

Lion numbers outside Gir to double by 2027 Gujarat has achieved its goals

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Asiatic lions recorded a threefold growth in numbers in the past 50 years. Out of the current population of 523 lions, 313 are inside Gir and other protected sanctuaries, while 210 live in close proximity to humans.

What is alarming is that the number of Big Cats living near human habitats is likely to double in the next decade, say a research paper published by H. S. Singh, Member, National Board for Wildlife (NBWL).

The paper titled 'Dispersal of Asiatic lion and its survival in human-dominated landscape outside Gir forest,' published in 'Current Science Magazine,' says that the lion population in Gir and nearby areas had grown over threefold between 1965 and 2015. The number of Asiatic lions had increased from around 170 in 1965 to 523 in 2015.

"Of the existing 523 lions, only around 313 are found in Gir, Girnar, Mitiyala, and Pania sanctuaries, while 210 dwell in close proximity to humans outside the protected areas," Singh said.

He further said that during the past two decades (1995-2015), the number of lions outside Gir had increased steadily from 42 to 208. The growth in the number of lions, however, is pegged to the fact that currently the Asiatic lion population is dominated by lionesses.

"If the present trend continues, the number of lions outside Gir forest is expected to double within the next 10 years," Singh said.

Interestingly, the growth in the number of lions is pegged to the fact that currently the Asiatic lion population is dominated by lionesses. "The number of reproductive lionesses is currently four times higher than that recorded in the 1970s," Singh says in his research paper.

Singh said that dispersion of lions had taken place beyond the expectation of conservationists. Currently lions inhabit 57 per cent villages in Junagadh, Gir Somnath, Amreli and Bhavnagar districts, he said.

"In future, Rajkot, Botad, Porbandar and Jamnagar—having a good lion prey base including blue bulls, wild boars and feral cattle—are expected to become potential lion habitats," Singh said.

The paper also states that industrial and mining activities around Veraval coast had forced the lions out of the area. Further, change in land-use pattern and disappearance of

wastelands and community lands are other problems affecting the lions.

People around the Gir forests and some of the satellite areas are aware of the habits of the lions and have developed an understanding to live with them in harmony.

Villagers in some of the new satellite areas have little understanding of the behaviour of the lion. They need to be educated, the paper says.

The 12-member expert committee set up by the Supreme Court to oversee translocation of lions from Gir to Kuno-Palpur in Madhya Pradesh, has stated that Kuno Palpur was suitable for translocation.

However, a research paper published by National Board of Wildlife member H. S. Singh seems to imply that Kuno site has become unnecessary as its objective had been achieved by Gujarat.

Singh's research paper says that the Kuno site was designed to increase the lion population beyond 500 and to improve the position of Asiatic Lions from 'Critically Endangered' to 'Endangered' in the IUCN Red List.

Both these objectives that were planned two decades back have already been achieved by Gujarat through its conservation practises. The research paper further states that the population of lion is growing only because the people of Gujarat take pride in them and feel that they own these lions. Conservation of wildlife is deep-rooted in the culture and tradition of Saurashtra, the paper says.

However, despite their growing population, the lions face threat from development of industries and ports, mining activities, and rail and high-speed roads in the coastal areas. The increased frequency and speed of goods trains on Pipavav-Rajula line is a new threat as 10 lions were killed during 2013-15.

Pipavav port and related activities near Kaj wetlands in Kodinar taluka are a source of disturbance to a group of lions settled there.

Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced conversion of six state roads as National Highways. Of these new highways, the Una-Chotila highway passes close to the Sanctuary. The research paper states that the road network, and widening and converting some of them as high-speed roads are a matter of concern for lion conservationists.