

Efforts to protect tigers are making an impact in India



A Bengal tiger in India. Researchers identify individual tigers by their stripe patterns. Each tiger's stripe pattern is unique, just like our fingerprints.

[Photo: Pixabay]

Thanks to efforts to protect this endangered species, tiger numbers are growing in India.

Animal conservationists are cheering now that tiger populations in India are on the rise. “It is incredible, wonderful,” said tiger expert Yadvendradev Jhala to *The New York Times*. He remembers how it was a completely different picture some years ago. At one point, certain wildlife reserves in India had seen their tiger populations reduced to zero. So, this comeback was a cause for some optimism and celebration. But, the battle to save these beautiful big cats from extinction is an **ongoing** one. The biggest threats are habitat destruction and poaching.

Habitat destruction

Tigers live in a range of environments: from hilly forests to mangrove swamps and grassy jungles. This is where they hunt, look for mates, and raise their cubs. But, humans have been taking over their natural habitats to build homes, farms, roads, and factories. As tiger territories shrink, the animals are finding it more difficult to find places to live. Some find themselves isolated, cut off from their regular mating grounds by big towns and highways. It has also

become difficult to find suitable dens where they can keep their cubs protected. As a result, fewer tigers are born and survive to adulthood.

Another **casualty** has been the tigers' food supply. As forests grow smaller, the number of small animals that tigers depend on for meat is also dwindling. Sometimes, this prompts tigers to emerge from the jungles to look for food within human settlements. And, that gets them into big trouble. Many are killed for attacking farm animals and people.

DON'T SIDE WITH THE WRONG TEAM	
Bad guys	Good guys
<p>Poachers Crooks who catch or kill wildlife where they are not supposed to.</p>	<p>Rangers People who patrol nature parks and protect wildlife from poachers.</p>
<p>Smugglers People who break the law by secretly transporting things across borders.</p>	<p>Customs officers Stationed at countries' borders, they check things that go in and out of the country and try to stop smugglers.</p>
<p>Traders People who buy illegal wildlife products from the smugglers – such as ivory, fancy foods or traditional medicines made from protected species – and then sell them to people who crave these items.</p>	<p>Conservation workers People who protect nature by working with the local people, investigating how the crooks work, and educating people that they should not buy illegal wildlife products.</p>

Poaching

There are laws protecting tigers and other threatened species. However, there are still crooks who disobey the laws to catch or kill these animals. These criminals are called poachers. Poachers kill tigers for their fur, bones, claws, and other body parts. Many countries have banned buying or selling these products. Yet, there are customers who still try to get them illegally. They are willing to pay a lot of money, too. This has tempted many poor villagers to take up **poaching**, even though they know they are breaking the law.

It is because of these multiple dangers that officials monitor tiger populations. They regularly count the number of tigers left in the wild with the help of camera traps. These are special cameras that

automatically shoot a picture if they sense movement. This is a great way to capture animals on film without causing too much disturbance. For the most recent count, camera traps were placed at more than 26,000 locations in different wildlife sanctuaries in India. Researchers then pored over the millions of pictures taken to identify individual tigers. Every tiger's stripe pattern is unique, just like our fingerprints. By studying the tigers' stripes, the researchers made sure that they were not counting the same tiger over and over again if it walked past the camera traps several times.

The results

There are now believed to be almost 3,000 wild Bengal tigers in the country, compared to 2,226 in 2014. It also means that India now has 70% of the world's tigers within its boundaries. The reasons for this growth are mainly due to the huge efforts taken by the Indian government and various conservation groups. The authorities introduced tougher laws. People were **barred** from entering certain forests, and villages were moved away to minimise contact between humans and tigers. Groups also began to educate people about the importance of protecting tigers. Local villagers were often recruited to guard the reserves against poachers. This was not only a good way to earn a living, but it also meant that fewer people took up poaching.

Experts say that there is still much to be done. Increasing the tiger population requires good planning and also better protection for its forests and reserves. Recently, there has been more cases of tigers coming into conflict with people, especially near the edges of protected reserves. India may need to expand the reserves to sustain the tiger population. While roads, railway tracks, power plants and waterways are good for the country's development, the government has to ensure that all these do not come at the expense of nature. Ullas Karanth, a conservationist biologist, told the *BBC*, "We have a long way to go, but it is doable if we get our act together. This is no time to be complacent."

— *By SHAMEEN IDICULLA.*

VOCAB BUILDER

ongoing (say "on-go-ing"; adjective) = continuing, still happening.

casualty (say "ka-zuel-tee"; noun) = loss.

poaching (say "po-ching"; verb) = catching animals without permission.

barred (say "bar'd"; verb) = stopped.

Activity

See what you'll find

Use this number code to colour in the picture:

1: light green. 2: dark green. 3: orange. 4: black. 5: yellow.

