sourav has led over 100 wildlife expeditions to the Himalayas. In one such expedition he found the snow leopard "walk towards his camera" offering some remarkable captures that are now reproduced in this issue. He was awarded Asia's coveted Nature in Focus Photography Award in 2017 and 2018.



Photo: Sourav Mondal



Photo: Prasanjeet Yadav

1. A pair of snow leopards in Spiti Valley, Himachal Pradesh
2. Close to 241 snow leopards were photographed during the population assessment. Each provided a unique image of this shy species

Saving the Elusive SNOW LEOPARD OF THE HIMALAYAS

The first-ever assessment of snow leopards in India assures that the population is stable. Camera trap pictures of the elusive big cat are now available, guiding experts towards evidence-based conservation programmes that include local communities

BY RAMESH K PANDEY AND S P YADAV



Photo: Sourav Mondal

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3. A mating pair

4. Camera trap technology has enabled researchers to monitor threats to high-priority population like the snow leopards. Here, a snow leopard appears to look up at a camera



Photo: Prasanjeet Yadav

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In January 2024, a report titled ‘Status of Snow leopards in India’ brought a lot of cheer to wildlife conservationists in India. It stated that India’s snow leopard population is “stable”, with 718 snow leopards in the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region. This piece of news also offered hope to conservationists

around the world. Snow leopard population has dwindled in many parts of the world and today only an estimated 3,500-7,000 individuals survive.

India has the third largest population of snow leopards globally. The release of the report ‘Status of Snow leopards in India’ by Mr Bhupender Yadav, Union Minister of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change

(MoEFCC), is part of a long-term strategy for effective protection of a threatened species. Conservation of a threatened species mostly hinges on accurate scientific record of its occurrence and the status of its population. The report was based on a first-ever comprehensive scientific exercise undertaken by the Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI)

programme. Between 2019 and 2023, the programme covered almost 70% of the potential snow leopard habitat, including the union territories of Ladakh and Jammu and Kashmir, and the states of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.

Snow leopards (*Panthera uncia*) in India are found in rugged, high-altitude Himalayan and trans-Himalayan landscapes, around 2,700m above sea level. Unlike species like leopards, tigers and lions, population estimation of snow leopards is often very difficult as they live in harsh terrain where camera traps can rarely be installed. Carrying out trail or transect surveys is even tougher. In several terrains, the temperature ranges from -40 °C in winter to 30 °C in summer.

Ladakh has maximum snow leopards (477), followed by Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51), Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21) and Jammu & Kashmir (9)

For India, this extensive survey aimed to identify core zones for better landscape management planning. Such a study helps focus on protecting large habitats that support multiple species and ecosystems. Snow leopards inhabit remote areas in the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions, that are also home to other important species like the blue sheep and ibex.

Under the SPAI programme, camera traps were set up at 1,971 locations for nearly 180,000 trap nights. The occupancy of snow leopards was recorded for around 94,000 km², with an estimated presence at more than 1,28,000 km². Close to 241 unique snow leopards were photographed via camera traps during this exercise. After five years of study, covering 120,000

A trio of Himalayan ibex remains oblivious to the presence of the snow leopard who is a master of camouflage



Photo: Sourav Mondal



Corral setup in villages

km² area, the programme announced that Ladakh had maximum snow leopards (477), followed by Uttarakhand (124), Himachal Pradesh (51), Arunachal Pradesh (36), Sikkim (21) and Jammu & Kashmir (9).

The survey was conducted in two steps: First it evaluated the spatial distribution incorporating habitat covariates based on population estimation guidelines released by the MoEFCC in 2019. In the second step, it assessed the abundance of the species by using camera traps in the distribution ranges.

This 2024 population assessment offered for the first time a baseline data on an elusive species. For conservationists and policymakers, this was a remarkable step towards evidence-based conservation interventions. The report also pointed to the impact of increasing human population on the snow leopards,

escalating anthropogenic factors, developmental pressures, and rapidly changing habitats due to climate change and human interactions. It also observed human-snow leopard conflicts in many parts of the country.

Snow leopards are given the highest degree of statutory protection in India. They are included in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, and they have also been listed in Appendix I of the CITES. Additionally, the snow leopard was declared the State Animal of the union territory of Ladakh.

Addressing Conflict

The human-snow leopard conflicts are sharpest in high-altitude grasslands where pastoral communities depend on livestock grazing. These grasslands

Project Snow Leopard

In 2019, recognising the importance of conserving the snow leopard as a keystone species in high-altitude Himalayan ecosystems, India launched Project Snow Leopard (PSL). The project aimed for a participatory and landscape-based approach to conserve snow leopards by involving the local communities, state governments, and NGOs.

Project Snow Leopard focussed on improving habitats, increasing the prey base, and mitigating conflicts while creating sustainable livelihoods for local and pastoral communities. The project operates in Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. It focuses on research, monitoring, and capacity building of field formations, mainly in protected areas.

Financial assistance for the project came from the species recovery programme component of the Centrally Sponsored Scheme for the Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (CSS-IDWH) of the ministry. A steering committee was also been established to monitor the implementation of the Snow Leopard Project across the country.

India also actively partnered in the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program (GSLEP), a collaborative initiative launched in 2013 for securing snow leopard populations and their habitats through transboundary cooperation, institutional capacity building, and community-based conservation. The GSLEP has 12 snow leopard range countries as its members. India has been proactively participating in the GSLEP meetings and various conservation efforts, such as developing the country's National Snow Leopard Ecosystem Protection Priorities (NSLEP) and supporting the assessment of the snow leopard population at the global level.



Solar installations help meet the energy needs of the local communities



Farmers from Kibber village, Himachal Pradesh, work in the field

are also habitats of snow leopards. Retaliatory killings of snow leopards, triggered by livestock predations by them, pose a serious threat to snow leopards in the area.

Further, habitat encroachment, prey depletion, and climate-induced changes aggravate negative interactions of snow leopards with local communities. Many mitigation measures have been introduced involving local communities, such as predator-proof enclosures (corrals), livestock insurance schemes, and timely compensation for livestock losses. These efforts aim to reduce economic losses for grazer communities while fostering coexistence, with many successful models implemented in Ladakh and in the

Snow leopard population estimates and density estimates (expressed as individuals/100 km ²)				
States/UTs	No. of Camera trap locations	No. of Unique individuals	Density estimates	Estimated number of snow leopards
Ladakh	956	126	0.34±0.14	477
Jammu & Kashmir	135	9	0.75±0.52	9
Himachal Pradesh	284	44	0.08-0.37	51
Uttarakhand	382	40	0.7-1.04	124
Sikkim	99	14	0.40±0.11	21
Arunachal Pradesh	115	8	0.26±0.11	36
Total	1971	241		718

Source: MoEFCC 2023. Status of Snow Leopard in India (SPAI)



and Darma in Uttarakhand, and Lahaul in Himachal Pradesh.

Homestay Initiatives

Conservation-based livelihoods such as nettle enterprises in Sikkim and Uttarakhand, cultivation of sea buckthorn in Himachal Pradesh, and homestays and ecotourism in Ladakh not only reduce pressure on natural resources but also enhance the income for local communities, thereby increasing their stake in wildlife protection and conservation.

Homestay initiatives and ecotourism have further incentivised conservation efforts by creating employment generation to the communities protecting them. Moreover, use of mobile apps made a difference, helping in communicating information especially about the movement of the animals in conflict areas. It has also helped in taking precautionary measures and in providing quick rescue and response by the wildlife department in case of conflicts.

The harsh climate of Ladakh has in some ways become an asset. Innovative use of solar power has helped several communities survive bitter cold and build better income-generation models. People continue to co-exist with snow leopards despite the economic challenges and losses it is causing. Snow leopards predate on sheep reared by grazer communities. The predation on sheep by snow leopard incur financial loss to the grazer communities, however they do not retaliate and kill snow leopards and try to take preventive measures to avoid conflicts.

The establishment of corrals helps prevent snow leopards from preying on their goats and sheep.

India's strategy for conservation of snow leopards includes expanding protected areas and ensuring landscape connectivity through wildlife corridors. India has already identified such corridors for tigers and elephants. The snow leopard survey offers added potential in supporting conservation strategies for long-term protection of this elusive species. 🐾

Photo: Liton Paul

Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh. Spiti is one of the first landscapes identified by the government under Project Snow Leopard to conserve India's unique natural heritage of high-altitude wildlife populations and their habitats.

In 2017, the MoEFCC launched SECURE Himalaya Project in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and supported by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), to adopt a landscape-level approach for conservation in the high-altitude ecosystems of Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Sikkim. It trained 2,000 frontline forest staff and community members in monitoring of wild habitats and skilled around a 1,000

women and youth in adventure and nature-based tourism.

With a focus on the sustainable management of alpine pastures and forests, SECURE aligned closely with the objectives of PSL securing habitats of endangered species like the snow leopard. It integrated conservation with livelihood development, thereby fostering long-term community support.

Based on 50 ecological studies, SECURE has also identified High Conservation Value (HCV) areas, three of which have been notified as Biodiversity Heritage Sites in Himachal Pradesh, setting the stage for community-led conservation. These are Khangchendzonga-Upper Teesta Valley in Sikkim, Gangotri-Govind

Ramesh K Pandey is Additional Director General of Forests (Wildlife) in MoEFCC.
Dr S P Yadav is Director General of IBCA.

Akagera National Park

Return of the Wild

Akagera National Park is one of Rwanda's first income-generating parks. A Public-Private Partnership model has transformed the landscape and the lives of local communities while restoring key African species

PRAMOD K YADAV AND MIHIR BHATT REPORT FROM AKAGERA

Tourists on a safari spot
an African lioness in
Akagera National Park

Photo: Hermann Nkusi



As one enters Akagera National Park, the rich, biodiverse landscape strikes you: dense forest cover dotted with huge water bodies, an array of species ranging from African lions and leopards, buffalos, elephants, waterbucks, and warthogs thrive amidst the rolling hills of Acacia bush and lush grasslands. A glimpse of the black and white rhinoceros assures one that Akagera is a haven of diverse wildlife.

One of Akagera's most notable achievements is the reintroduction of species, an initiative aimed at restoring the ecological balance and enhancing biodiversity in the park. Almost a decade ago, the lion was reintroduced after a 15-year absence. Eighteen eastern black rhinoceros were translocated from South Africa to Akagera in 2017. In 2021, 30 southern white rhinos made this park their home for the first time. This year, in the second week of June, another 70 white rhinos arrived in the park.



