

3. Democratising Tiger Conservation

Prelims Syllabus: Environment

Mains Syllabus: GS-II Environment - Biodiversity Conservation



Why in News?

- Project Tiger was launched by the Union government on April 1, 1973, in a bid to promote conservation of the tiger.
- The programme came at a time when the population of tigers in India was rapidly dwindling.
- The number of tigers in India has increased by 6.74 percent from 2,967 in 2018 to 3,167 in 2022, according to the 5th cycle of India's Tiger Census, which was released to mark 50 years of 'Project Tiger' on April 09, 2023.
- India's tiger conservation success is attributed to the Wild Life (Protection) Act (WLPA) and Project Tiger, which helped bring back the national animal from the brink of extinction.

Conservation Amnesia:

- The 50-year celebration of the Act brings attention to the need to reflect on conservation practices for the next 50 years.
- Conservation amnesia is a syndrome of shifting baselines where, despite political support, funds, and a strong legal framework, the numbers do not reflect significant success in tiger conservation.

Unintended consequences:

- There have been some unintended consequences of Project Tiger, including the displacement of indigenous people living in protected areas, increased human-tiger conflicts, and the diversion of resources away from other conservation efforts.
- Additionally, the focus on tigers has led to the neglect of other species and their habitats, resulting in the decline of some wildlife populations.
- The 2023 preliminary report on Project Tiger shows that tiger populations are declining in certain regions, resulting in a loss of genetic diversity unique to those areas.
- To combat this, tigers are being reintroduced from central Indian forests, but this may homogenise tiger genetic structure across the country.
- The umbrella species concept of saving the tiger to save the ecosystem resulted in the manipulation of ecosystems to boost tiger numbers rather than their habitat and species.
- Excessive provisioning of water to enhance the cheetal (Prey for Tiger) habitat, led to reduced natural, climate-driven variations in populations of wildlife.
- This also led to the transformation of tiger reserves into habitats dominated by cheetals, a phenomenon referred to as “cheetalification.”
- For example, in the Kanha Tiger Reserve, the explosion in the cheetal population resulted in the habitat becoming unsuitable for the endangered hard ground barasingha, which depends on tall grass.

Decentralising Conservation:

- Conservation in India depends entirely on a network of Protected Areas (PAs). This is an exclusive conservation model which entirely depends on the government to protect and conserve the environment, wildlife, and natural resources.
- One way to decentralise conservation efforts is to involve local communities in decision-making processes related to conservation.
- This can be done by creating community-based natural resource management systems, where local communities are given the authority to manage their own natural resources in a sustainable way.
- This approach can help to reduce conflicts between local people and conservation authorities and can also promote greater accountability and transparency in conservation efforts.

-
- The WLPA must be amended to provide a policy framework and incentive for ordinary citizens to aid in conservation.
 - In many countries, natural lands are owned or managed by a variety of stakeholders, including individuals, communities, farmers.
 - To incentivize conservation efforts, each group has different models and approaches to conservation that are tailored to their specific interests and needs.
 - As a result, multiple conservation models operate simultaneously, each with its unique strengths and challenges.
 - This diverse range of conservation models can help ensure that natural lands are conserved in a way that works for all stakeholders, while also promoting sustainable use and management of natural resources.
 - In India, 'Reserved Forests' can be co-managed with an inclusive approach which also provides economic benefits for local communities.

