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Big Cats

A magazine by IBCA on wildlife conservation

Director General IBCA
Dr S P Yadav writes on the
Global Movement of Conservation

Nimr on a Comeback Trail



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P 23

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Lion Conservation
Lessons from India

Woman Behind
Jaguar Protection

Global Big Cats Photo
Contest Winners

Kenya's Lion Warriors

A community-led initiative, Mama Simba (Mothers of Lions), has adopted an innovative approach to lion conservation in Kenya. Mama Simba women educate their communities about conservation and coexistence. Seen in this picture, the women water grass seedlings to support landscape restoration. Their earth has endured long, punishing droughts, but Mama Simba women nurture the seedlings with patience and care. They have always believed that wildlife belongs to them. Conservation is their forte too.

SAMBURU NATIONAL RESERVE, KENYA

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANTHONY O ONYANGO





A Collective Vision for Big Cats



Women hold up half the sky. They are a powerful force in wildlife conservation too, silently guarding the environment, protecting species and conserving ecosystems.

Our opening photograph of Kenyan women watering grass seedlings represents the commitment and resilience of thousands of women across countries who are fighting the crisis of climate change. The first to be impacted by deforestation, pollution, or droughts, they often engage with the community to adopt better approaches that preserve biodiversity but also protect the big cats across landscapes. Like the jaguar protector of Brazil Dr Yara Barros, whose interview we publish in this issue.

In this issue, we also learn about the efforts being made for the Critically Endangered Nimr (Arabian leopard) to finally return to Saudi Arabia. Our cover story provides an exciting glimpse of the experiment underway in northwestern Saudi Arabia by the Royal Commission for AlUla that proposes the reintroduction of the species into the wild by 2035. Last spotted in 2014, Nimr is a cultural icon, and has inspired several experts to contribute towards the conservation breeding centre in the region. This comeback story of the smallest and one of the rarest of all the big cats is indeed fascinating.

India's lion population recovery continues to inspire experts from other countries. In this issue, we have Africa's leading lion conservationist Dr Paul Funstan share his learnings from India – the philosophy and science of conservation that is equally concerned about the 'happiness' of the lions and not just their numbers. We have interesting stories on how sniffer dogs are fighting wildlife crime and a group of scientists studying the dangerous virus threatening the Amur tiger in Far East Russia.

This issue offers a blast of images featuring the Big Cats Photography Competition 2025 winners celebrate the beauty and spirit of the apex predators. The top eight images struck the distinguished jury as marvellous portrayals of the magnificence and resilience of the big cats.

Conservation has to overcome boundaries and set universal examples. In his special article for the magazine, Dr SP Yadav, Director General IBCA, shares how the organisation has emerged as a global platform for dialogue and outreach for big cat conservation. Within a year, IBCA has demonstrated how diverse countries can come together to evolve better strategies for wildlife protection. Indeed, IBCA is an incredible idea that is growing substantially into a force of cooperation and commitment towards wildlife conservation. Its collective vision for conservation gives hope for the future. More power to IBCA! 🐾

MALVIKA KAUL

BigCats

Chief Patron

Bharat Lal

Editor

Malvika Kaul, PhD

Research Team

Dibyendu Mandal, PhD

Pramod Yadav, PhD

Tamali Mondal, PhD

Staff Writer

Ravina Yadav

Designers

Anuradha Sen & Bipro Kumar Sen

Production

Disha Joshi

Cover Image: Adult female leopard at the Conservation Breeding Centre, AIUla, Saudi Arabia. Photograph courtesy Royal Commission for AIUla

Printer: Print Screens

A-22 Naraina Industrial Area, Phase-2,
New Delhi-110028

Address for Correspondence

Sankala Foundation, 414-416, B-Block,
4th Floor, Somdutt Chambers – I,
Bhikaji Cama Place, New Delhi-110 066
Email: bigcats@sankala.org

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Our Contributors for this Issue



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*.



Dr Paul Funston, pg 06

Dr Paul Funston is one of Africa's leading lion conservationists, with over 30 years of field experience across the continent's most iconic landscapes. As Director of African Lion Conservation (PTY) Ltd, he advises governments, conservation agencies, NGOs, and private reserves on predator and veld management, habitat restoration, and conservation policy. Dr Paul has dedicated his career to protecting lions through science-led conservation, community partnerships, and landscape restoration. A passionate photographer and storyteller, he continues to champion Africa's wild places, with an unshakeable commitment to keeping lions on the landscape.



Jose Ferreira, pg 18

Jose Ferreira is the Conservation Breeding & Reintroduction Director at the Royal Commission for Alula. Jose has two decades of experience at major zoological institutions, specialising in animal husbandry science, behaviour, welfare, collection planning and breeding programme management. He has actively participated in in-situ conservation programmes in Brazil, Borneo, Madagascar and the Caucasus ecoregion, including coordinating the EAZA Endangered Species Breeding Programme and studbook for Persian leopards. He is also a member of the Caucasian Leopard Reintroduction Advisory Group (CLRAG) and is coordinating the EAZA EEP for the Arabian leopard.



Dr Victor S Lukarevsky, pg 22

Dr Victor S Lukarevsky is a renowned wildlife biologist and author of more than 150 scientific papers. He has led comprehensive studies of the Persian leopard, snow leopard, Amur tiger and Far Eastern leopard in Russia. He has also contributed to programmes for the restoration of the Persian leopard in the Caucasus, developed strategies for the conservation of the snow leopard and Amur tiger in Russia and worked on a methodology for the rehabilitation of orphan tiger cubs, lynx, translocation and restoration of lost groups of snow leopard, translocation goitered gazelle and kulan in Turkmenistan.



Anthony O Onyango, pg 28

Anthony Ochieng is an award-winning Wildlife Ecologist, Educator, National Geographic Explorer, and International League of Conservation Photographers (iLCP) Emerging League Fellow. Based in Nairobi, Kenya, he is also a conservation and underwater photographer and filmmaker dedicated to creating powerful content that inspires people of all ages and backgrounds.



Srijan De Sarker, pg 08

Srijan De Sarker is a scholar and research fellow of Language and Linguistics Fellowship of the Asiatic Society, Kolkata, India. He is also a keen collector of fascinating items that tell fabulous stories. His rich collection of matchboxes with tiger images (featured in this issue) was part of a major exhibition held in Kolkata in July 2025. Srijan also directed a documentary *Saga of Life* focussed on his matchbox collection. This film was nominated for the 5th National Science Film Festival in India and was screened in many esteemed institutions.



Rajarshi Banerji, pg 08

Rajarshi Banerji is a well-known wildlife photographer from India and Nikon India's Brand Creator in Wildlife Photography. Rajarshi is an avid conservationist who has photographed wildlife for over 30 years in USA, South Africa, Brazil, Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania, Norway, Namibia, Sri Lanka, Chile, the Antarctica and the Arctic Circle. He has won the Memorial Maria Luisa Grand Prize, World Nature Photography Award, Golden Turtle and several other awards. His photographs made it to the cover of magazines like the National Geographic Traveller and Sanctuary Asia.



Abhijit Chattopadhyay, pg 08

Abhijit Chattopadhyay began photography at age of eleven. Beginning with a black-and-white analogue SLR, he captured nature, wildlife, landscapes, and portraits. Balancing a corporate career with his passion for outdoors photography, has managed to win the Bronze Portfolio Distinction (BPSA) and has showcased the Photo. Society of America and the Jehangir Art Gallery, India.



Narayan Malu, pg 08

Narayan Malu has won several photography competitions like the Jaipur Tiger Festival, Maharashtra Wildlife Awards. He specifically loves to click tigers. His goal is to inspire people towards protection of wildlife and conservation.



A Global Movement for a Shared Future for Wildlife Conservation

BY DR S P YADAV, DIRECTOR GENERAL, IBCA

When the world talks about biodiversity and climate action today, it increasingly recognises that conservation cannot be confined to political borders. The big cats of the world – cheetahs, jaguars, leopards, lions, pumas, snow leopards, tigers – embody this truth. They roam across geo-political borders, connecting landscapes, serving as symbols of ecological integrity and cultural pride. Their survival is not only a matter of protecting a species, but of safeguarding the very ecosystems that store carbon, purify water and support millions of lives.

It was with this conviction that the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) was conceived by the Prime Minister of India and established as a treaty-based intergovernmental organisation, with its headquarters in New Delhi (India), following the approval of the Union Cabinet of the Government of India in 2024. This marked a historic milestone in international conservation diplomacy. With IBCA, the world has a global platform for cooperation – one that connects science, policy and people under a single framework for the long-term survival of big cats and their habitats.

Reflecting Collective Will of 95 Countries

Since its establishment, IBCA is rapidly evolving into a vibrant organisation that reflects both Global South leadership and the collective will of 95 big cat range countries and partner organisations. The signing of the Headquarters Agreement between the Government of India and IBCA in April 2025, followed by its ratification and enforcement in June 2025, has given the Alliance full international legal status, with privileges and immunities equivalent to those of United Nations organisations.

The IBCA Secretariat became fully functional in 2025 after its first Assembly held in June 2025 at New Delhi. In its short journey, IBCA has already achieved a level of credibility and organisational maturity that many global bodies take years to build.

Today, 37 countries have consented to join IBCA and 17 have formally joined as members. In addition, countries such as Kazakhstan, Thailand and Namibia hold Observer Status with IBCA. This rapidly expanding membership base demonstrates growing confidence in the Alliance's mission and the shared understanding that big-cat conservation is integral to the planet's ecological and climatic stability.

At the heart of IBCA's mandate is capacity-building, in order to empower member countries with the knowledge, tools and

technology needed to safeguard their wildlife. In February 2025, IBCA organised its first Executive Training Course under the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) Programme of the Ministry of External Affairs at the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve in Assam, a state in northeast India. The event brought together 44 participants from 27 countries, blending India's field experience with global perspectives on conservation management.

This pioneering initiative has not only strengthened professional competencies but also fostered cross-border networks of practitioners and policymakers. Similar programmes are now being planned for other big-cat landscapes, reflecting India's commitment to South – South cooperation and its philosophy of sharing both knowledge and opportunity.

Science, Outreach and Cultural Diplomacy

Today IBCA is emerging as a global platform for dialogue and outreach. The Alliance maintains an active presence on social media and has launched a bi-monthly magazine *Big Cats* that documents stories of best practices, community engagement and conservation innovation from around the world.