Akagera is a safe space for the tuskless

Photo: Ravina Yadav



Rigorous patrolling has almost ended poaching in Akagera

Photo courtesy Akagera National Park

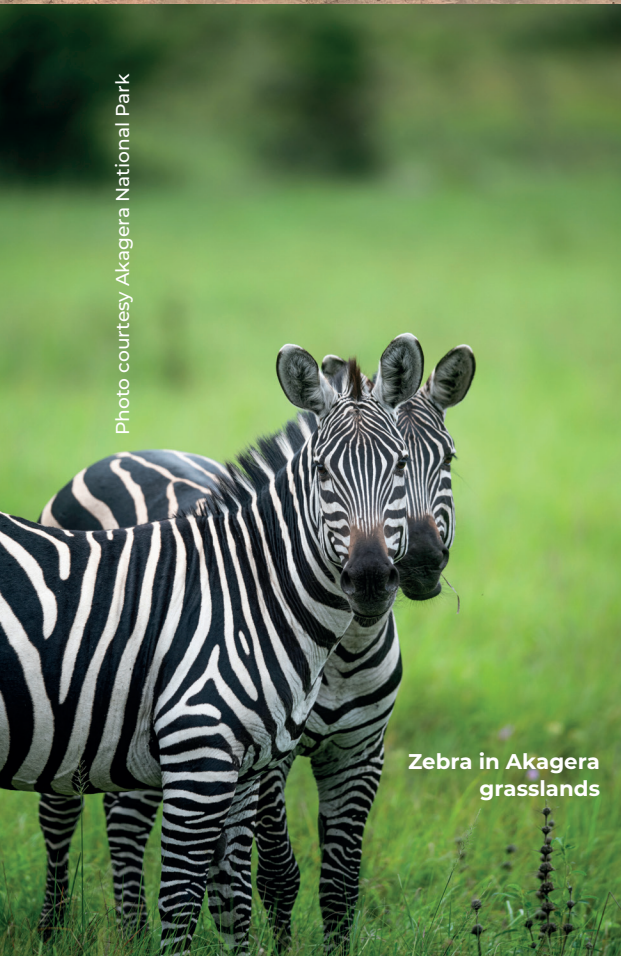


Photo courtesy Akagera National Park

Zebra in Akagera grasslands

Since 2010, Akagera National Park has experienced no loss of high-value species (elephants, rhinos, and lions) due to poaching

The translocation of both rhinoceroses and lions is being carried out successfully, and their populations continue to grow. The reintroduction of rhinos, with their distinctive large bodies and horned profiles, is particularly vital, as they help maintain the landscape by grazing on shrubs and contributing to the health of the savannah. Meanwhile, the return of lions, the apex predators known for their social structures and regal presence, helps regulate prey populations, ensuring a balanced food chain.

Today, nearly 12,000 animals inhabit Akagera. Approximately 500 species of birds ensure the park earns its title as a paradise for birdwatchers and ornithologists. The Big Five, which include elephants, rhinos, leopards, lions, and buffalo, inhabit various ecosystems within the park, such as wetlands, woodlands, and savannahs. In recent years, species like—Impala (common antelope), Topi (fast antelope), African buffalo, waterbuck, zebra, and warthog—have also found refuge here. The park is characterised by its natural river border with Tanzania and features a number of lakes that enhance its diverse landscape. The park's lakes and wetlands, including Lake Ihema, support a flourishing population of hippopotamuses, crocodiles, and aquatic birds.

An African lion rests in the open grasslands of Akagera National Park

Photo: Ravina Yadav



Clear Conservation Targets

Akagera's significant transformation began in 2010 with a collaboration between the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), a government agency focused on spurring the national economy, and African Parks (AP), a non-profit that manages protected areas using the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model across Africa.

One of the first tasks undertaken under this model was habitat restoration, which involved removing invasive species, such as the water hyacinths, from lakes and wetlands, allowing native aquatic life to flourish. To regenerate grasslands, fire management practices were introduced, which eventually helped protect ecologically important habitats.

Rangers were trained in advanced surveillance systems, including GPS tracking, camera traps, and aerial monitoring. Rangers now get better remuneration and other benefits that have boosted their morale and made them more effective. Since 2010, Akagera has experienced no loss of high-value species (elephants, rhinos, and lions) due to poaching. Its anti-poaching efforts have resulted in an increase in wildlife sightings.

These conservation efforts were supported by a dynamic business model followed by the park. Akagera National Park funds 92% of its operations through self-financing and continues to collaborate with nearby communities to provide economic and social benefits. This enables both the ecosystem and local people to flourish together.

Every dollar earned from tourism is reinvested in the park, covering its operating expenses and reducing the park's dependence on donor support. This approach fosters greater financial sustainability and enhances the park's ability to thrive. Consequently, the park stands out as an excellent example of self-sustainability.

Civil Unrest, Shrinking Landscape

Akagera National Park was established in 1934 and is the largest protected wetland in Central Africa, serving as the last refuge for savannah-adapted species in Rwanda. Since the early 1990s, the national park has faced a series of challenges due to civil unrest. The devastating genocide against the Tutsi community in 1994 significantly disrupted its ecosystem. The park also saw an influx of refugees, many of whom brought large herds of cattle. In 1997, the government of Rwanda was compelled to degazette nearly 50% of the land to accommodate the refugees. Originally stretching 2,500 km², it is now reduced to 1,122 km². Additionally, human encroachment due to farming altered natural landscapes that further hindered conservation efforts.



A white rhino calmly exits its crate and enters the new home at Akagera National Park

Local People as Park Rangers, Guides

Akagera's success lies in its involvement and support of local communities. Recognising that conservation must benefit both people and nature, the park implemented a series of community-centred initiatives. Through revenue-sharing schemes, 10% of park revenue was allocated for local development projects that included the construction of schools, water supply systems and health centres. Established in 2022, Gishanda Fish Farm now provides the community with a sustainable protein source while also improving traditional farming practices and creating new skills and job opportunities.

Local people have been employed in the park as rangers, guides, hospitality staff and in infrastructure development. These jobs generate income and cultivate a sense of ownership and pride in the park's success. Women's cooperatives and local entrepreneurs have also identified opportunities in tourism-related businesses, including handicrafts and cultural experiences. Some of the community-led activities include harvesting of honey and fish.

Further, Akagera runs regular school visits, conservation clubs, and community sensitisation campaigns. These initiatives help establish a culture of stewardship for wildlife conservation among



Local communities perform to welcome the white rhino

A woman showcases the traditional form of bee-keeping and (below) fish farming has become viable

Photo courtesy Akagera National Park

Every dollar earned from tourism is reinvested in the park, covering operating expenses and reducing the park's dependence on donors

young people and foster long-term support for the park.

With the installation of an electric fence designed to deter wildlife from encroaching on human settlements, a recurring human-wildlife conflict challenge has been effectively addressed. Instances of crop raids and livestock losses have reduced. A dedicated compensation fund supported by a proactive conflict-resolution team ensures local communities do not bear the financial burdens associated with conservation efforts.

Rwanda has a range of habitats and ecosystems – humid montane forests, savannahs, lakes, rivers, and wetlands that support a rich biodiversity. However, in recent decades, there has been a substantial loss of species, a shrinkage in population sizes, and ecosystem degradation. The Akagera model promises hope to other parks also in reviving the lost wildlife and habitat. 🐾



Photo courtesy Akagera Forest Department

Dr Pramod K Yadav is Programme Associate with Sankala Foundation.

Mihir Bhatt is a wildlife photographer and creative director based in Rwanda.



Photo: Nikolay Zinoviev

The Amur leopard is primarily found in the temperate forests, or the Taiga of the Russian Far East and northeast China. Taiga forests are shaped by pines, birch, hemlock, spruce, alder and Siberian larch. This threatened species has made a comeback in these forests

A lion rests in Gir
National Park



Photo: Mohan Ram

When Asiatic Lions Reclaim their Lost Home

Bharat Lal writes about a unique carnivore recovery programme in Gujarat, western India, that increased the Asiatic lion population and led to habitat expansion while ensuring local communities continue to live in harmony with them

India has 891 Asiatic lions in the wild today. Since 2020, there has been around 32% increase in their count. The May 2025 Asiatic Lion Population Estimation (the 16th since

its inception in 1968) not only affirmed the presence of a stable population but also offered evidence of the apex predator reclaiming lost territory. The survey also pointed towards substantial

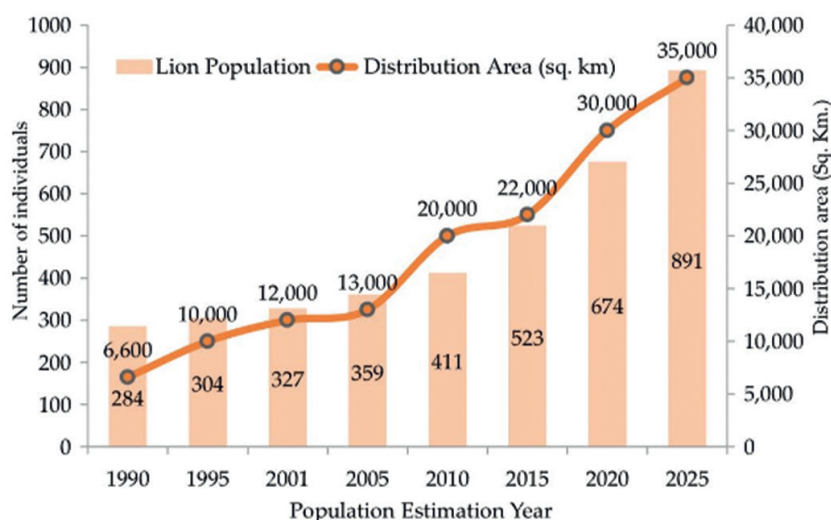
reduction in human-wildlife conflict, a unique example in conservation history.

The Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) once roamed extensively across Asia Minor and in parts of Arabia, Persia



Tourists follow lions in Gir National Park

Lion Population and Distribution in Four Decades Starting 1990



Source: Lion Population Estimation – 2025, Gujarat Forest Department, Government of Gujarat

and the Indian subcontinent. But by the 17th century its range had shrunk, confining the big cat primarily to Asia Minor (Turkey) and western India. The decline was rapid

in the forthcoming decades – the species was extirpated from Turkey by early 19th century, it had vanished from Iraq during the First World War, and was eliminated

from Iran in the Second World War. This was largely due to intensive hunting, habitat loss, and human encroachment.

