

TIGER DECLINE IN EASTERN INDIA: ENVIRONMENT

NEWS: State of India's tiger prey, why challenges to their habitat need to be addressed

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

A joint study by the Wildlife Institute of India and NTCA highlights a regional decline in tiger numbers due to loss of prey species like chital and sambar, especially in eastern states. This decline, driven by habitat degradation and poverty-linked poaching, threatens conservation gains and increases human-wildlife conflict.

Tiger Conservation in India

Status of Tiger Population

- In 2006, India's tiger population dropped to an all-time low of around 1,400.
- Through significant conservation efforts, the population recovered to over 3,600 tigers by 2023.
- However, tiger numbers have declined in certain eastern states:
 - Telangana
 - Chhattisgarh
 - Jharkhand
 - Odisha

Key Findings of the Study

(Conducted by Wildlife Institute of India and National Tiger Conservation Authority)

- **Tiger Recovery with Uneven Gains**
 - National tiger numbers have increased overall.
 - Certain regions such as Simlipal, Palamau, Udanti-Sitanadi, and Guru Ghasidas are witnessing a decline.
- **Prey Base Decline**
 - Populations of essential prey species — chital, sambar, Indian bison — are falling in these regions.
 - This decline affects tiger survival and ecosystem balance.
- **Human-Wildlife Conflict**
 - Decline in prey base is forcing tigers to move out of protected reserves in search of food.
 - This increases the frequency and severity of human-wildlife conflict.

- **Socioeconomic Link to Poaching**

- Many affected tiger reserves are located in economically poor districts.
- Consumption of bush meat is common due to poverty.
- This increases poaching pressure on prey species, further degrading the ecosystem.

Short-term and Long-term Solutions

- **Short-term Solutions**

- On-site breeding of prey species inside predator-free enclosures.
- However, this is not ideal as herbivores bred this way may have weak survival instincts when released into the wild.

- **Long-term Solutions**

- Focus on habitat improvement to naturally support a healthy prey base.
- Engage local communities in conservation efforts.
- Address poverty to reduce dependence on bush meat.
- Promote sustainable tiger conservation practices integrated with local development.

Wildlife Institute of India (WII)

- Established in 1982 as an autonomous institution under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).
- Headquartered in Dehradun, Uttarakhand.
- Core focus areas:
 - Wildlife research
 - Capacity building and training
 - Conservation and management of India's diverse fauna.
- Collaborates with various national and international organizations on wildlife studies.

National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)

- NTCA is a statutory body under the MoEFCC.
- Established in 2005, based on recommendations of the Tiger Task Force.
- Legal Framework:
 - Granted statutory status under the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act, 2006.

- **Mandate and Functions**

- Strengthen tiger conservation and management of tiger reserves.
- Oversee the implementation of Project Tiger (launched in 1973).
- Conduct tiger population monitoring.
- Implement habitat protection and anti-poaching measures.
- Collaborate with WII to conduct *Management Effectiveness Evaluation (MEE)* of tiger reserves to ensure scientific and efficient reserve management.

Source: <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/state-india-tiger-prey-habitat-challenges-10050197/>