Public engagement has been central to the Alliance's efforts. In 2025, IBCA organised a global photography competition on big cats, celebrating the intersection of art, awareness and conservation. Our

IBCA has demonstrated how conservation diplomacy can unite nations around a common cause

exhibitions – such as those showcasing India's tribal art from tiger landscapes at the Eastern Economic Forum in Russia and at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi – have reinforced the message that conservation is not only scientific but also deeply cultural.

Leading global institutions are now partnering with IBCA, positioning the latter as a bridge between governments, science,



Group photo from the 1st International Steering Committee Meeting of IBCA in New Delhi, India, on 16 April 2024

and civil society. Some of our partners include, the Global Tiger Forum, Amur Tiger Centre, IUCN, UNDP, WWF, IORA Foundation, Earth Brigade Foundation, Wildlife Institute of India, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Confederation of Indian Industry, Mobius Foundation, Asian Development Bank, World Bank, Russian Snow Leopard Association and the International Snow Leopard Trust.

Significantly, IBCA's outreach has been supported by sustained diplomatic engagement. Over the past year, the Alliance have held 25 bilateral meetings with ambassadors and high commissioners from across big cat range countries, encouraging nations to join the platform.

India's support for the Alliance has also been evident at the highest political levels. In 2025, the Prime Minister of India urged BRICS member nations to join the Alliance during the BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro in July 2025—a call that was endorsed in the Summit's Joint Declaration. The Indian Prime Minister's addresses to the parliaments of Ghana and Namibia further emphasised IBCA's vision as a shared global good. These diplomatic efforts have been complemented by engagements during the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF20) in New York and through bilateral discussions with ministers and delegations from Africa, Central Asia and South America. Each of these interactions carries the same message: that big cat conservation transcends national interests – it is a collective responsibility towards the planet – One Earth-One Family – One Future.

Besides successfully hosted eight international webinars on significant conservation days, IBCA in August 2025 hosted a landmark International Lion Conference in Gir National Park, in western India, celebrating World Lion Day with over 140 participants and international experts.

Global Big Cat Summit 2026

Looking ahead, preparations are underway for a Global Big

Cat Summit in 2026 – expected to bring together heads of states, environment ministers, conservation leaders and practitioners and other stakeholders. This conference will serve as a pivotal platform for forging global consensus on conservation financing, technology sharing, and joint landscape management.

In recent months, the Alliance has submitted proposals to national and international funding agencies, indicating an evolution from mere institution – building to strategic on-ground implementation. By developing, science-based projects and aligning them with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets, IBCA aims to integrate wildlife conservation directly into the global climate agenda.

From its conception to its current status as a treaty-based inter-governmental alliance, IBCA has demonstrated how conservation diplomacy can unite nations around a common cause. India's leadership – rooted in its decades-long success in big cat recovery – has provided both credibility and direction to this global movement.

But the road ahead is even more ambitious. The Alliance now seeks to operationalise large-scale landscape restoration, promote technology-driven monitoring, and mobilise sustainable finance through carbon and biodiversity credits and other innovative blended finance mechanisms. It will continue to engage youth, local communities, experts and academia across continents, ensuring that conservation becomes a shared social movement rather than a specialised pursuit.

I see this journey as both a responsibility and a source of hope. Every stride we take towards protecting big cats also preserves our planet. In saving these magnificent species, we are in fact saving ourselves—our climate, our cultures, and our collective future.

Let this be our message to the world: Big Cats offer Big Opportunities! When big cats thrive, nature heals, and humanity prospers. 🐾



Photo Courtesy Royal Commission for AlUla

Nimr on a Comeback Trail

A conservation initiative in Saudi Arabia attempts to reintroduce the Critically Endangered Arabian leopard (locally called Nimr) into the wild

TEXT BY JOSE FERREIRA



The Arabian leopard was last spotted in Saudi Arabia in 2014. A decade later, the IUCN in its 2023 Red List declared the species Critically Endangered, with barely 100-120 individuals remaining in the wild, mostly on the Oman-Yemen border. Most of the captive population was kept at the Breeding Centre for Endangered Arabian Wildlife (BCEAW) in Sharjah, UAE, along with 14 individuals at the Saudi National Centre for Wildlife's Prince Saud Al-Faisal Wildlife Research Center in Taif (a city in Saudi Arabia), plus a handful of others in zoos in Oman and Yemen.

With no active or coordinated conservation breeding programme across the region at the time, the threat of a collapse in the captive population while wild numbers dwindled was very real.

Recognising the urgency, the Royal Commission for AlUla (RCU) – a government body responsible for preserving and developing the AlUla region in northwest Saudi Arabia – was given the national mandate for Arabian leopard conservation. In 2020, RCU assumed management of the Taif facility, renamed the Arabian Leopard Conservation Breeding Centre (ALCBC), with the goal of reintroducing Arabian leopard into the wild in AlUla. This effort was further strengthened by the launch of the Arabian Leopard Fund (ALF), signalling the kingdom's intention to support regional conservation and cross-border collaboration.

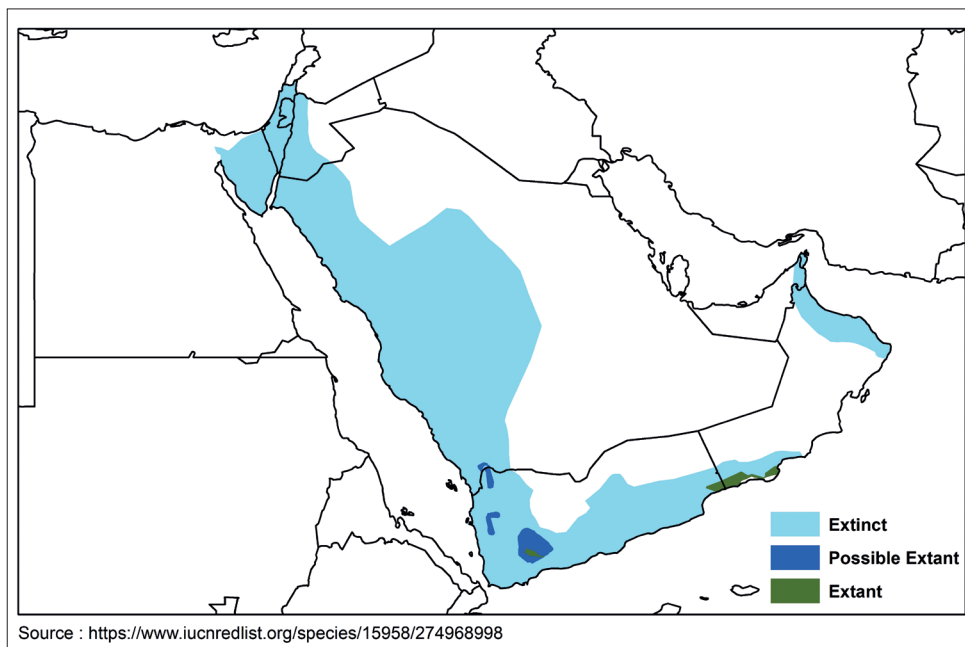
The breeding programme at the Centre has been steadily successful ever since RCU took charge, more than doubling the initial population of 14. In June 2024, the birth of triplets, two

(Left) Adult female Najd at the Arabian Leopard Conservation Breeding Centre. **(Below)** Mother Hams with her cub at the Centre



Photo courtesy Royal Commission for AlUla

Geographic Distribution of the Arabian Leopard



males and one female, was only the third ever recorded instance in captivity and the first in Saudi Arabia. The Centre attempts to create a robust population capable of reintroduction into the wild.

Nimr, an Arabian icon

Popularly called Nimr (leopard or panther in Arabic language), the Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) signifies strength and bravery in art, folklore and literature of the Arabian Peninsula. The Arabian leopard is the smallest and potentially rarest of all the big cats and their various subspecies. Adult males typically weigh around 30 kg (66 pounds), while females are generally around 20 kg (44 pounds), roughly half that of their African, Persian or Indian cousins. Preferring rugged, mountainous terrain, their former range spanned almost the entire length and breadth of the Arabian Peninsula.

The RCU team in Taif has in recent years collected extensive data, developed Arabian leopard-specific best practice guidelines, and continuously refined processes. Today the still relatively small ex situ population, currently around 70 individuals almost all split between Taif and Sharjah, demands proper planning to increase genetic diversity and overall demographic health.

The expansion plans include a brand-new centre in AlUla that will have the space for an additional 25 individuals in larger, purpose-built enclosures. The planned Arabian Leopard Conservation Breeding and Rewilding Centre will also feature three one-hectare rewilding areas that will see the first stage of preparing future generations with randomised prey release to stimulate and train hunting skills in individual leopards.

A second phase will be spread across an even larger area and

have minimal human contact with the cats unless necessary – the final stage from which the leopards deemed most likely to thrive in the wild will be selected for pilot releases and the future full-scale release project.

Creating a healthy 'safety net' ex situ population and rewilding the leopards are just two important cogs in a complex movement towards reintroduction in AlUla. The landscapes here are stunning, however decades of overgrazing, hunting and lack of protection led to a marked loss in biodiversity and the disappearance of other species. To successfully reintroduce leopards as the apex predator capstone of our ecological pyramid the blocks need to first be in order.

The foundations of our pyramid were laid with the creation of the AlUla Protected Area Network's nature reserves, along with management plans,

the establishment of a local ranger force, and thousands of hours of research, baselining and planning. Five of these reserves are located in AlUla and one in Khaybar – Sharaan National Park, Harrat Uwayrid Biosphere Reserve, Gharameel Nature Reserve, Harrat AlZabin Nature Reserve, Wadi Nakhl Nature Reserve and Khaybar White Volcano Geopark – with a total area of 12,160 km².

Scholarships to Save Future of Nimr

In 2024, the Arabian Leopard Fund announced the launch of a 50-strong scholarship programme with the aim to train next generation of conservationists with skills, knowledge, and practical know-how to safeguard the future of the Critically Endangered Arabian Leopard. As part of the AlUla Scholarships Programme, the winners (Saudi women and men) will pursue specialisations at the diploma, bachelor, and masters degree levels.