By the mid-20th century, the Asiatic lion's range was confined exclusively to Saurashtra, the peninsular region of Gujarat, a state in western India. Even in India, the situation appeared critical when in 1968 during the first lion estimation by the Gujarat Forest Department, only 177 individuals were recorded. And they were all restricted to the Gir Forest region (enclosing the Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary). Conservationists feared that this remnant population — the last wild Asiatic lions on planet Earth — would also disappear within a generation if urgent actions were not taken.

Expansion of Territory

This concern galvanised Indian authorities and scientists and since the 1970s, the state of Gujarat spearheaded one of the most successful large carnivore recovery programmes in the world. Hunting lions had already been banned in 1965. India

Panoramic view of the
Gir landscape

Photo: Mohan Ram



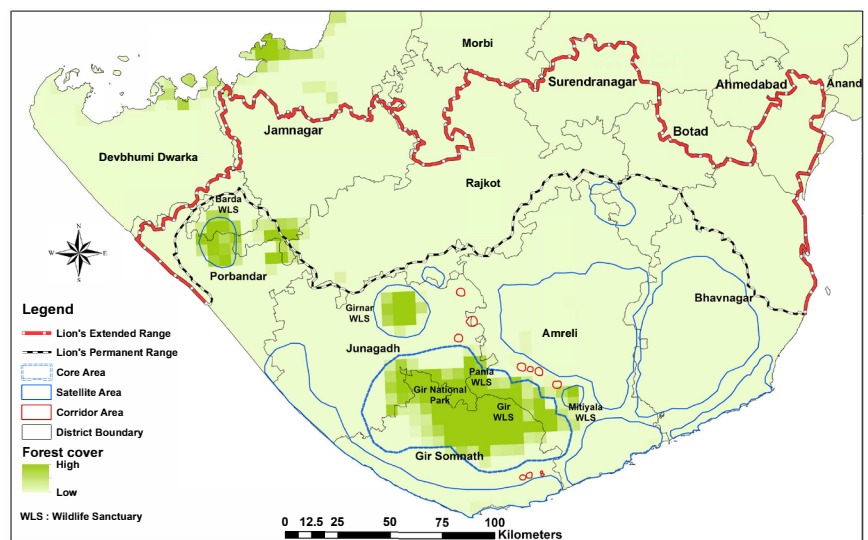
enacted the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, which provided a nationwide legal framework for protecting endangered species, including the Asiatic lion. Lions were included under Schedule I — the highest protection category in India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

Conservation efforts were scaled up with systematic population estimation undertaken every five years. Anti-poaching units and veterinary care units were set up and community outreach programmes were also initiated. These efforts not only increased the lion numbers, but also expanded their range from the dry teak forests of Gir to the grasslands and coastal regions of the state. Significantly, this habitat expansion was achieved without displacing local communities or affecting their livelihoods. The lion population grew from 180 in 1974 to 327 in 2001, and 523 in 2015. And in 2025, it reached 891 individuals. This has been a gradual and steady rise.

Eco-restoration with Eco-development

The success of this could be attributed to the twin focusses of eco-restoration

Permanent and Extended Range of Asiatic Lion in Gujarat



Sourced from Gujarat Forest Department and adapted for BigCats magazine by Deepesh Goyal

and eco-development. In 1974, the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary was officially notified under India's Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, covering 1,412 km². It marked a watershed moment: the area was protected as a sanctuary, with core and buffer zones, and a lion population estimation began under

scientific protocols. Around 82 villages, mostly inhabited by pastoral communities like the Maldharis, and the Siddis (an ethnic group originally from Africa), came within the Gir Protected Area (PA). However, unlike conventional models of 'fortress conservation', where ecosystems

are isolated from human disturbances, the communities here were encouraged to coexist within the ecosystem. The local people were not forcibly relocated. Several opted for community-managed co-habitation, stressing the symbiotic and enduring relationship of humans with wildlife.

This type of conservation blended ecological restoration and socio-economic integration. The lions' prey base — chital (spotted deer), nilgai (antelope), sambar (large deer), and feral cattle — was stabilised by improving grassland management and water conservation programmes. Studies show that the once degraded grassland ecosystems were revived with assistance from the Maldharis (local agro-pastoralists). Compensation schemes for livestock loss were strengthened, and grazing was regulated in buffer zones through participatory governance models. Gradually, communities realised and recognised the benefits derived from such developments.

The Maldharis and Siddis, whose cattle sometimes fell prey to lions, were compensated promptly, a factor that reduced animosity and increased acceptance of lions. They also benefited economically through eco-tourism, grazing rights, and improved access to water and fodder, making this a rare example of conservation where predator and pastoralist thrive together.

Lions Recolonise

With improved habitat, something remarkable was noticed around Gir. Lions began dispersing out of Gir, colonising grasslands, agricultural fields, and coastal scrublands in Amreli, Bhavnagar, Junagadh, and Porbandar. They returned, after 30 years to their old home, the Girnar landscape, a patch of 179 km² area with degraded forests located 50 km away from Gir National Park and Sanctuary. This was due to the protection and eco-restoration work undertaken in Girnar forest. Today, there are 54 lions in Girnar, now a wildlife sanctuary.

The current Asiatic lion distribution spans over 35,000 km², far beyond Gir forest. This natural expansion occurred without translocation, suggesting that lion populations were ecologically saturated in Gir and had begun reclaiming their former



India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, an avowed nature lover, took some critical steps when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat (2001–2014). The ongoing efforts for lion conservation were institutionalised. The launch of the Asiatic Lion Conservation Project in 2019 further contributed to habitat improvement and disease surveillance. (Above) Prime Minister Modi interacts with frontline staff who are engaged in lion conservation in the state of Gujarat.

Photo: PMINDIA

range with the eco-restoration and habitat improvement work taken up in the region. The systematic lion estimations efforts every five years enabled a strong scientific foundation for tracking trends.

Community involvement was deepened through awareness initiatives and investment in infrastructure like secured wells and machchans (platforms on trees to observe wildlife), and schemes like Vanya Prani Mitra (friends of the forest). Institutions such as the Gujarat State Lion Conservation Society (GSLCS) and specialised units like the Task Force Division and Wildlife Crime Cell ensured effective coordination, enforcement, and reinvestment into conservation priorities.

The forest and wildlife teams were motivated to take pride in this restoration work. The May 2025 survey highlighted the impact of such efforts. Not only has the lion count risen, the recorded presence of huge lion prides indicates presence of healthy prey base and limited human-wildlife conflict.

Lessons for Global Community

The success of Asiatic lion conservation in Gujarat offers vital lessons:

- ❖ Conservation without human

displacement is possible.

- ❖ Apex predators can thrive in multi-use landscapes.
- ❖ Community participation isn't just a token gesture but a cornerstone for ecological resilience.
- ❖ Long-term systematic lion estimations and prey-base monitoring ensure adaptive management.

This conservation model can be an example for the world showcasing how a predator species at the brink of extinction not only survived but reclaimed its range autonomously, through habitat restoration. The recovery was not via regulation but with active participation of the local community. This programme did not require captive breeding support.

The Asiatic lions in Gujarat reclaimed lost habitat without fences or large displacement of people — an unprecedented feat in drought-prone, semi-arid and densely populated landscapes. 🐾

Bharat Lal has extensively worked in this region during 1992-1996 leading to eco-restoration of Girnar and return of the Asiatic lion. He is a firm believer in harmonising conservation efforts and people's aspirations for development and improved quality of life.



Habitats that support big cat species are vital for preserving biodiversity. Latasha Das, a tribal artist from the Indian state of Odisha, depicts the connection between big cats and ecosystems. This painting was part of the 2024 exhibition 'Silent Conversations: From Margins to the Centre', showcasing the conservation ethos of tribal communities through art

IBCA and the Planetary Boundaries Framework

BY KAUSIK BANERJEE

The planetary boundaries framework is one of the most influential paradigms proposed for assessing human impacts on Earth's systems. This framework identifies critical thresholds—referred also to as planetary limits—for processes such as climate change, freshwater use, nitrogen deposition, and notably, biodiversity loss. The planetary boundaries framework draws attention to the idea that there are nine crucial processes regulating the resilience and stability of the Earth. The concept posits that transgressing these boundaries could lead to irreversible and widespread ecological damage.

As the world grapples with accelerating biodiversity loss and the pressures of climate change, the concept of planetary limits—thresholds beyond which Earth's environmental systems may become unstable—has emerged as a critical framework for sustainable development.

Big cat conservation is inherently linked to planetary limits. The habitats that support big cat species are vital for the preservation of rich biodiversity. The focused conservation of these areas directly

contributes to maintaining the ecological functions that define the safe operating space within the planetary boundaries' framework.

In an era where humanity is fast approaching many of the Earth's critical planetary limits—from biodiversity loss to climate instability—the need for comprehensive conservation strategies has never been greater. At the intersection of these challenges stands the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA), a robust global coalition of experts, conservationists, and institutions dedicated to the protection of some of nature's most charismatic and ecologically influential species: the Big Cats. Its aim is not only to preserve the apex predators but also play an essential role in sustaining the planetary boundaries that underpin the health of our entire ecosystem.

How can IBCA play a role in maintaining planetary limits. I list a few critical tasks for IBCA:

1. Preserve Ecosystem Integrity

Big Cats as Pillars of Ecological Balance: Big cats are more than symbols of wild majesty. They serve as critical regulators of ecosystem dynamics. By controlling prey populations, these apex predators ensure that herbivore numbers remain in balance, thereby preventing overgrazing and safeguarding vegetation cover. This chain reaction helps maintain forests, grasslands, and other habitats that function as natural carbon sinks and in mitigating climate change. This trophic cascade is also essential for sustaining ecosystem resilience—a core element in staying within planetary limits. In preserving such species, IBCA indirectly supports the stability of ecological processes vital to adhering to the planet's environmental limits.

