



50 years of India's Project Tiger

Earlier this year, India released a summary of its four-yearly tiger population estimation report, Status of Tigers 2022.

The report's release marks the 50th anniversary of Project Tiger – India's iconic conservation programme for the species and the ecosystems it inhabits – which was launched in 1973.

The headline figures from the report are a total of 3,080 individual tigers camera trapped during the survey and a minimum population estimate of 3,167 tigers in the country.

Given the changes in methodology and coverage that have taken place as the survey and estimation process has evolved, it is difficult to make a simple comparison to the results of previous estimations (the 2006 population estimate was just 1,411 tigers). However, few would argue with the proposition that tiger populations are stable and recovering in significant areas of India. While not a time for complacency, it is perhaps an occasion to commend the contributions of those involved over the past five decades, be they Government staff, scientists, members of civil society or the local communities that co-exist with tigers.

The report reveals that while the country-level picture looks to be one of steady improvement, progress has not been uniform and some important areas have taken backward steps.

Overall, tiger occupancy of habitat has improved slightly since 2018 and this appears to be driven mainly by increases in the Shivalik and Gangetic flood plain, the Central Indian states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh and, to a lesser extent, in the North East Hills and Brahmaputra Plains landscape. Worryingly, the Western Ghats landscape, long one of the tiger's safest bastions, has seen a decline in population and significant reduction in tiger occupancy, particularly outside protected areas. The East-Central states of Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh and Telangana have also seen a decline in tiger occupancy, with local extirpations in Kawal, Satkosia and Sahyadri tiger reserves, the Chennur forest area and Sri Venkateswara National Park.

The report is candid about the major challenges that persist with conserving tigers in India. Although they have increased steadily in size and number, India's tiger reserves are small islands in otherwise heavily populated, human-dominated landscapes.

Connectivity between tiger habitats is deteriorating due to unsustainable use and development. Mining poses a significant threat, particularly in the Central Indian landscape. Linear infrastructure, especially a fast-expanding road network, is an issue across tiger landscapes, threatening to cut off vital paths for animal movement. To address these challenges, the report recommends the adoption of green infrastructure and mitigation measures.

The report also notes that poaching and the illegal wildlife trade remains a significant challenge, with poachers continuing to kill tigers due to high demand for tiger products. Most of this demand comes from China, Vietnam and other parts of South-East Asia.

The other major challenge highlighted by the report are high levels of negative human-tiger interactions, driven in part by habitat conversion and fragmentation, but also by increasing tiger populations as a consequence of successful conservation measures. The latter is particularly true for the Central Indian states of Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. Since the level of conservation success varies widely in different parts of the country, human-tiger coexistence requires redressal through different policy approaches depending on the context. Local communities have borne significant costs, both economically and in terms of actual lives, to conserve tigers and other wildlife. Where tiger populations are increasing, it is vital that people's safety and well-being are put at the heart of conservation planning and action. It isn't just a matter of fairness – not doing so risks eroding support for tiger conservation in its most important constituency.

India's tigers now make up almost 75 per cent of the world's wild tiger population, reflecting a degree of tolerance and coexistence that biologists, anthropologists and conservationists are working to understand and learn from, to promote coexistence measures for the future.

Globally, tiger populations continue to be in decline. Wild tigers are now extinct from Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, decreases continue across much of the rest of their South-East Asian range and they are just clinging on in north-east China.

Where progress has been achieved in India, it has been through a combination of coexistence, strong political will, public support, comprehensive prohibitions on hunting and the consumption and use of tiger parts and derivatives and significant Government investment in protection, monitoring and enforcement.

Unless similar factors come into play in other parts of the tiger's range, it is difficult to envision how they will return to parts of their former range.

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