View of Sharaan
National Park, AlUla



Photo: Ali B Alenezi, Royal Commission for AlUla

Installation of
predator-proof
livestock enclosures



Photo: David Mills

Photo courtesy Royal Commission for AlUla

Arabian oryx in Sharaan National Park

Half million seedlings planted

The first blocks laid are the plants. Our Habitat Regeneration and Landscaping team have founded a seed bank and nursery, collecting and cultivating seeds from nearly 100 native species so far, many for the first time, with another 100 planned. To date we have planted over half a million seedlings including key species for supporting wildlife, countering desertification and improving soil quality, such as various *Vachellia* (thorn trees similar to Acacia) and *Haloxylon persicum* (dominant species of stout trees). Sustainable grazing policies are being created and Sharaan National Park, AlUla's flagship protected area, was fenced resulting in a remarkable passive recovery of rangeland vegetation.

The next layers are the hundreds of consumer species in the complex food web beneath the leopard which are already benefitting from the increased abundance and protection, including key prey species like rock hyrax and sand partridge. We have reintroduced close to 1,500 individuals from four ungulate species that were locally extirpated or only present in fragmented groups: Arabian oryx, sand gazelle, Arabian gazelle and Nubian ibex, the latter two also being among the leopard's future quarry.

Community inclusion, support and readiness for life alongside leopards is also key to the long-term success of the project. This has ranged from general awareness raising and realising the benefits of nature-based travel in the local economy, to practical support for farmers such as the creation of predator-proof enclosures to keep flocks safe from wolves.

This is a long-term, ambitious effort that brings significant challenges. The rising profile of the Arabian leopard as a flagship species for AlUla's ecological restoration has unlocked support at the highest levels, but also introduced added pressure and a broader network of stakeholders. From landscape restoration to apex predator — from saplings to the Arabian leopard — few conservation initiatives globally match the scale and complexity of what's underway.

Leopard Facts

What are the distinguishing features of Arabian leopards?

The Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) is the smallest sub-species of leopard, characterised by its pale coat, an adaptation to the arid and mountainous terrain within its range. Other sub-species include the Javan leopard, Indian leopard, Sri Lankan and the Persian leopard.

Are there any wild leopards in Saudi Arabia today?

No leopards have been confirmed in the wild in Saudi Arabia since 2014, despite extensive camera trapping efforts.

When will the leopards be reintroduced into the wild in Saudi Arabia?

The reintroduction is expected to take place by 2035.

World's leading experts are part of the Arabian Leopard Technical Advisory (ALTA) group: Dr Andrew Spalton with his near-four decades in wildlife conservation, while Dr Alexandra Zimmermann brings unmatched knowledge in human wildlife conflict and community work with a focus on big cats. Other experts include: Dr Alexander Sliwa, expert in African carnivores in arid habitats; Dr Urs Breitenmoser, renowned carnivore ecologist; and Ms Marianne Hartmann, a specialist in behaviour-specific enclosure design and environmental enrichment for felids.

The reintroduction of the first Arabian leopards will be a major achievement. The return of Nimr, a national symbol, will hopefully also restore the natural balance of this unique region. 🐾

Jose Ferreira is Conservation Breeding & Reintroduction Director at the Royal Commission for AlUla.



Wild Beauty

Urial (wild sheep) in Golestan National Park, Iran, has seen significant population growth and an expanded distribution range due to conservation efforts in recent years. The Urials are one of the major preys of Persian leopards along with bezoar goat, wild boar, red deer and fallow deer. They are marked Vulnerable in the IUCN Red List.

PHOTO BY JAFAR PANAHPOUR

A pride of lions in Thanda
Private Game Reserve,
South Africa

Lion Conservation Lessons from India for Africa

A leading carnivore biologist and conservationist from Africa, **Paul Funston** reflects on what sets apart India's lion conservation experience and the key role communities and culture play in protecting the big cat

All Photos Courtesy Paul Funston



A male lion in Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park, South Africa

I have worked with lions in Africa for over 30 years now. When people ask me, “How are the lions doing in a particular area?”, they are asking about the lion population: is it stable, declining, or exposed to persecution, poaching or excessive hunting? This is mostly what people imply when they ask, “How are the lions doing?” On my recent trip to India, to celebrate World Lion Day 2025 (10 August) in the Gir Forest and attend an international seminar on lion conservation (11 August), I noticed when people in India ask, “How are the lions doing?”, they primarily want to know how the individual lions are doing. They want to know if the lions are happy, doing well and in good mental state. Most importantly, they are concerned about the lions’ disease status.

This was a very heartwarming and welcome change compared to the responses from Africa. This became a key learning during my visit to the Gir Forest region in the state of Gujarat, western India. I was invited by the International Big Cat Alliance Director General Dr S P

Yadav and his team to speak at the seminar. I discussed the status of lions in Africa and also delved into the larger issue of lion conservation in the past 20 years.

When comparing Africa and India (one continent and another a sub-continent), the differences are numerous. Africa has got lions in multiple sites, including in countries like Botswana, Tanzania, Kenya, Namibia, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Zambia. In some regions, lions are doing well, their population increasing or stable, especially in larger protected areas. But today many areas experience decline. Lions are now found mostly in 6% of their historic range in Africa.

In contrast, India has a single population site, the Gir Forest. Here the lion population has been increasing in number and in range for almost four decades. India came perilously close to losing its lions at the turn of the 20th century. In 1909, a notification from the princely state of Junagadh declared that the number of Asiatic lions had “seriously diminished” and “all steps would be taken for their preservation”. Soon after, they



decided to try and halt the rampant and excessive trophy hunting of lions and the destruction of lions as problem animals. Today, they sit with one of the perhaps better challenges for wildlife managers – overabundance of the species. They're not dealing with populations that are stable or declining, they're dealing with a growing population for which there seems to be almost no space.

India's experience has fascinated me and forced me to look at the conservation strategy of African lion through a different lens. I had known for a long time that the lion population in Gir was increasing, that the Gir National Park and Sanctuary (a protected area) was not huge and could only support around about 400 to 450 lions. This population figure was reached between 2010 and 2015. By 2020, the lion population started exceeding, and reached 670. Researchers increasingly started finding lions living along the Gujarat coast, near farmland, wetlands and other corridors, or any sort of rough or dissected part of the landscape, and,

I was struck to see the forest rangers walking with the lions on foot doing their observations

often amidst people.

How is this possible? The terrain I saw outside the Gir Sanctuary was quite flat, mostly farmlands overlooking villages. In India, lions exist outside a formal protected area. In Africa, with that density of people and the kind of land use around a protected area, there would be zero lions outside a park. And if the park was as small as it is in Gir and as under-resourced as most African protected areas tend to be, there'd probably be zero lions inside the park too. Today, there are 891 lions out of which around 450 are living in the protected area. Much of the Gujarat state is now sparsely inhabited by lions. It's an incredible success story!

Of the key lessons I learned, the first was that the people who inhabit the Gujarat state are vegetarians. They don't eat meat, and they certainly don't poach wild animals for meat or any other products. In 2007, a poaching incident resulted in the death of seven lions. The state government of Gujarat asked the forest department what they needed and dramatically increased manpower and resources. There has not been a poaching incident since. Any wild animal, boar or deer is accepted as part of the eco-system and not killed by people. So, you can have wildlife living in little patches of natural habitat providing critical prey for lions.

Gir Sanctuary was once inhabited by



Asiatic lion in Gir Forest, Gujarat, India. (Right) Close to 13 lion ambulances are available to treat the injured animal



Lion Population in India Over the Years

1990:	284
1995:	304
2001:	327
2005:	359
2010:	411
2015:	523
2020:	674
2025:	891
Source: Gujarat Forest Department	

thousands of cows and several villages. Many people and their livestock had to be resettled out of the park and duly compensated. But interestingly, even today, there are about 20 or so villages

inside the park, where people bring their cattle to graze on a seasonal basis. Strongly connected to the rhythm of nature, the communities understand that sometimes the lion may prey on their cattle. They do not retaliate against the lion. Only in exceptional cases people get irate when lions kill too many domestic animals. So, the people themselves are the key to the lions and their success. Through their religious and cultural belief systems, they put these lions and all creatures, and even trees into the realm of worship.

In Africa, communities appear less tolerant towards wildlife. Colonisation came with guns and religious doctrine in Africa that did its wildlife no good. It taught Africans, who also respected wildlife and had cultural rules to limit use, that wanton killing and conversion of the land to agriculture, was the way to go. Both the royalty in some parts of India and forest communities pushed back against the colonial rulers at the time and tried to prevent hunting of lions.

Investment from state has also made a huge difference. Both the central government and state government have provided consistent support for conservation plans. When there is injury – to human or big cat – there is an immediate response. Sometimes in the action lions or leopards get injured. They can also fall into wells. All manner of things can happen.

For better response across the state, they have 13 lion ambulances available to rush to the scene to go and help treat, capture, immobilise, or solve any issue to do with an injured animal.

This deep reverence and respect for life is so different to Africa. At every level I just found the Gir system, the Gir forest, the mindset of the people, the mindset of government completely different to pretty much anywhere I've been in Africa.

During my visit to India, I was struck to see the forest rangers walking with the lions on foot doing their observations. I had heard about it and have seen images and video footage in the past. But I was a witness to it now. In Africa people fear lions – or have been taught to fear lions largely due to Western influence. Hunters come to hunt dangerous lions in Africa, display bravado, etc. But in India, people are not scared of lions and lions are not scared of people. So, in Gir Sanctuary rangers walk alongside them taking notes and making sure each individual lion is ok, each lion is content.

When I reflect on that question, “How are the lions doing?” What does that question really mean? Well, in India it means beautiful things. It means that the lion is respected and loved. 🐾

Dr Paul Funston is Executive Director
African Lion Conservation

A young Amur tiger
in Russian Far East



Photo: Adobe Stock

Amur Tiger

Battles an Invisible Enemy

A recent study warns about the threat to Amur tigers in Russian Far East due to virus outbreak and a spike in human-wildlife conflict

The Amur tiger in the Russian Far East appears to be in terrible danger.

The drastic decline of the Amur tiger's primary prey (wild boar) due to a viral outbreak - African swine fever (ASF) epizootic, that began in 2019, has resulted in widespread starvation, increased human-tiger conflicts, and a dire warning for global conservation efforts.

In the remote, snowy forests of the Russian Far East, the resilient Amur tiger has been battling an unseen threat, an outbreak of ASF that devastates its food supply and forces it into increasingly dangerous encounters with humans.