Comparative Analysis of IBCA Objectives and Corresponding Planetary Boundaries

IBCA CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES	RELEVANT PLANETARY BOUNDARIES	ECOSYSTEM IMPACT AND CONTRIBUTIONS
Habitat Preservation and Expansion	Land Use and Biodiversity Loss	Maintains Ecosystem Integrity, Supports Species Diversity
Protection and Monitoring	Biodiversity Loss	Prevents overexploitation, ensures sustainable population levels
Sustainable Resource Management	Biogeochemical Flows, Freshwater Use and Climate Change	Protects Natural Resources, ensures ecosystem services, mitigates climate impacts
Centralized Knowledge Sharing	Innovative Ecosystem Management	Facilitates global replication of best practices, leads to more precise threshold determination

Habitat Connectivity: The role of IBCA extends beyond the protection of individual species. By advocating for and endeavouring habitat restoration, the alliance ensures that ecosystems remain intact and resilient. Restored and connected landscapes contribute to improved freshwater regulation, soil fertility, and carbon sequestration, all of which are critical for keeping key planetary boundaries in check.

2. Mitigating Climate Change Impacts

Carbon Sequestration through Forest Conservation: By preserving large tracts of contiguous, healthy forests—critical habitats for big cats—IBCA can support global climate regulation efforts and contribute to maintaining the climate system within safe operating limits. The conservation initiatives of IBCA help protect vital landscapes from degradation and deforestation, thereby stabilising carbon stocks and mitigates greenhouse gas emissions.

Enhancing Ecosystem Resilience: In the face of climate change, resilient ecosystems can absorb and recover from disturbances. Big cats and their associated landscapes play a key role in this resilience. Through its various conservation programs, IBCA can promote practices that enhance the adaptability of ecosystems to changing climatic conditions, thereby reducing the risk of crossing critical environmental thresholds.

3. Promoting Biodiversity Conservation

Guardians of Genetic Diversity: Biodiversity is one of the cornerstones of planetary health. Big cats are not only charismatic but also indicators of broader biodiversity health. Protecting these species helps maintain genetic diversity across ecosystems, crucial for the adaptive capacity of species in the face of environmental change. Healthy, diverse ecosystems are better equipped to withstand shocks and stressors, ensuring the continued provision of ecosystem services.

Integrated Conservation Strategies: The survival of big cats is a bellwether for broader environmental health. Their successful conservation yields cascading benefits: balanced food webs, restored habitats, and stabilized ecosystems that are better equipped to cope

with climate variability. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, IBCA can integrate traditional conservation practices with innovative technologies, such as remote sensing, genetic analysis, and AI-driven monitoring systems.

The table above shows that IBCA's objectives not only cater to the needs of big cat conservation but also address broader environmental concerns integral to maintaining planetary limits.

4. Fostering Global Collaboration and Policy Advocacy

International Partnerships for a Common Cause: One of IBCA's key strengths lies in its ability to bring together diverse stakeholders—from governments, IGOs and NGOs to academia and local communities to corporates—to protect big cats.

Influencing Conservation Policy: In the policy arena, IBCA's focus should be on influencing national and international conservation policies. By championing evidence-based strategies and highlighting the critical role of big cats in maintaining ecosystem balance, IBCA can help shape regulatory frameworks that ensure environmental sustainability and adherence to planetary limits.

5. Inspiring Public Engagement and Education

Raising Global Awareness: Big cats have a unique ability to capture public imagination and inspire action. Their charisma can be harnessed by IBCA to raise global awareness about the interconnectedness of species, ecosystems, and climate stability. Through campaigns, events, and digital platforms, IBCA can mobilise support for conservation initiatives that are vital for keeping planetary boundaries intact.

Empowering Local Communities: Effective conservation is rooted in local engagement. Building capacities of communities living closest to big cat habitats can dramatically improve conservation potential. This grassroots involvement not only improves local livelihoods but also creates a network of stewards dedicated to maintaining the environmental health of their regions—a critical factor in sustaining planetary limits. 🐾

Dr Kausik Banerjee is Lead Specialist at IBCA.

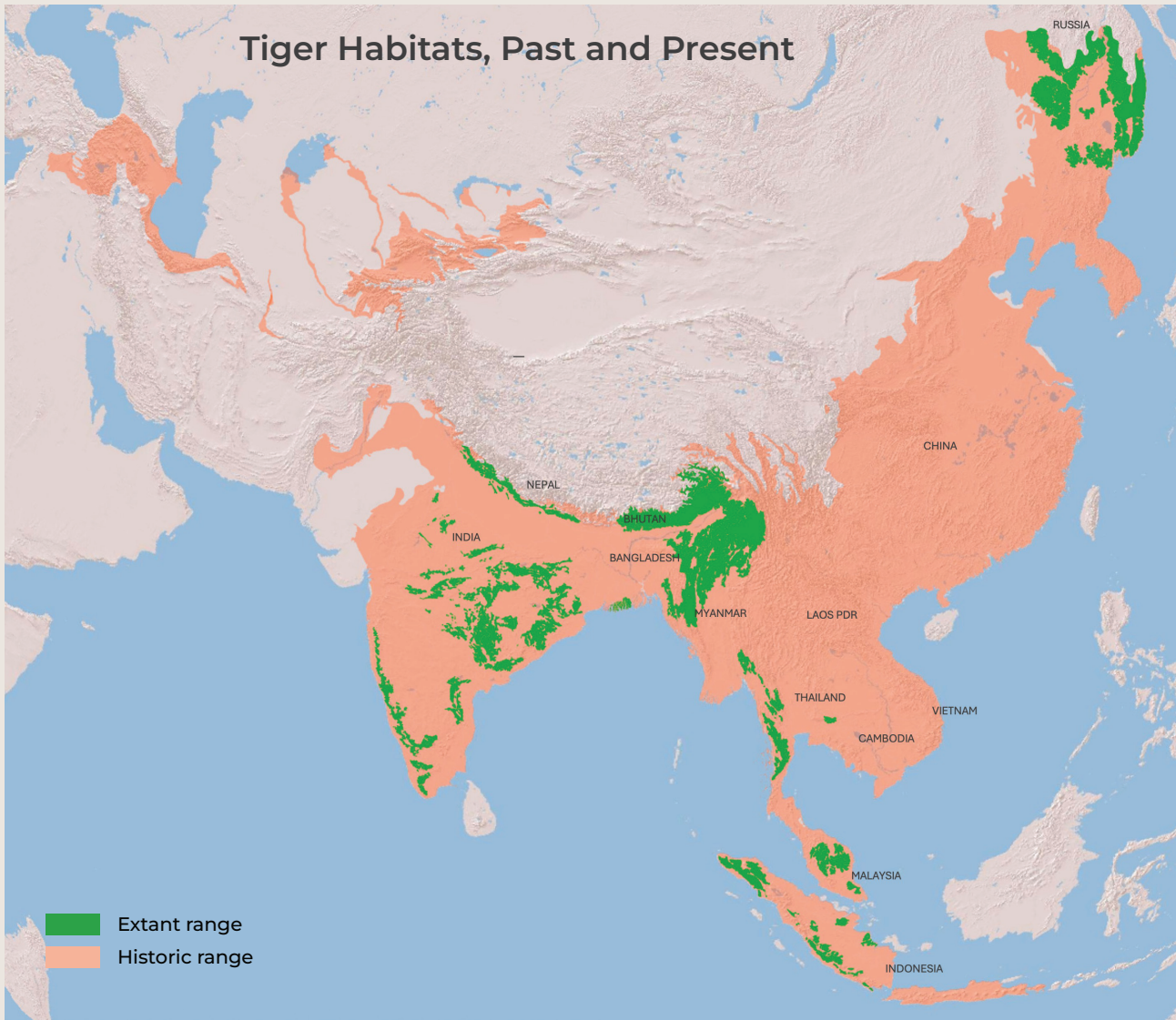
THE BIG SURGE

Phurba Lhendup and Elisa Facchini

There has been a 40% increase in tiger numbers globally, to which the Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme (ITHCP) has made a significant contribution.



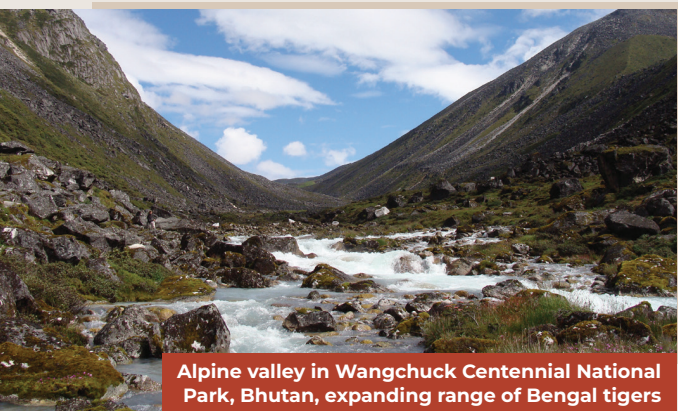
Tiger Habitats, Past and Present





Rimbang Baling Landscape Sumatra, Indonesia

Courtesy: WWF



Alpine valley in Wangchuck Centennial National Park, Bhutan, expanding range of Bengal tigers

Photo: Phurba Lhendup



The endangered Bengal tiger in the Bangladesh Sundarban

Photo: Niaz Abdur Rahman

¹Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Russia, Thailand, and Vietnam

At the start of the 20th century, more than 100,000 wild tigers roamed across Asia. By 2010, that number had plummeted by 97%, with only around 3,200 remaining in fragmented pockets of habitat. Poaching, deforestation, and also the escalating human-wildlife conflict had driven the world's largest cat to the brink of extinction.

In response to this crisis, tiger-range countries¹ came together in an unprecedented alliance at the St Petersburg Tiger Summit in 2010. The goal was ambitious: to double the wild tiger population by 2022. This formed the foundation of the Global Tiger Recovery Programme (GTRP). In 2014, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched the Integrated Tiger Habitat Conservation Programme (ITHCP) to support this global ambition through action on the ground.

The Strategy

Backed by Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KfW), a German bank, on behalf of the German Government, the ITHCP has worked across six tiger range countries: **Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Nepal**. ITHCP promotes a comprehensive approach that addresses the interconnected issues of species, habitats, and communities. This strategy promotes the long-term success of tiger conservation efforts, showing how comprehensive solutions can result in enduring positive change.

Projects focus on 3 core pillars

1. Species Protection
2. Habitat Preservation
3. Community Empowerment

The Action

Monitoring tigers and their prey

The ITHCP enhanced wildlife monitoring through camera traps, eDNA sampling, and national surveys. In Bhutan, the programme supported nationwide tiger surveys and also genetic monitoring using eDNA sampling.

Combating poaching and illegal wildlife trade

Anti-poaching efforts improved with SMART² tools, ranger training, and community patrols. Over 500 staff were trained in Nepal, India used M-STRIPES³ in key reserves, and Bhutan's 'Hunter to Hermit' programme transformed ex-poachers into protectors.