The Amur tiger (*Panthera tigris altaica*), also known as the Siberian tiger, is a symbol of resilience, a magnificent hunter stalking its prey in temperatures that can plummet to -45°C. But for the last few years, this apex predator has

been fighting an enemy it cannot see, attack, or escape: a virus

Published in May 2025 in *The Journal of Wildlife Management*, our study records an outbreak of ASF that has created a conservation emergency for the world's northernmost tiger subpopulation. The findings show that when the tiger's pantry runs empty, a desperate search for food begins, pushing these normally elusive predators into a dangerous collision course with human.

This study reports that the average annual number of human-tiger conflicts increased more than 11-fold after the arrival of ASF. Tiger mortality and human-mediated removal of tigers due to conflicts increased 3.3-fold after ASF.

The ASF arrived in 2019. This highly contagious and deadly virus swept through the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*) population at high speed.



Wild mother boar with her baby. Wild boars are primary prey of the Amur tiger

Measures that Can Help

◆ Protect the Tiger's Remaining Food:

Implement a temporary ban on hunting other key prey species, like red deer and roe deer, for at least five years to allow their populations to recover and provide an alternative food source for tigers.

◆ **Strengthen Habitat Protection:** Elevate the status of regional wildlife sanctuaries to the federal level, creating more secure, protected areas where both tigers and their prey can thrive away from human pressure.

◆ **Conduct a Modern Census:** Launch a large-scale, comprehensive survey of the Amur tiger population using robust methods like camera trapping to get an accurate, up-to-date count of the remaining animals.

For the Amur tiger, wild boar is not just another meal—it is the corner-stone of its diet, the primary source of fat and energy needed to survive the severe winters.

The impact of the disease was apocalyptic. The ASF epizootic wiped out an 90-95% of the wild boar population.

The loss of this primary prey species, at a time when other prey was already scarce and habitat was under pressure, has created a perfect storm.

A Spike in Tiger-Human Conflicts

With no boars to hunt in the forest, hungry tigers were forced to look for food elsewhere. Their search led them directly to human settlements.

The study found that the annual number of human-tiger conflicts skyrocketed by more than 11 times after ASF hit. These weren't just sightings. Desperate tigers began systematically hunting domestic animals. Attacks on dogs became the most common form of conflict, increasing dramatically as tigers ventured into villages, farms, and even the outskirts of towns.

Before the crisis, tiger conflicts were relatively rare, registered in 47 settlements over an 11-year period. In just three years after the ASF outbreak, conflicts were

recorded in 93 different settlements. The problem wasn't just one or two "problem tigers"; it was a widespread behavioral shift across the population, driven by sheer hunger. This new, risky lifestyle has had a devastating impact on the tigers themselves. We documented a sharp decline in the physical condition of the animals.

Using camera trap photos, we observed a significant increase in the proportion of emaciated and poor-condition individuals, especially among young tigers and males.

This starvation has led to a tragic cascade of other effects:

■ **Increased Tiger Mortality:** The number of tigers found dead or removed from the wild due to conflicts more than tripled. Starvation and conflict-related killings became the leading causes of death. There was an increase in the proportion of emaciated individuals within the tiger population, particularly among young animals and male

■ **More Attacks on Humans:** While still rare, attacks on humans also increased. Critically, the study found that while pre-ASF attacks were often by healthy tigers, post-ASF attacks were overwhelmingly carried out by tigers that were emaciated or injured. Hunger was driving them to take risks they

would never normally consider.

■ **Failing Reproduction:** The crisis has also hit the next generation of tigers. We found that the average litter size decreased, and the birth of cubs shifted to later in the year. This means cubs enter their first harsh winter smaller and weaker, with a lower chance of survival. Heartbreakingly, all documented cub deaths since 2021 occurred during the cold season, many after their starving mothers led them into human settlements.

The tigers are forced into a behavioural shift that expands their food resources to include domestic animals, but it also dramatically heightens the risks for both the tigers and for people.

The story of the Amur tiger and ASF fever is a powerful lesson for conservationists across the globe. It demonstrates how interconnected ecosystems are and how a threat to one species can trigger a collapse for another. For a world racing to save its last wild tigers, this research from the cold forests of the north delivers a clear message: protecting the tiger means protecting its entire world, down to the very last wild boar. 🐾

Dr Victor S Lukarevskiy is a well-known wildlife biologist. He published this research along with Aleksey Yu Oleynikov and Sergey A Kolchin in *Biology Bulletin*, 2024, Vol. 51, No. 9, pp. 2983–3001.

Wildlife Action Heroes

Photo: iStock

A training session in progress for a sniffer dog

Across the globe, sniffer dogs are helping combat wildlife crime that has threatened species and ecosystems alike. Trained dog squads have become key allies in conservation

BY RAVINA YADAV

Ivory, rhino horn, tiger and leopard skins, exotic birds, timber, live animals, and rare plants – the list of smuggled wildlife parts and products has grown bigger and diverse. Trafficking in wildlife is estimated to be the fourth largest illegal trade in the world, trailing only drugs, counterfeiting, and human trafficking. Between 2015 and 2021, authorities in 162 countries and territories reported seizures involving nearly 4,000 animal and plant species, according to the World Wildlife Crime Report 2024.

But one species is doing its best to combat wildlife crime: Sniffer dogs in various parts of the world are performing heroic tasks in detecting wildlife parts and products. Sniffer dog squads have contributed to numerous wildlife seizures globally and shown exceptionally high detection efficiency in key operations. The growing effectiveness of these dogs has led to an increase in dog units across the globe, offering a powerful tool for wildlife law enforcement.

The global illegal wildlife trade spans a wide range of demand sectors – from food

and medicine to pets, ornamental plants, and luxury goods. Shark fins, pangolins, and sturgeons are traded for consumption; pangolin scales, big cat bones, and seahorses are sought for traditional medicine; while African grey parrots, reptiles, orchids, and succulents fuel the exotic pet and plant markets. At the luxury end, elephant ivory, rhino horn, shahtoosh, and rosewood continue to be prized as symbols of wealth and status.

Among all trafficked species, pangolins remain the most heavily targeted mammals. Poached for their scales, believed to have

medicinal properties, pangolins have suffered drastic population declines, with some species now listed as Critically Endangered. Elephant ivory and tiger parts also continue to dominate global seizures, reflecting persistent demand and organised trade networks.

In Africa, poaching hotspots supply elephant ivory, rhino horn, and other high-value products to international markets via organised smuggling routes that span multiple countries. In South and Southeast Asia, persistent demand fuels the trafficking of pangolins, exotic birds, timber, and live animals to East Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. Together, Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia account for nearly half of all global wildlife seizures, underscoring their pivotal role in the illegal trade.

Targeting Poachers

Across conservation landscapes, there are three types of roles sniffer dogs follow in wildlife crime: Tracker dogs, such as bloodhounds, and foxhounds, follow human scent trails from crime scenes or areas of incursion; detection dogs, including Labradors, springer spaniels, and cocker spaniels, search vehicles, houses, and cargo for illegal wildlife products; and attack dogs, like Belgian Malinois, are trained to disarm armed offenders by targeting their weapon-holding arm to enable safe arrests.

Each breed excels in its specific role, yet anti-poaching units continue to innovate—experimenting with new breeds that are easier to train, transport, and maintain in challenging field conditions.

Countries like South Africa have increasingly turned to trained sniffer dogs to combat a range of wildlife crimes – from rhino poaching to the illegal trade in rare plants. The Southern African Wildlife College, one of the continent's leading K9 training hubs, reported more than 700 dog deployments between January 2023 and November 2024, resulting in over 260 successful operations and 170 arrests.

Sniffing Out Illegal Harvest

By November 2023, South African authorities had seized over one million illegally harvested succulent plants from more than 650 species, many already on the brink of extinction. The *Conophytum*

Why Tiger Poachers Fear Genie

Genie, a Belgian Malinois, has served in the Shahdol Forest Circle (central India) since 2020. She has contributed to 72 cases, resulting in the arrest of 262 offenders. She has helped nab tiger and leopard poachers, pangolin traffickers, and hunters targeting elephants and bears. Genie has also foiled 17 hunting attempts and contributed to multiple search operations in the area.

Rajkumar Tripathi, Assistant Handler with the Bandhavgarh Forest Department, Madhya Pradesh, recalls one case. The poachers had set snares to catch a leopard. They could not finish their task and propped up the dead leopard against a tree to make it look as if alive. A forest guard on patrol noticed the wire snare and grew suspicious. “The forest staff were initially hesitant to go closer, but when they did, they realised the leopard had been killed,” says Rajkumar. The dog squad decided to investigate. When she reached the site, Genie picked up a scent around the area where an axe had been found earlier. She began tracking the scent for close to five km – across rocks and pebbles and trees – until she reached a nearby village where the poachers hid. “Within two hours, 13 individuals were arrested,” says Rajkumar. He considers Genie a genius in detection, committed to combatting the most dangerous poachers.

genus has suffered the most, with most of its species now critically endangered.

The Succulent Karoo, stretching from southern Namibia into South Africa's

Northern and Western Cape, is the world's most diverse succulent hotspot – home to over 6,000 species, around 40% of them endemic. Persistent illegal harvesting continues to threaten this extraordinary biodiversity, making every canine detection a critical step in protecting South Africa's last wild succulents

Leading this pioneering effort, EWT's canine squads are trained to detect succulents hidden in parcels, vehicles, and cargo. This is a first for South Africa – and as far as we know, the only project worldwide where dogs are being used to combat plant poaching, say experts.

At roadblocks, these dogs uncover shipments of rare succulents, while at airports they assist in screening cargo – including rhino horn – achieving near-perfect detection rates. The scent detection of these dogs helps protecting some of the country's rarest biodiversity.

According to Shadi Henrico, Canine Coordinator at the Endangered Wildlife Trust (EWT), a leading NGO in South Africa, dogs are typically selected at around one year of age, chosen from high-drive working lines that are steady-tempered and focused. “Breeds commonly used include Belgian Malinois, German Shepherds, and Dutch Shepherds,” she explains. “Labradors and Spaniels are less favoured here due to temperament considerations.”

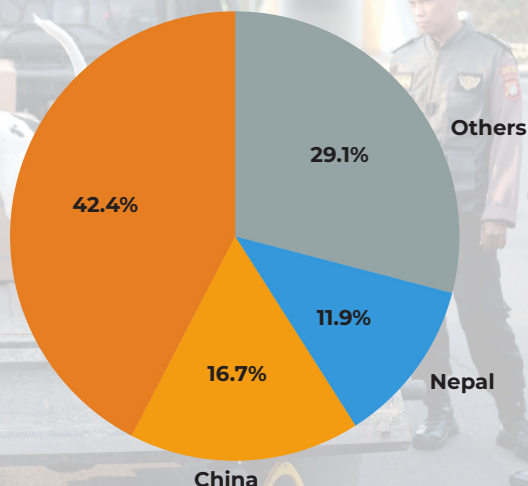
Once selected, dogs undergo intensive three- to six-month training programmes aimed at sharpening their detection abilities and operational discipline. Each handler usually works exclusively with one or two dogs to foster trust and consistency.

Training unfolds in three stages. The first phase builds bonding and discipline, laying the foundation for teamwork. The second phase focuses on developing key detection skills – tracking, searching, and identifying wildlife products during seizures and poacher interceptions. In the final phase, dogs and handlers operate under near-real conditions, practising crime scene investigations, detecting concealed contraband, and supporting the apprehension of offenders.

By the time they graduate, both handler and dog are fully prepared for field deployment – an expert team ready to confront the complex realities of wildlife protection with precision, trust, and courage.

Photo: R. Zai

Asian Big Cats Seized by Country (2000-2022)



Source: Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) Crime Tracker, 2000-2022

Tracking Down Traffickers

In India, sniffer dog squads have played a quiet but crucial role in the fight against wildlife crime. “They have assisted in more than 500 investigations,” says Dilpreet Chhabra, Head of Programme Communications at WWF-India. Launched in 2008, the Wildlife Sniffer Dog Training Programme has trained and deployed around 120 dogs and 240 handlers across 21 (out of 28) states in India. Each squad—made up of one dog and two handlers—works with Forest Departments and the Railway Protection Force. Trained to detect tiger and leopard skins and bones, elephant tusks, bear bile, deer antlers, red sanders, and caterpillar fungus, these dogs help track some of the most commonly trafficked wildlife products.

Indonesia’ Ace Sniffer

Bailey, a rescued cocker spaniel, is Indonesia’s first wildlife detection dog. She works at a busy ferry harbour connecting two of the country’s largest islands, sniffing passengers’ suitcases, bags, and trucks to detect endangered and protected animals.

A country that boasts of thousands of wildlife species, offering a home to several threatened and endangered species, Indonesia is also the hub of smuggling of various birds, reptiles and primates. The deployment of sniffer dogs has in recent



FEMKE DEN HAAS,

Founder of the Jakarta Animal Aid Network (JAAN), Indonesia

Bailey detects trafficked wildlife at least once a week, helping disrupt the illegal wildlife trade at one of the world’s busiest smuggling hubs



DILPREET B CHHABRA,

Head – Programme Communications, WWF-India

Since 2008, sniffer dogs have assisted in more than 500 plus investigations



SHADI HENRICO,

Canine Coordinator Endangered Wildlife Trust, South Africa

Dogs are chosen from high-drive working lines that are steady-tempered and focused

years resulted in rescue and protection of several species.

Since her deployment, Bailey has rescued 56 primates – including two baby orangutans, long-tailed macaques, pig-tailed macaques, leaf monkeys, and a marmoset – along with tens of tortoises and more than 23,000 songbirds. Femke den Haas, Founder of the Jakarta Animal Aid Network (JAAN), Indonesia, says their team of sniffer dogs operate across National Park Ujungulon in West Java, southern Sumatra at the main harbour, seaport, and airport, and Jakarta’s seaport. “On average, Bailey detects trafficked wildlife at least once a week, helping disrupt the illegal wildlife trade at one of the world’s busiest smuggling hubs,” says Femke.

Femke says Bailey has a unique drive. She has superpowers – always keen, always driven. She loves what she does.

Across continents, sniffer dogs are quietly reshaping the fight against wildlife crime. Whether tracing the scent of a poacher through the forests of India or uncovering illegal shipments at African ports, they have become indispensable to enforcement teams. Their work doesn’t just solve cases – it saves species, strengthens ranger networks, and restores faith that dedication and instinct together can still turn the tide against trafficking. 🐾

Ravina Yadav is staff writer for BigCats magazine.

‘Future of jaguar conservation will not be decided only in labs or offices, but also in farmers' backyards, schools, and in the hearts of local people’

Photos: Project Jaguars of Iguaçu



Yara Barros checking the VHF sign of a jaguar collar

Dr Yara Barros is a Brazilian conservation biologist and the Executive Coordinator of Project Jaguars of Iguaçu, a flagship initiative dedicated to the conservation of jaguars in Brazil's Atlantic Forest. Dr Yara received the 2025 Whitley Award for her efforts to protect jaguars in Iguaçu National Park within the Atlantic Forest. Her efforts in the last decade and more have resulted in doubling jaguar numbers in Brazil and Argentina. Since 2018, she has worked to change the conservation narrative so that local people see jaguars as essential to biodiversity. Landowners now contact Dr Yara's team to resolve conflicts instead of killing jaguars. Through education, dialogue, and creativity, she and her team are helping shape a new future in the heart of the Atlantic Forest.

Dr Pramod K Yadav spoke with Dr Yara Barros about the key ideas that shape her understanding of conservation at the grassroots.

Pramod K Yadav (PKY): How did you first become involved in jaguar conservation?

Yara Barros (YB): I often say I didn't choose jaguars – they chose me. My career began with birds, actually. I worked for years with the Spix's macaw, one of the rarest species on Earth. Watching the

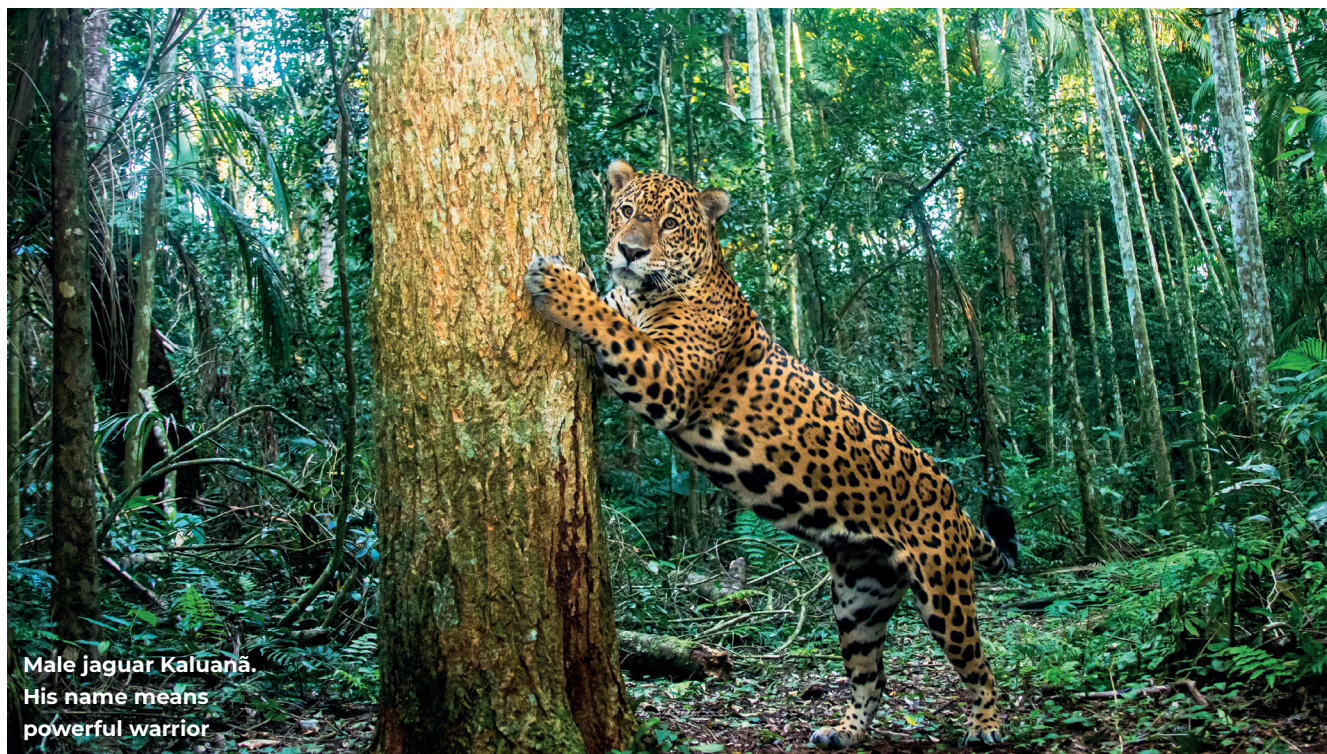
last known individual disappear from the wild was a turning point in my life. It made me realise that saving a species isn't just about biology – it's about people, relationships, and coexistence.

Years later, when I was invited to lead Projeto Onças do Iguaçu in Brazil's Atlantic Forest, I knew this was my calling. The jaguar, a powerful symbol in our culture and ecosystems, embodies everything I believe in: strength, balance, and connection. My team and I work to ensure that both people and jaguars can thrive together.

PKY: Why is jaguar conservation even more critical now?

YB: Because the jaguar's fate is our own, the species once roamed from the southern United States to Argentina. Today, it occupies barely half of that range. Every patch of forest lost, every river polluted, every conflict ignored – it all brings us closer to losing jaguars as well as the health of the ecosystems. Protecting jaguars means protecting water sources, carbon-storing forests, and the dignity of communities who share this land. It's not just about a big cat; it's about the future we choose to build.

PKY: The Jaguar population in Iguaçu National Park of the Atlantic Forest is growing. How is your team working with



Male jaguar Kaluanã.
His name means
powerful warrior

the local communities?

YB: Jaguar population recovery hasn't happened by chance – it is happening because of trust, persistence, and partnership among various stakeholders.

Over the past 13 years, the jaguar population in and around Iguazu National Park has more than doubled, a rare success story for a big cat in such a densely populated landscape. But every number tells a story of daily effort. Inside the park, the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio) fights tirelessly against poaching, one of the park's most serious historical threats. Outside the park, we focus on building capacity for human-jaguar coexistence from the ground up.

Our field team goes door-to-door, farm by farm, listening before acting. We help families protect their livestock with practical, low-cost solutions – secure henhouses, night corrals, and electric fences. But coexistence isn't only about fences; it's about relationships. We are constantly in the field, making visits to properties across the park to build trust relationships.