Improving human-tiger coexistence

Conflict mitigation included early warning systems, predator-proof corrals, and rapid response teams. Nepal built 1,000+ corrals, Bangladesh and India set up response units, and Indonesia installed predator proof livestock shelters.

Strengthening protected area management

The ITHCP strengthened management in 44 protected areas. Bhutan enhanced oversight in regions with half its tigers, while Nepal, India, and Indonesia improved plans, patrols, and infrastructure.

Restoring and connecting habitats

Over 10,500 ha of forest were restored, and corridors reconnected key tiger zones, including between Chitwan (Nepal) and Valmiki (India).

Engaging indigenous peoples and local communities

Communities were involved in conservation, sustainable resource use, and governance. The ITHCP promoted local leadership through land-use mapping in Indonesia and community-led funds in Nepal and Nagaland.

Supporting sustainable livelihoods

Clean energy, farming, and ecotourism reduced forest pressure. LPG stoves in India, improved livestock in Bhutan, and buffalo banks in Myanmar supported both conservation and household needs.

Raising awareness for tiger conservation

Awareness efforts reached 675,000+ people through tiger scouts, school centres, radio, and community outreach across Nepal, India, and Indonesia.



Ranthambore Tiger Reserve, India
Photo: Shikhar Mohan



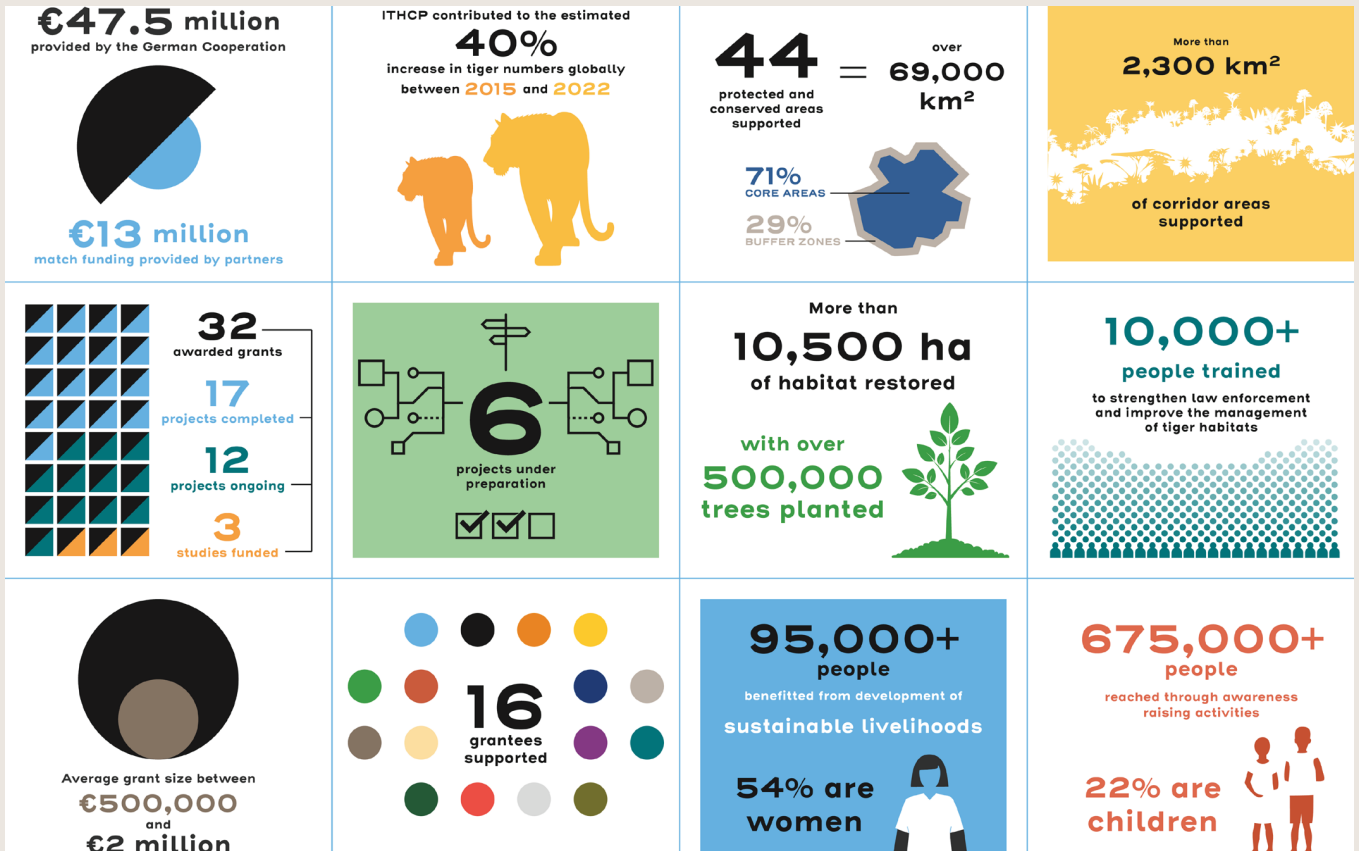
Rimbang Baling landscape, Indonesia

Photo: Okie Kristyawan

²Spatial Monitoring and Reporting Tools

³Monitoring System for Tigers - Intensive Protection and Ecological Status

The Impact, in Numbers



Between 2015 and 2022, the ITHCP helped increase wild tiger numbers by 40%, reaching around 5,574 individuals. Key achievements include

- 44 protected areas supported
- 10,500+ hectares of habitat restored
- 500,000+ trees planted
- 95,000 engaged in sustainable livelihoods
- 10,000+ trained in conservation
- 675,000+ reached through awareness activities

Phurba Lhendup leads the ITHCP in IUCN, Switzerland.
Elisa Facchini is Programme Officer at IUCN, Switzerland.



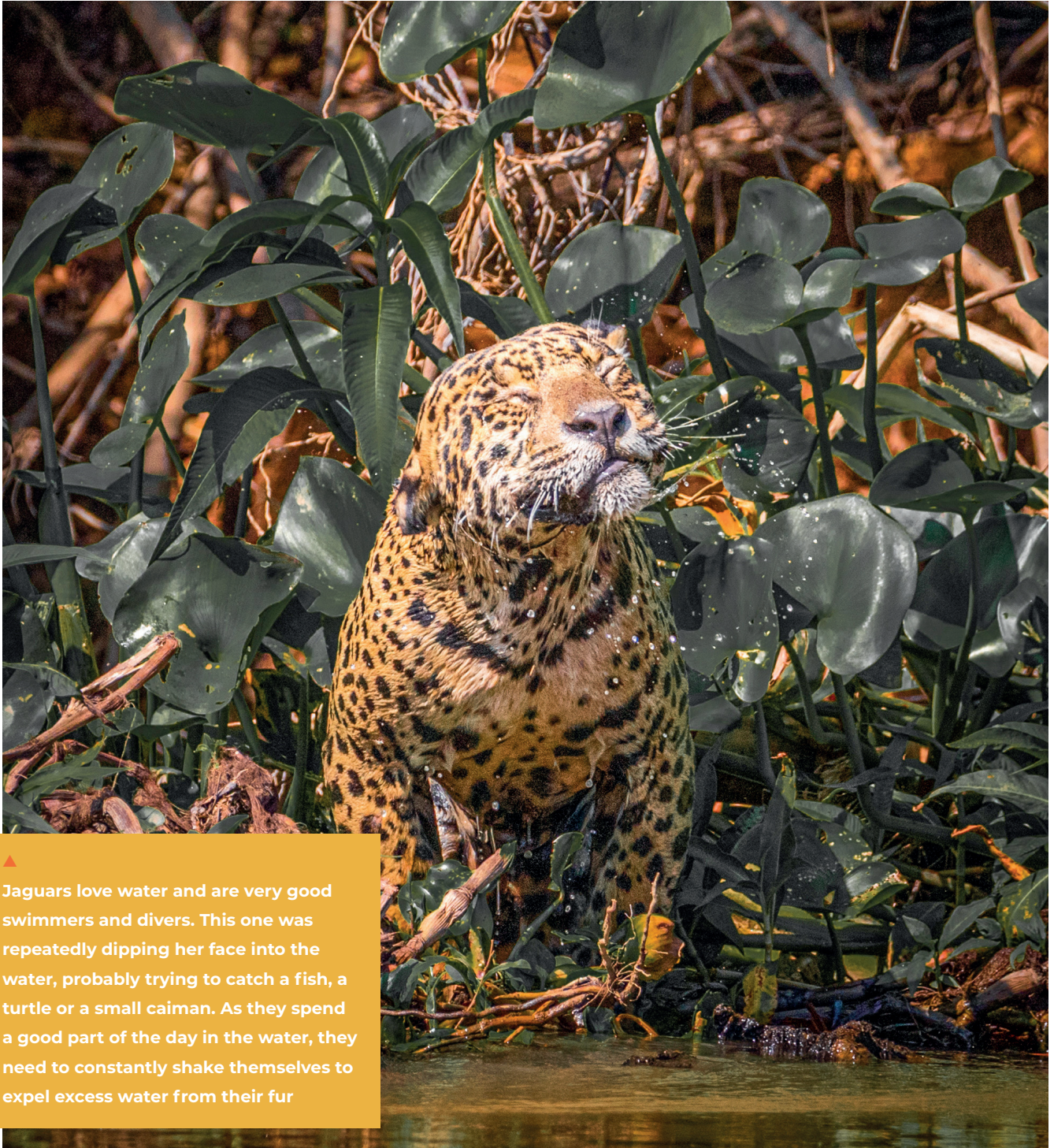
Grassland assessment for effective habitat management in Shuklaphanta National Park, Nepal