Over the years, we've created initiatives that connect people emotionally and economically to conservation: Jaguar Crocheteers - women artisans who crochet jaguar amigurumis and earn income through their craft; Scratching the Future - families who produce eggs safely without losing hens to predators and Grafitti Jaguar - a street-art movement that turns fear into fascination across local towns.

The landscape around Iguazu is changing

as ranches shift from cattle to agriculture, leading to fewer livestock losses and fewer conflicts with jaguars. This transformation – ecological, economic, and cultural – has been key to the region's recovery.

Still, success is fragile. A population that has doubled can also decline quickly if pressure returns. That's why we never stop. Every conversation, every fence, every child who learns to see the jaguar with wonder instead of fear – each is a small victory in a much larger story. Coexistence is no longer a dream in Iguazu. It's a daily practice of trust, and it's working.

PKY: How do you see the role of local communities and conservationists like you in protecting the jaguar population in Latin America?

YB: The future of jaguar conservation will not be decided only in labs or offices – it will also be decided in the backyards of farmers, in schools, and in the hearts of local people.

My team and I have learned that conservation is no longer about 'experts teaching others'. It's about listening, co-creating, and sharing responsibility. Conservationists must act as facilitators, turning spectators into actors in the conservation process. Our role is to empower local voices, to understand their realities, and to build solutions together that truly work in the field. We also helped create the Trinational Coexistence Network, uniting Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay around a shared

Protecting
jaguars means
protecting water
sources, carbon-
storing forests,
and the dignity
of communities



(Above): Jaguars of Iguaçu team (Dr Yara Barros is second from left) with the captured female Indira



(Right): Women from three towns surrounding the national park take part in a workshop to make crocheted amigurumi

vision of people and jaguars coexisting because coexistence doesn't stop at a political boundary.

PKY: In the face of climate change and rapid biodiversity loss, how can jaguar conservation be a strategic step towards ensuring ecosystem resilience and human wellbeing?

YB: Jaguars are what we call umbrella species – protecting them means safeguarding everything beneath that umbrella: forests, rivers, prey species, and ultimately, people. In the Atlantic Forest, jaguars are restoring balance in an ecosystem that once seemed beyond repair. They regulate prey populations, promote forest regeneration, and maintain the ecological web.

But beyond the science, there's a more profound truth: human-wildlife coexistence itself is an act of climate resilience. When communities understand their connection to the land and its wildlife, they become partners in regeneration, not just beneficiaries.

PKY: What gives you hope, and what concerns you most about the future of jaguars?

YB: What gives me hope is what I see every day in Iguaçu – and what the numbers confirm. In just 15 years, the jaguar population in and around Iguaçu National Park has doubled. That kind of recovery is extraordinary, especially in such a human-dominated landscape. It shows that when we protect the forest, control poaching, and work hand in hand with communities, nature responds.

But beyond the data, my greatest hope comes from people. From farmers who once feared the jaguar to those who now proudly display her photo on their walls. From partners across borders who believe, like we do, that coexistence is not a dream – it's a shared

future we're building together.

What worries me, besides habitat fragmentation and hunting, is indifference – the loss of empathy in a noisy, distracted world. Conservation depends on connection; if we stop caring, we lose everything.

But as long as people are willing to care, to act, and to stand beside us, there's hope. And in Iguaçu, the jaguar's roar is proof that coexistence works.

PKY: As a woman conservation professional, what kind of challenges and advantages do you see in the field?

YB: Working in conservation as a woman has never been simple – but it has always been meaningful.

You often have to prove your strength twice – in the field, in meetings, and in leadership spaces. But women bring something essential to conservation: empathy, collaboration, and the ability to connect across worlds. I believe that one of the greatest values of a conservationist is their ability to inspire others to act, strive for improvement, and make a positive impact on the world. Seeing women in these spaces inspires other girls to envision themselves making a difference – in the forest, in the lab, and in leadership roles. I'm deeply grateful that my journey can serve as inspiration for other women and girls, so they know they belong here too.

For me, conservation is a collective journey where science, culture, and community unite to protect our shared dependencies. When women join that journey, we not only protect nature but also reshape the world with care and compassion. 🐾

Dr Pramod K Yadav is Programme Associate with Sankala Foundation.

Women bring something essential to conservation: empathy, collaboration, and the ability to connect across worlds.

Global Big Cats PHOTOGRAPHY

The Global Big Cats Photography Competition drew over 1,000 entries from around the world, celebrating photographers who captured the beauty and spirit of the wild's most iconic predators. The top eight winners were recognised for their striking portrayals – lions at dusk, a tiger in quiet reflection, a leopard under the moonlight, and playful cubs full of life. Together, these photographs serve as a powerful reminder of our shared responsibility to protect big cats and the landscapes they depend on.

All photographs are courtesy IBCA

Nine Stars at the Waterhole



I waited besides a waterhole in Kenya for several nights, hoping to photograph this pride of lions. I heard their roars often at a distance. After failing for five nights, I sat near the waterhole, my last night in Kenya. And, then suddenly, a lioness broke cover and came towards the waterhole. To my sheer delight the entire pride of eight slowly followed. I was focused on getting a shot where all the individuals had their heads down, eyes open and engaged in slaking their thirst. The five cubs were an added delight.

LOCATION: Olkirimatian Conservancy, Kenya

PHOTOGRAPHER: Rajarshi Banerji

COMPETITION 2025



Life is
Beautiful

Playful female Bengal tiger jumps to cross a shallow stretch of water.

LOCATION: Ranthambore National Park, India

PHOTOGRAPHER: Abhijit Chattopadhyay



Clash of the Titans

The jungle echoed with their loud roars as the two tigers – Taru and Paras – tried to establish their dominance in the forest. The visitors to the tiger reserve were awe-struck by this rare and heartbeat-raising display of male power.

LOCATION: Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve, India

PHOTOGRAPHER: Narayan Malu

A photograph of a tiger clinging to a large, textured tree trunk in a forest. The tiger's head is visible, looking towards the camera, with its paws gripping the bark. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage.

He Loves Trees

In the heart of Kanha National Park, amidst the rustling leaves and dappled sunlight filtering through the dense canopy, I embarked on a journey to capture the Bengal tiger.

After hours of patient waiting, a fleeting shadow appeared among the trees. We sat still. And then, there he was – a magnificent male tiger, bathed in the soft glow of the morning sun, standing besides a towering Sal tree. He approached the tree and began to rub his cheek against the rough bark, an apparent display of affection. He surely loved his trees.

LOCATION: Kanha National Park, India

PHOTOGRAPHER
Anosh Koppikar

Motherhood in Savannah



(Left): This Topi pride lioness, with her two-month-old cub, stands guard while locking eyes with the photographer. The playful cub seems to enjoy the precious moments with the mother.

LOCATION: Maasai Mara, Kenya

PHOTOGRAPHER: Prasad Hamine

(Bottom): Spotted this sub-adult male leopard early in the morning roaming on the rocky slopes. As soon as he spotted our gypsy it started moving towards the upper edge of the rock. The full moon was just right above. The leopard walked up to the edge and settled down staring right into the camera. He had composed the shot for us.

LOCATION: Jawai Bandh Leopard Conservation Reserve, India

PHOTOGRAPHER: Jeetendra Chaware

Posing with Full Moon





King of the Jungle

A male lion came across a dead elephant and immediately appeared to claim appeared to establish his proprietary claim over it

LOCATION: Ghoha Hills, Chobe National Park, Botswana

PHOTOGRAPHER:
Vishwas Patwardhan

We had been waiting for a tigress for a while. When she finally appeared, she walked sideways and did not bother to look at us. We felt disappointed. And then suddenly, a tiny cub walked towards us while following his mother. He stopped to look at us. We were thrilled. Four more cubs followed. All five posed for us, and gifted us incredible moments of happiness.

LOCATION: Umred Karhandla Wildlife Sanctuary, India

PHOTOGRAPHER: Vinod Sharma

*Organised by the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA), in collaboration with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Aarts Maestro, and the Uttar Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board, the competition brought global attention to the shared mission of conserving big cats and their habitats.



Cub Class

Two jaguars resting in Amazon forest, Brazil

Photo: WWF- Brazil



Jaguars Face a New Predator: Overtourism

In Brazil's Pantanal, jaguar (*Panthera onca*) sightings now exceed 1,000 per year, attracting tourists from across the globe. Eco-tourism has become a lifeline for conservation and local communities, making jaguars symbols of both ecological and economic value.

Yet, this success carries hidden costs. On peak days, more than 30 boats, each with camera-toting tourists, can crowd around a single jaguar, disrupting hunting and mating behaviour. Prolonged exposure to such disturbance elevates stress hormones, which can weaken immunity, reduce breeding success, and alter natural movement patterns. Animals that once roamed vast territories are increasingly habituated, sometimes approaching ranches and human settlements, creating new tensions. This pattern is emerging in wildlife destinations globally: high demand for sightings can unintentionally stress animals and disrupt ecosystems.

The Pantanal illustrates a central paradox of modern conservation: protecting wildlife often depends as much on managing people as on protecting habitats. The challenge now is to ensure that the region's jaguars continue to thrive, even as global

fascination turns their world into a stage.

Read more: <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-72906-x>

Indochinese Leopards on the Brink

Fewer than 800 Indochinese leopards (*Panthera pardus delacouri*) survive across Southeast Asia, with populations confined to Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia. Populations in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos are believed to be functionally extinct (present in numbers too low to maintain a viable population), driven by poaching, snares for wild meat, prey depletion, and

habitat loss.

Camera-trap surveys in Thailand's Kaeng Krachan National Park indicate densities of 3–4 leopards per 100 km², though dense forests and melanistic individuals complicate accurate counts. The critically endangered subspecies occupies only 2–6% of its historical range.

Conservation efforts include restoring prey species, creating watering holes, reconnecting fragmented forests, and strengthening protection in key habitats. Rangers and NGOs work to reduce poaching and mitigate human-wildlife conflicts, while careful monitoring helps track populations.

Despite their rarity, Indochinese leopards play a critical ecological role as top predators, influencing prey populations and forest ecosystem balance. Conservation in remaining strongholds is central to the subspecies' survival.