Map courtesy: Panthera
Infographic information courtesy: ITHCP

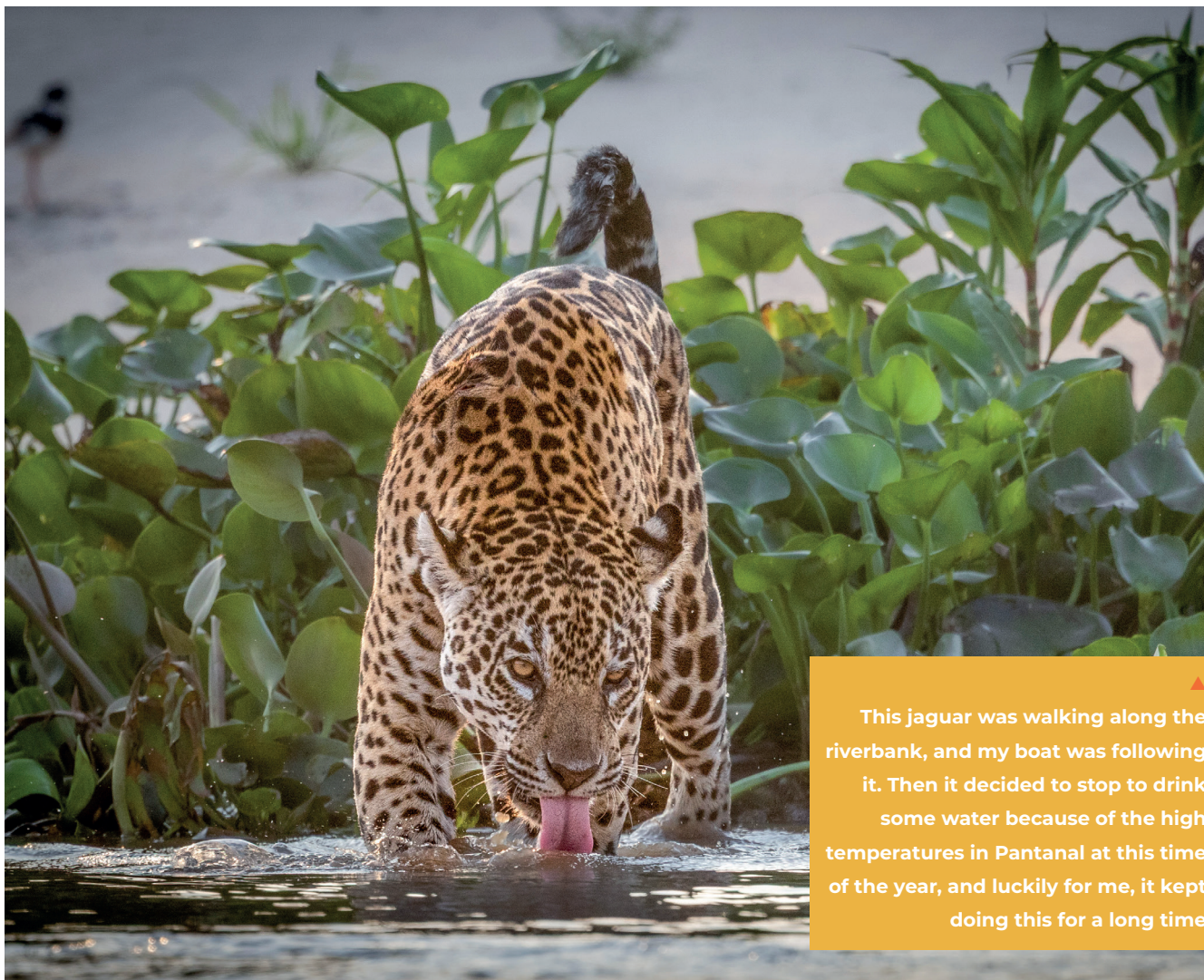
Courtesy: ZSL

Pantanal Close-ups

MARIZA FREITAS captures intimate moments of jaguars in Brazil



▲ Jaguars love water and are very good swimmers and divers. This one was repeatedly dipping her face into the water, probably trying to catch a fish, a turtle or a small caiman. As they spend a good part of the day in the water, they need to constantly shake themselves to expel excess water from their fur



▲
This jaguar was walking along the riverbank, and my boat was following it. Then it decided to stop to drink some water because of the high temperatures in Pantanal at this time of the year, and luckily for me, it kept doing this for a long time

As a wildlife photographer, I seek to capture the most beautiful moments in nature, and among the animals that fascinate me the most is the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), the largest feline in the Americas and the third largest in the world. It's present in several areas of Brazil but reigns supreme in the Pantanal of Mato Grosso.

It is in the dry seasons that jaguars reveal themselves most easily, as they need to come to the river banks in search of water and food. This is when I have the opportunity to see, observe, and photograph this majestic animal in the most diverse situations, such as crossing rivers, mating, caring for its cubs, hunting for food, or relaxing in the shade of a tree.

As a top predator, strictly carnivorous, which feeds on caimans, tapirs and capybaras, in addition to 80 other species that are part of its diet, the jaguar is an extremely important element in the balance of the ecosystems in which it is found and needs to be protected.

Currently, several projects seek to highlight the idea that jaguar conservation should not be thought of or conducted only by experts, but by all those interested in the survival of the species. It's in this context that I see myself, by using my photographs as a tool to promote the beauty and strength of the Pantanal jaguar so that people become aware of the need and importance of its preservation for future generations.



▲
Jaguars are predominantly solitary, but they can tolerate the presence of other individuals in their territory. In addition to small groups of mothers and cubs, cases of coalitions of unrelated males living together have also been recorded. Here are two brothers, young adults who are beginning their independent lives

◀ Jaguars love to sit on the high branches of trees as it is a cool place for resting, and it allows them to have a good view of potential prey on the ground. Jaguars climb trees not only for resting and hunting but also for escaping rising floods. Sometimes, female jaguars use these trees as shelters against aggressive adult males



▲ Jaguar cubs remain with their mother, who raises them alone, until they are around two years old, when they begin to stray and look for their own territory. In this photo, this mom was trying to encourage her cub to swim and cross the river with her, but the juvenile was scared. In the end, it made it across bravely!

◀ Capybara, the world's largest rodent, is an important prey species for jaguars, which often hunt them near the water sources. Although capybaras are good swimmers, their dependence on water to escape hunting sometimes puts them at a disadvantage compared to jaguars because jaguars are also good swimmers

BY RAVINA YADAV

Female adult clouded leopard is listed as vulnerable and can be found in Asia

Photo: iStock



Lesser-Known Species May Protect Biodiversity Better

In tropical conservation, few species command as much attention or funding as the tiger. But relying solely on iconic animals may not be the most effective way to protect biodiversity.

In Sumatra's Leuser Ecosystem, where conservation efforts have long focused on the critically endangered Sumatran tiger and rhino, new research published in *Biological Conservation* presents a different view. By analysing data from two large-scale camera trap surveys across 183 locations in Gunung Leuser National Park between 2016 and 2018, researchers found that the Sunda clouded leopard and sambar deer were stronger indicators of mammal diversity.

These lesser-known species were more consistently associated with areas rich in evolutionary history and ecological roles. Tigers and rhinos, by contrast, showed weaker links to broader biodiversity.

Rather than relying on a single flagship, scientists now recommend using 'umbrella fleets' – groups of species that together offer a clearer picture of ecosystem health. Conservation strategies must evolve

with the evidence.

Read more: doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110511

Pumas Help Reconnect Brazil's Disappearing Biomes

In central Brazil, scientists are using pumas as ecological indicators to reconnect two of the country's most threatened biomes: the Cerrado and the Atlantic Forest. Through the Suçuaranas Detetives (Puma Detectives) project, GPS collars track pumas like Corumbá (named after a local river) across more than 120 km of fragmented landscapes, highlighting key zones for conservation between protected areas.

These movements serve as a biological compass, guiding the restoration of degraded corridors.



Photo: Augusto Gomes

Pumas in the wilds of Torres del Pain, Patagonia (Representative photograph)

Camera trap surveys and tracking data have also recorded high biodiversity, including maned wolves, jaguars and bush dogs.

The project combines field research with community engagement. Residents now refer to the researchers as 'the puma ladies' and follow the cats' movements, reflecting a growing interest in local wildlife.

Insights from the pumas' home ranges and hunting behaviour show their reliance on forest patches and shrublands, even in human-modified areas. This highlights the need to preserve such habitats for large carnivore survival.

Read more: <http://www.locus.ufv.br/handle/123456789/22653>

Empowering Communities Key to Save Sumatran Tigers

A decade of patrols, prosecutions, and snare removals has done little to reduce pressure on the Critically Endangered Sumatran tigers in northern Sumatra's Gunung Leuser National Park. Despite steady enforcement, tiger numbers remain low, and poaching persists in some of the species' last strongholds.

Between 2015 and 2019, rangers removed more than 700 snares while covering over 10,000 kilometres on foot. Prosecutions for tiger trafficking have risen since 2013, but most sentences remain lenient. The financial rewards from the illegal trade still outweigh the risks of getting caught.

Camera trap data from 2010 to 2020 show that tiger populations remain low and unstable, with high individual turnover. Prey species such as sambar deer and wild boar are also declining, leaving tigers with less to hunt.

These findings point to a larger issue. Enforcement alone is not enough. Protecting tigers will require stronger community involvement,



**Himalayan wolf found in
India and Nepal**

better livelihood options, and long-term investment in both ecosystems and people.

Read more: doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2025.124759

Habitat Overlap With Wolves Threatens Snow Leopards

The reappearance of Himalayan wolves in Nepal's high mountains is adding pressure to an already delicate predator-prey dynamic. Blue sheep, or naur, the primary prey of snow leopards, now face heightened vigilance that reduces the time they spend feeding and recovering.

A study by Tribhuvan University researchers in the Manang and Nar Phu valleys found that naur were twice as alert in areas with both wolves and snow leopards, compared to areas with only snow leopards. This increased stress, along with direct competition, threatens to reduce the availability of prey for snow leopards.

While snow leopards hunt alone

and rely on stealth, wolves hunt in coordinated packs, exhausting prey over longer distances. Scientists caution that this growing overlap may accelerate prey depletion, especially as tigers and common leopards also move into higher elevations. For snow leopards, already a vulnerable species, the expanding presence of predators in the Himalayas could mark a dangerous turning point.

Read more: doi.org/10.1071/WR23012

Coexistence Key as Jaguar Conflict Rises in the Pantanal

Brazil's Pantanal, the world's largest tropical wetland, is facing an ecological emergency as worsening droughts and fires push jaguars into conflict with local communities. Since 2020, extreme heat and habitat destruction have caused a sharp decline in jaguar prey like capybaras and caimans. As a result, jaguars are venturing into villages, killing livestock and pets in their search for food.

In Serra do Amolar, some families report losing dozens of dogs to jaguar attacks. While human fatalities remain rare, fear is growing – especially after a fatal jaguar attack on a ranch worker in April 2025. Experts warn that retaliatory killings could threaten the region's already vulnerable jaguar population, estimated at 4,000–7,000.

Conservationists are urging immediate action: building secure animal enclosures, managing food waste, and strengthening community-based coexistence strategies. Without it, both jaguars and people face an increasingly dangerous and uncertain future in this climate-stricken landscape.

Read more: <https://news.mongabay.com/2025/06/ecological-crisis-in-brazils-pantanal-fuels-human-jaguar-conflict/>

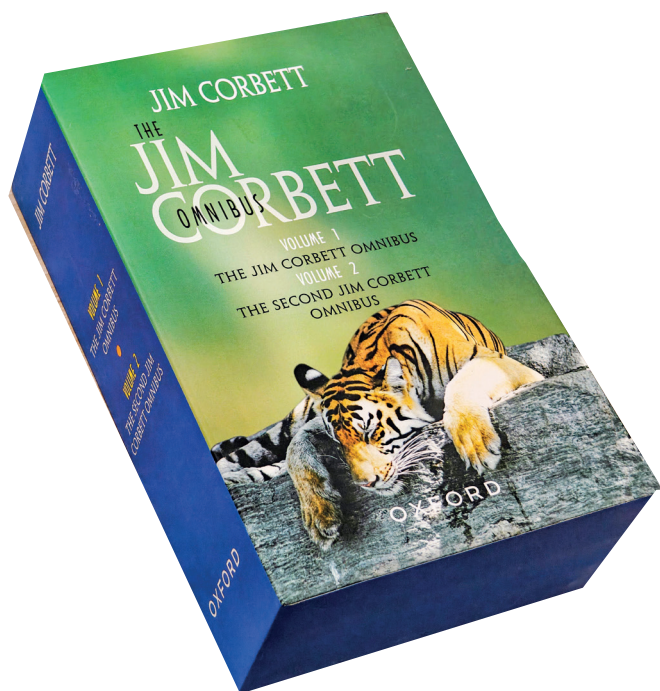


**Jaguar and cub walk
through Brazil's
Pantanal**

The Jim Corbett Omnibus - Vol 1 and 2

July 2025 marks the 150th birth anniversary of Jim Corbett, India's pioneer conservationist after whom the country's first national park was named

BY MALVIKA KAUL



Edward James Corbett's writings are a treasure for India and the world. Born on 25 July 1875 in India, almost 100 years before tiger conservation was launched as a national project, his explorations of the Indian jungles (Himalayan foothills) and his experiences of hunting, killing and protecting the big cats offers a fascinating study in wildlife preservation.

The Oxford University Press's *The Jim Corbett Omnibus – Vol 1 and 2* is a wonderful assemblage of some of Corbett's best known and rare works. The two volumes are divided between his bestselling books *Man-eaters of Kumaon* (first published in 1944),

The Temple Tiger and *More Man-eaters of Kumaon*, *The Man-eating Leopard of Rudraprayag* and less quoted *My India*, *Jungle Lore*, and probably his last published writings *Tree Tops* (set in Kenya).

The first collection elaborates some of his hunting expeditions – between 1907 and 1938. He is known to have killed more than a dozen tigers and an equal number of leopards. All his kills had extensively threatened human life in the villages of the state of Uttarakhand in northern India. His writings not only carry the suspense and rigour of chasing and hunting fierce animals, but also an appeal for restraint and care – he marvels at the beauty of the forests and is one of the first to record the consequences of rapid takeover of the forest by human habitation.

A large part of Corbett's writings in this volume avoid demonising the tiger, especially the ones considered as man-eaters. He challenges expressions like 'cruel as a tiger', 'bloodthirsty as a tiger', while recounting his personal encounters with the big cat. The tiger, unless molested, would do no harm. Even after more than three decades of pursuit of man-eaters, Corbett claims in the Author's Note that he does not recall any moment when the tiger had been deliberately cruel, or killed without provocation.

Corbett was concerned, as early as the mid-1930s, of the threat to tiger habitat that may result in extermination of the marvellous species. Many of his books are evocative long-form fables warning about the damage to wildlife and specially to the tiger. In the early 1970s, his predictions of the tiger disappearing from the forests almost came true when tiger population hovered just around 2,000.

Master of the Jungle

In Volume 2, readers come face to face with Corbett the child, and the man. By the time he is 11, Corbett has learnt three valuable lessons in jungle training – he can fire a gun, has gone deep inside forests to see tigers and bears, and has learnt that there is no danger from wild animals that are not wounded. His

Jim Corbett in the early 1940s.



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Jim Corbett on

MAN-EATING TIGER

A man-eating tiger is a tiger that has been compelled, through stress of circumstances beyond its control to adopt a diet alien to it. The stress of circumstances, in nine out of ten cases, wounds, and in the tenth case old age...Human beings are not the natural prey of tigers, and it is only when tigers have been incapacitated through wounds or old age that, in order to live, they are compelled to take a diet of human flesh.

INDIANS

Those who visit India for pleasure or profit never come in contact with the real Indian – the Indian whose loyalty and devotion alone made it possible for a handful of men to administer, for close on two hundred years, a vast subcontinent with its teeming millions.

MACHANS

When in my wanderings through the jungles I see the machans that have been put up for the purpose of shooting carnivores, and note the saplings that have been felled nearby to make the platforms, the branches that have been cut to give clear view ...I am not surprised when I hear people say they have sat up hundreds of times for tigers and leopards without ever having seen one of these animals.

brother Tom, his friend and guide, often lured him to explore the hidden corners of the forest. Once when he was seriously ill and unable to eat, Tom presented him with a catapult. The gift was followed by a cup of beef juice. He had to drink the juice in order to be strong to use the catapult. Corbett took the bait.

By the time Corbett reached his teens, he could make sounds of various birds and animals – a langur or cheetal barking, a peafowl calling at a tiger. Corbett later credits his ability to pinpoint every sound in the jungle as a special skill that helped him assess the movement of the unseen tigers and leopards. He describes his progress as hunter: “Fear has taught me to move noiselessly, climb trees, to pin-point sound; and now in order to penetrate into the deepest recesses of the jungle and enjoy the best in nature, it was essential to learn how to use my eyes, and how to use my rifle.”

Corbett, the man, was generous and smart. He helped a lower caste get rid of his long debt; saved his close friend Kunwar Singh from opium addiction; and crowd-funded support for the family of a headman. He writes movingly about Sultana, a tribal forced to take to crime. He regrets the British government executing Sultana, for he did not have a fair chance as he was branded a criminal since birth. Many of the stories in this volume demonstrate his deep love for the people and the desire to work for their happiness. He describes Indians as big-hearted and predicts that one day they would “weld the contending factions into a composite whole, and make of India a great nation.”

In *Tree Tops*, named after a hut built on the branches of a

Ficus tree in Kenya, Corbett details the visit of Queen Elizabeth (then a princess). The hut is accessible by a steep and narrow 30-foot ladder. From the balcony of the hut (equipped with a dining room, three bedrooms) one could get a clear view of the miniature lake and Aberdare mountains rising to a height of 14,000 feet. Elizabeth stayed in this hut along with Prince Phillip. Corbett's account presents her as keen student of wildlife and conservation. This was no ordinary visit. For Corbett writes: “For the first time in the history of the world, a young girl climbed into a tree one day a Princess and, after having what she described as her most thrilling experience, she climbed down from the tree next day a queen.” Her father King George VI died while Elizabeth was in Kenya.

The two volumes, dotted with several illustrations, carry an old-world-charm. An editor's note on why some of these works were included and others excluded in the omnibus would have added to the value of the two volumes. Even more wonderful would have been inclusion of some photographs of Corbett and his life in India.

Undoubtedly, Corbett's words continue to speak to us, about our rich biodiversity, and implore us to protect it. Most importantly, they help us reconnect with the natural world, and realise the advantage we have in building our relationships with the wild. 🐾

Dr Malvika Kaul is Director, Research and Communication, Sankala Foundation.

First Assembly of IBCA in New Delhi



Participants and IBCA team members with Union Minister Bhupender Yadav at the First Assembly of IBCA in New Delhi

The first Assembly of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) was held in New Delhi on 16 June 2025. This international alliance has been envisioned by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to strengthen big cat conservation across range countries. This Assembly marked a significant milestone in global collaborative efforts and was presided over by the Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Mr Bhupender Yadav. The Assembly which functions as IBCA's apex decision-making body, was attended by ministerial delegations from nine countries: the Kingdom of Bhutan, Kingdom of Cambodia, Kingdom of Eswatini, Republic of Guinea, Republic of India, Republic of Liberia, Republic of Suriname, Federal Republic of Somalia, and Republic of Kazakhstan.

In his address, Mr Yadav highlighted India's emergence as a global leader in wildlife conservation under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. He urged all range countries to actively participate in IBCA's initiatives, emphasising the need for collective action to protect the seven major big cat species and their habitats, ensure ecological security, and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

International Leopard Day Webinar

On 3 May 2025, the International Leopard Day webinar opened with remarks by Dr Kausik Banerjee, Lead Specialist, IBCA.

This day was formally instituted in March 2023 at the inaugural Global Leopard Conference.

Dr Andrew Kittle, Principal Investigator, The Wilderness & Wildlife Conservation

Trust (WWCT), Sri Lanka, presented the organisation's work along the Peak Ridge and Elbedda Ridge corridors, highlighting the integration of community, habitat, and predator conservation. Dr Igor Khorozyan, Biodiversity Task Leader, WWF-Armenia stressed the urgency of conserving the Persian leopard, with fewer than 2,500 mature individuals remaining. While connectivity is key, only 30% of their core habitats are currently occupied.

Dr Erwin Wilianto Sintas, Java-Wide Leopard Survey Project Coordinator, SINTAS Indonesia, Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Republic of Indonesia, reported that only 319 Javan leopards remain in the wild, and just 5 of 29 suitable landscapes can support viable populations. For the Arabian leopard, with a wild population of just 40-70 and more than 98% habitat loss, Dr Gareth Mann Director, Leopard Program, Panthera outlined critical recovery steps, including captive breeding, facility development, and reintroduction efforts under Saudi Arabia's initiative.

International Crystal Compass Award for IBCA Chief



Dr S P Yadav at the awards ceremony where he was honoured with the 2025 International Crystal Compass Award in Moscow for leadership in tiger conservation

Dr S P Yadav, Director General, IBCA, was conferred with the prestigious International Crystal Compass Award by the Russian Geographical Society during a grand ceremony in Moscow on 29 May 2025. This honour, among the world's most esteemed in geography, ecology, and conservation, recognised his leadership and contribution to Project Tiger.