Read more: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biocon.2024.110810>

AI and Satellites Map the Great Wildebeest Migration

The Serengeti-Mara migration is one of nature's grandest spectacles, with wildebeest, zebras,

Indochinese melanistic leopard with spotted leopard



Photo: Adobe Stock

The Great Migration of the
Serengeti and Maasai Mara



and gazelles travelling up to 1,000 km each year. Traditionally, aerial surveys have tracked these herds, offering population estimates but limited spatial and temporal resolution.

Now, satellites and artificial intelligence are adding a new dimension to the drama. High-resolution imagery analysed with deep learning models allowed scientists to detect and count wildebeest across 4,000 km² for the first time, providing a complementary, near real-time view of the migration. This method also enables researchers to study collective movement patterns, showing how thousands of animals coordinate their journey without a leader.

While the 2022–23 satellite survey recorded fewer wildebeest than some aerial estimates, it demonstrates a scalable, non-invasive approach that could transform monitoring of migratory species. By combining satellites with traditional surveys, scientists can now better understand population dynamics, ecosystem interactions, and the behaviour of these iconic herds on an unprecedented scale.

Read more: <https://theconversation.com/the-great-wildebeest-migration-seen-from-space-satellites-and-ai-are-helping-count-africas-wildlife-266308>

Pangolins: The World's Most Trafficked Mammal

Pangolins, with their armoured scales, curved claws, and worm-like tongues, are among the planet's most extraordinary yet endangered mammals. Found across Asia and Africa, all eight species are threatened,

primarily by poaching for meat and scales used in traditional medicine. Between 2010 and 2023, over 136,000 pangolins were seized in nearly 400 trafficking cases, with China as the largest market.

Their slow-moving, nocturnal habits make them especially vulnerable, while human-made hazards such as electrified fences further imperil them. Little is known about their wild populations, making conservation and monitoring challenging.

The latest edition of *10 Years of*

Black-bellied Pangolin,
Central African Republic



Remembering Wildlife, a photo book series established by photographer Margot Raggett in 2015, spotlights pangolins for the first time. Through these images, the series aims to raise awareness, fostering a connection between people and this secretive species. Awareness, protection of habitats, and anti-poaching efforts remain crucial to securing pangolins' survival.

Read more: <https://edition.cnn.com/world/pangolin-remembering-wildlife-photos-conservation-c2e-spc>

eDNA Reveals Hidden Wildlife in Bhutan's High Himalayas

In Bhutan's high Himalayas, monitoring elusive wildlife like snow leopards has long been a challenge. Traditional methods such as camera traps and field surveys often yield few sightings due to the species' camouflage and remote habitats. Environmental DNA (eDNA) offers a non-invasive alternative: water samples from rivers capture traces of animals' genetic material, revealing species presence without direct observation.

Using eDNA from high-elevation waters of the Paa Chhu River near Mt. Jomolhari, scientists confirmed the presence of snow leopards and Pallas's cats for the first time in this region. The analysis also detected 19 mammal species, including sambar deer at record elevations, leopard cats at the upper edge of their range, and the rare woolly flying squirrel. These findings illustrate eDNA's power to map biodiversity in inaccessible terrain and support conservation planning.

Bhutan has now established its first eDNA lab in collaboration with ETH Zurich, enabling local analysis and faster monitoring. By complementing traditional surveys, eDNA provides a broader understanding of Himalayan ecosystems, helping safeguard rare species and guiding evidence-based conservation strategies in the region.

Read more: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/news/stories/edna-reveals-snow-leopard-presence-in-bhutans-mountain-rivers/>

Compiled by **Ravina Yadav** a staff writer for BigCats magazine.



A snow leopard walking
in the Spiti Valley, India

The Pursuit of Creating Proxy Species

BY ISHANI NANGIA



While the internet had its moment of frenzy over the recent resurrection of direwolves, real-world scientists across the globe have been quietly working to bring endangered and even extinct species back from the brink. But scientifically, resurrection is not possible! The so-called resurrection often involves a combination of gene editing and cloning, where fragments of ancient DNA are integrated with those of closely related species to create a living proxy rather than a true revival.

The recently released four-part docu-series *The Resurrection Quest* by Indian filmmaker Mayurica Biswas, delves deep into the subject. The series also won the prestigious Gold Dolphin Award at the 16th Cannes Corporate Media & TV Awards for excellence in science, technology, and innovation storytelling. The award was given to recognise the series' compelling exploration of the scientific and emotional dimensions of de-extinction and animal cloning efforts. The storyline traverses through the suburbs and

museums of America to the deserts of the UAE, grasslands of Serbia, pet-cloning labs in China and Singapore, and the savannas of Kenya, each story building on to the next.

The opening sequence feels straight out of a sci-fi, post-apocalyptic film, perhaps even *Jurassic World* (pun intended). The series begins with Ben Novak, a de-extinction biologist and a passionate advocate of passenger pigeons. He has made it his life's mission to bring back the passenger pigeon, a species once present in billions that then went extinct in 1914 due to extensive hunting. Following Ben's story, we meet Dr Jean Paul Ly, a veterinarian from Singapore who tragically ran over his own pet dog, Khan. Overcome with grief, he decides to clone his beloved companion through a facility in China. His story offers a deeply human entry point into the booming pet cloning industry in China, one that even enjoys state support.

Here, *The Resurrection Quest* takes a sobering turn, several pet owners across China and Singapore are now seeking to clone their beloved companions, but at what cost?

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What's being created is not the original species reborn, but rather a biological stand-in shaped by human intervention

Cloning has 5-10% Success Rate

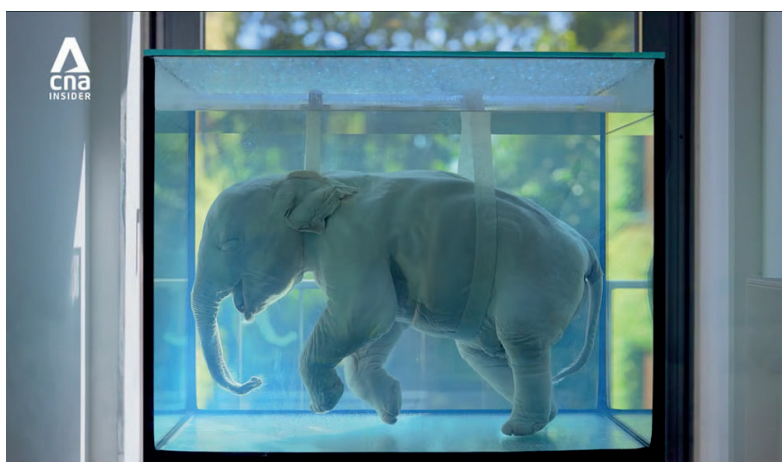
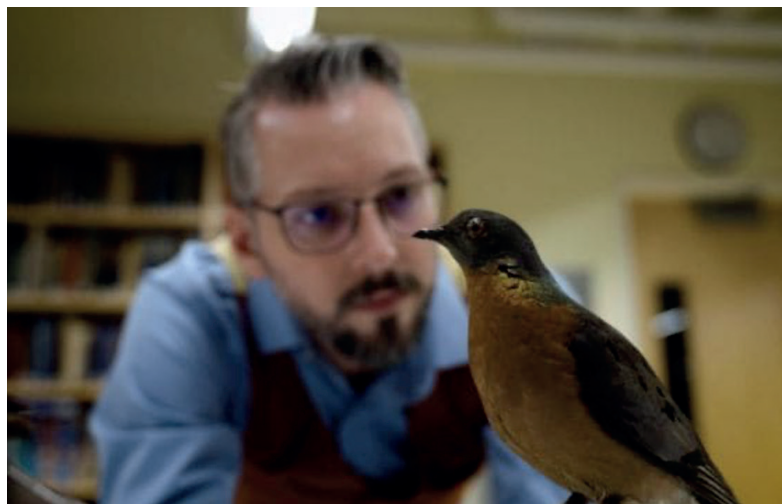
Cloning only has a 5-10% success rate, so what happens to the “excess” of cats or dogs produced during this process, as one biotechnology researcher asks? What are the breeding and living conditions of the surrogates? And what happens when a clone doesn't behave quite like its donor, as many owners expect? It's impossible not to wonder where does grief end and human ambition begin? Similarly, not much further away, the Middle East is home to the lesser-known world of camel beauty contests, a spectacle as extravagant as it is fascinating. Sheikhs in the region are investing millions in cloning their prized race and beauty camels. In these sand- struck arenas science is no longer a tool for preservation but rather perfection.

The series then takes us to Kenya's Ol Pejeta Conservancy, home to Najin and Fatu—the last two living northern white rhinos in the world. Najin and Fatu are global symbols of humanities' impact on wildlife. Relentless poaching has driven their species to the point of functional extinction, leaving behind just Najin and Fatu, both infertile female rhinos.

Parallely, in the remote tundras of Siberia, father and son duo Sergei and Nikita Zimov are working to revive the steppe grassland ecosystem through their ambitious experiment – Pleistocene Park. Their goal is to restore an ancient balance that could help prevent the rapid melting of permafrost in the region. The series keeps circling back to one recurring scientific obsession; the revival of the woolly mammoth, a keystone species once central to this ecosystem. The idea is that mammoths, through their constant grazing and movement, could help curb global warming by preventing the rapid melting of permafrost. Their grazing would scrape away snow layers, allowing cold air to penetrate the ground and keep the permafrost frozen.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines de-extinction as any attempt to create a proxy of an extinct species or subspecies through scientific techniques such as selective back-breeding, somatic cell nuclear transfer (cloning), or genome engineering. The emphasis here, as the IUCN notes, is on the word ‘proxy’ – acknowledging that what's being created is not the original species reborn, but rather a biological stand-in shaped by human intervention.

However, many researchers argue that de-extinction may not be the solution to global biodiversity loss. Restoring a species alone is not the same as reviving an ecosystem. With nearly 200 countries pledging under the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to protect 30% of the planet by 2030, the urgency lies



Stills from the docu-series

not just in resurrecting lost species, but in addressing the broader crisis of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity collapse. After all, de-extinction means little if the habitats these species once thrived in no longer exist.

The series constantly switches from one intense story to another, and hooks you with its subjects, characters, and conversations. Interestingly enough, it also educates you on the science behind cloning, breaking it down in a way that feels both fascinating and unsettling. Technically, there is no science that can raise the dead, but can we bring back a species that existed possibly a millennia ago, or one that stands at the brink of extinction today?