Dr Yadav dedicated the award to the collective efforts of the Government of India, National Tiger Conservation Authority, state governments, the Wildlife Institute of India, civil society members, local communities, and frontline workers who are tirelessly safeguarding India's wildlife.

Concluding the session, Mr Soumitra Dasgupta, Director (Programme), IBCA, expressed gratitude to global conservationists and reflected on the day's rich discussions. "The leopard may not roar like other big cats, but its loss will echo across the wild," he said, capturing the sentiment of the event.

IBCA 'Curtain Raiser' for Big Cat Conference

On 10 May 2025, a 'Curtain Raiser' event for the upcoming International Conference of Big Cat Range Countries was held in New Delhi, graced by Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Mr Bhupender Yadav. He emphasised that challenges facing big cat habitats require collective solutions and robust partnerships among nations, organisations, communities, and the private sector.

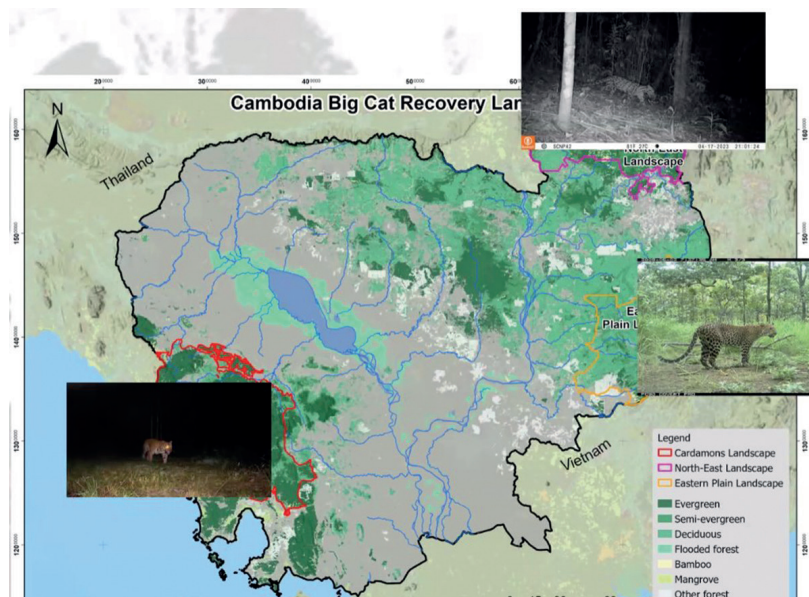
The event saw participation from ambassadors and officials representing big cat range countries, global conservation organisations, and senior representatives from MoEFCC, MEA, NHRC, and IBCA member countries, who were felicitated for their continued commitment.

IBCA Participates in GSLEP Steering Committee Meet

A delegation from IBCA, led by Mr Soumitra Dasgupta (Director, Programme) and Mr Aditya Bisht (Programme Associate), participated in the IX Steering Committee Meeting of the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Programme (GSLEP) in Cholpon-Ata, Kyrgyzstan (5-6 June 2025).

Bilateral meetings with ministers and senior officials from Bhutan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Nepal, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as dialogues with key international partners (WWF, SLT, NABU, UNDP, UNEP, GEF), yielded promising discussions on future collaborations. Formal invitations were extended to join IBCA.

Mr Dasgupta chaired a session on ethical conservation and community leadership in snow leopard habitats, emphasising grassroots involvement and alliance-building. He also presented IBCA's vision, outlining its inclusive framework of 95 range countries and institutions working toward the conservation of all seven big cat species.



Map shared by Cambodia highlighting key landscapes under its Big Cat Recovery Programme on World Environment Day 2025

A key outcome was the Cholpon-Ata Resolution, which called for stronger climate finance and support for Indigenous communities. The resolution acknowledged IBCA's growing role in the global conservation landscape.

New Members Join IBCA

Bhutan and Suriname formally joined the International Big Cat Alliance by signing the Framework Agreement. With these additions, IBCA now has a total of nine member countries.

World Environment Day Webinar: Big Cats and Global Climate Action

On 5 June 2025, at the World Environment Day webinar, Dr S P Yadav (Director General, IBCA) called for innovative strategies and cross-border collaboration to conserve big cats and their ecosystems.

His Excellency Dr Chea Sam Ang, Secretary of State, Focal Point IBCA, Kingdom of Cambodia shared updates on Cambodia's expanding protected area network and its tiger reintroduction programme, supported by (UN-REDD+) United Nations Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries. Dr Yash Veer Bhatnagar, Country Representative, International Union for

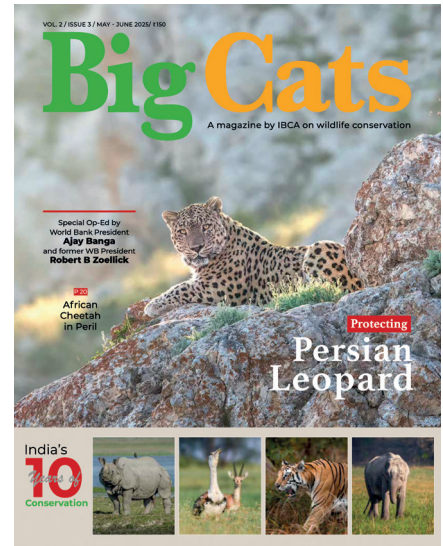
Conservation of Nature (IUCN) highlighted India's experience with human-wildlife coexistence, particularly snow leopards.

Contributions also came from Mr Abidrashid Artan Abdirahman, Head Section of Biodiversity and Wildlife Conservation, Focal Point IBCA, Federal Republic of Somalia, who spoke on the national ban on single-use plastics, and Mr Thulani Methula, Focal Point IBCA, Kingdom of Eswatini, who celebrated the cheetah's return to Hlane Royal National Park.

Mr Maxwell Nyounway, Chief Park Warden, Conservation, Focal point IBCA, Republic of Liberia emphasised the country's commitment to conserving its forest-dwelling big cats.

In his closing remarks, Mr Soumitra Dasgupta reaffirmed IBCA's dedication to working closely with member countries to advance conservation in alignment with climate and sustainability goals.

Dr Yadav highlighted India's emergence as a global leader in wildlife conservation under Prime Minister Modi's leadership. He urged all range countries to actively participate in IBCA's initiatives, emphasising the need for collective action to protect the seven major big cat species and their habitats, ensure ecological security, and mitigate the impacts of climate change. 🐾



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Leopards & Snow Leopards in National Currencies and Bullion Coins

Former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland



One-pound banknote (1956–1964)
A leopard resting beneath a tree appears
in the lower-left corner of the obverse side

Kenya



100 Shillings banknote (pre-2000 issues),
featured the leopard in earlier designs

Oman



½ Rial banknote (2020), reverse
shows the Arabian leopard

Congo



10 Sengi coin (1967), reverse
features a crouching leopard

Somalia



100 Shillings silver coin (2023),
part of the African Wildlife Series with
a detailed leopard

South Africa



200 Rand banknote (2018–present),
reverse includes the African leopard

Kazakhstan



5000 Tenge silver coin (2009), features
two snow leopards, part of the Wildlife
of Kazakhstan commemorative series

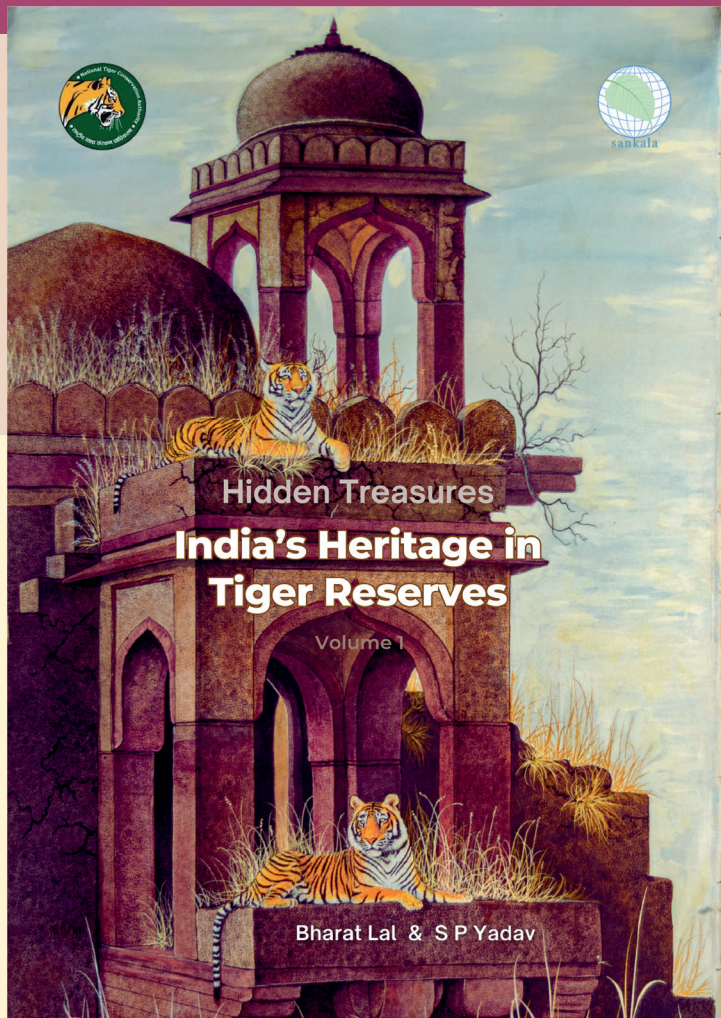
Nepal



50 Rupees banknote (2015–present),
features a snow leopard against a Himalayan
backdrop, part of the Mount Everest series

Snow leopards and leopards have appeared on the official currencies of several countries, both in everyday banknotes and special commemorative coins. Some of these designs are part of daily use, such as Nepal's 50 rupee note, while others, like Somalia's bullion coins, are minted primarily for collectors. One historical instance is the currency of the former Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland—now Zimbabwe, Malawi, and Zambia—which featured a leopard in its mid-20th-century designs, reflecting colonial-era use of regional fauna in currency imagery. Several are included in nationally significant series. Nepal's Mount Everest series celebrates the country's Himalayan identity, and Somalia's African Wildlife series showcases its native species in vivid detail. These currencies reflect how nations use monetary design to express ecological pride, cultural heritage, and support for wildlife conservation.

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CHEETAH



JAGUAR



LEOPARD



LION



PUMA



SNOW LEOPARD



TIGER