As each episode unfolds, one question keeps circling back in my mind — is de-extinction an act of hope or hubris? The series leaves you with more questions than answers. My only critique would be that it often drifts past some of the more sinister aspects of cloning, which deserve equal attention. 🐾

Ishani Nangia is Communications and Outreach Associate at the Sankala Foundation

Photos courtesy IBCA and the Sankala Foundation



Winners of the Global Big Cats Photography Competition 2025 pose with their awards during the felicitation ceremony in New Delhi

Global Big Cats Photography Competition 2025

As a lead-up to the Global Summit on Big Cat Conservation 2026 to be held in India, IBCA, along with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), the Aarts Maestro (a talent-scouting platform), and the Uttar Pradesh Ecotourism Development Board, declared the winners of the Global Big Cats Photography Competition 2025. Mr Bhupender Yadav, Minister MoEFCC, on 8 October gave away the prizes to the winners.

The competition drew over 1,000 entries, with 456 shortlisted for the final jury round. The winning photographers were honoured in the presence of ambassadors of big cat range countries, senior officials from MoEFCC and the Ministry of External Affairs, representatives of the

Uttar Pradesh Ecotourism Board, and partner conservation organisations.

Mr Yadav emphasised on India's thriving ecosystems and the nation's expanding green footprint – forest and tree cover has risen by 1,445 km² over the past decade, bringing India's total green cover to 25.17%. The Protected Area Network now spans 1,022 sites, covering 5.43% of India's geographical area.

conservation through a series of high-level sessions and meetings. The Alliance was represented by Mr Soumitra Dasgupta, Director (Programmes), and Dr Kausik Banerjee, Lead (Programme).

A key session titled 'Scaling up Global Action for Big Cat Conservation' featured eminent conservation leaders who emphasised the need for coordinated global strategies and inclusive partnerships. The session called for enhanced collaboration among governments, research institutions, conservation groups, and financial organisations to address the mounting threats faced by big cats.

Mr Dasgupta also held a series of strategic meetings with global conservation leaders. Notably, with Dr Fred Launay, CEO of Panthera, he explored future collaborations aimed at strengthening global initiatives for big cat conservation. Mr Dasgupta invited Panthera to join hands in securing the long-term survival of the world's big cats.



Mr Soumitra Dasgupta, at the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025

High-level Sessions at IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 led by IBCA

At the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 held from 9–15 October in Abu Dhabi, IBCA showcased its commitment to big cat

IBCA at the International Olympiad on Climate Change

Dr Amit Mallick, Director (International Cooperation), IBCA, represented India at the International Olympiad on Climate Change and Environmental Issues, held from 13–20 September 2025 in Sirius

List of Winners

- 1st Prize – Rajarshi Banerji
- 2nd Prize – Abhijit Chattopadhyay
- 3rd Prize – Narayan Malu
- 4th Prize – Anosh Koppikar
- 5th Prize – Prasad Hamine
- 6th Prize – Jeetendra Chaware
- 7th Prize – Vishwas Patwardhan
- 8th Prize – Vinod Sharma



Dr S P Yadav from IBCA and Mr Sergey Aramilev from Amur Tiger Centre at the signing ceremony in Vladivostok

IBCA and Amur Tiger Centre Sign MoU

At the 10th Eastern Economic Forum held from 3–6 September 2025 in Vladivostok, Russia, IBCA and the Amur Tiger Centre signed an MoU to advance their shared mission of conserving big cats. At the Forum, Dr S P Yadav, Director General, IBCA, addressed the Plenary Session during the Falcon Day International Forum organised by Roscongress. Dr Yadav highlighted the urgent need for collective global action to protect migratory species, stressing that conservation success depends on shared responsibility and transboundary collaboration.

As part of the Forum, an exhibition showcased 24 artworks jointly created by Russian artists and India's tribal artists from tiger landscapes.

The MoU aims to advance the two organisations' mission for conserving big cats. The collaboration focuses on strengthening institutional cooperation through joint research, scientific knowledge exchange, and the sharing of best practices. Together, the two organisations aim to promote sustainable forest management, encourage community-based conservation models, and ensure the long-term survival of tigers and other endangered species.

The MoU also formalises the Amur Tiger Centre's accession to IBCA as a partner organisation, reinforcing the commitment of both sides to work collectively for the protection of big cats across their range countries.

Federal Territory, Russia. He served as one of the four international jury members alongside representatives from Malaysia, China, and Qatar.

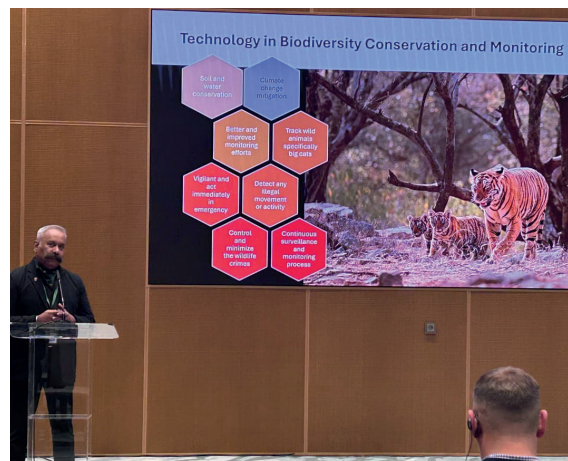
The Olympiad brought together participants from 11 countries – Ethiopia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Costa Rica, Djibouti, India, Tajikistan, Myanmar, Russia, and Qatar – fostering global dialogue on environmental challenges and solutions.

During the International Scientific Conference on Ecology and Climate

Change organised by Sirius University of Science and Technology, Dr Mallick shared India's pioneering use of tools such as remote sensing, AI-enabled monitoring, and community-driven digital platforms to strengthen biodiversity protection. He also discussed IBCA's vision to advance big cat conservation worldwide through innovative technology and international collaboration.

At the closing ceremony, Dr Mallick presented Gold Medal awards to the Olympiad winners. He elaborated on

the Alliance's mission of international cooperation, capacity building, and knowledge sharing, and talked about the forthcoming Global Summit on Big Cat Conservation, to be hosted by India in 2026.



Dr Amit Mallick delivers a talk at the International Olympiad on Climate Change in Sirius, Russia

International Snow Leopard Day Webinar 2025

To mark the first UN-recognised International Snow Leopard Day on 23 October 2025, IBCA hosted a global webinar titled 'Beyond the Rosettes: Protecting the Snow Leopards and Their Ecosystem'.

In his opening remarks, Dr S P Yadav, Director General, IBCA, reaffirmed the organisation's commitment to fostering international cooperation, knowledge sharing, and capacity building for the conservation of all big cat species. He also acknowledged the pioneering work of the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection (GSLEP) programme across snow leopard range countries.

Mr Ramesh Pandey, Additional Director General (Wildlife), MoEFCC, noted that India's snow leopard habitats span nearly 250,000 km² across four Himalayan states above 3,000 m. Based on the national population estimation (2019-2023), India now has over 700 snow leopards, placing the country third globally among range nations.

Sharing insights on the Secure Himalaya Project, a pioneering initiative that has placed the snow leopard at the heart of India's high-altitude conservation

efforts, Dr Ruchi Pant, Head Climate Adaptation, NRM and Biodiversity, UNDP India, discussed landscape management plans for four high-altitude regions and SOPs for wetland management, snow leopard population assessments. Ms Nozanin Rasulova, Head, Department of Cooperation, Committee for Environmental Protection, Tajikistan, mentioned that significant progress has been made in snow leopard population studies and outlined future cooperation prospects to enhance transboundary conservation across the region.

Dr Sathyakumar, former scientist, Wildlife Institute of India, shared India's journey from rough estimates to data-driven snow leopard population assessments via SPAI, involving local communities, researchers, and frontline staff across six states, strengthening conservation and understanding of these elusive cats.

Mr Sonam Wangdi, Chief of Nature Conservation Division, Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources, Royal Government of Bhutan, explained that Bhutan's protected area system covers 52% of the country's total land area, one of the highest proportions in the world, exceeding global conservation targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD).

Director of Science and Conservation, Snow Leopards, in Kyrgyzstan, Dr Koustubh Sharma highlighted threats like habitat loss, climate change, and human interference. He urged global action citing examples like the initiative in India, 23 for 23, that invites everyone to dedicate 23 minutes to support snow leopards and inspire conservation worldwide.

Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre – Tribal Voices, Conservation Stories

The fourth edition of Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre, organised by the Sankala Foundation with support from the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) and in partnership with IBCA was held from 9 to 12 October 2025 at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi. Bringing together over 50 tribal artists from 17 states, the exhibition featured 250 paintings and crafts representing more than 30 tiger reserves of India. The exhibition was inaugurated by the former President of India Ram Nath Kovind. Highlighted



(Top) Former President of India Ram Nath Kovind interacting with tribal artists at the fourth edition of the exhibition in New Delhi. (Above) Visitors engage with tribal artists and their works

the deep ecological wisdom and cultural heritage of tribal and forest-dwelling communities, offering powerful insights into habitat protection, coexistence and the symbiotic relationship between people and nature. Cultural evenings on 9 and 10 October, featuring performances by tribal artists from Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, added a vibrant

dimension to the experience. Conceived in 2023 to mark 50 years of Project Tiger, Silent Conversation has evolved into an important platform that strengthens dialogue in partnership with NTCA and IBCA. 🐾

Compiled by **Dr Tamali Mondal**,
Programme Associate, IBCA

Matchless Tiger Collection



Tigers on a Matchbox? This curated selection by scholar and collector Srijan De Sarker was showcased at the three-day International Tiger Day exhibition in July 2025, organised by the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, India. Srijan has spent years documenting how these tiny objects reflect the cultural and ecological history of the tiger. These matchboxes – once simple daily-use items – evolved into vivid carriers of art, stories and wildlife messages. Among the rare pieces displayed were labels depicting Khairi, the well-known tigress raised by the forest conservator Saroj Raj Choudhury, whose story symbolises trust and coexistence between humans and wildlife. The collection captures the tiger's enduring place in human imagination while underscoring the ongoing need to protect this iconic species and the forests it represents.



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**Address for
Correspondence:**

Sankala Foundation
B-414 - 416, Somdutt Chamber -1,
Bhikaji Cama Place
New Delhi - 110 066, India.

Tel: +91 - 8800123344

E-mail: bigcats@sankala.org

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