

INDIA AND ITS WILDLIFE CONSERVATION EFFORTS**¹Sayashree Rabha, ²Devraj Singh Jodha**¹College of Veterinary Science, AAU, Khanapara, Assam²R R College of Veterinary and Animal Science, Deoli, Rajasthan*Corresponding author's email: shreedask3@gmail.comDOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19603660>

India is one of the world's most biodiverse countries, hosting about 7-8 % of all known species, including over 45,000 types of plants and 91,000 types of animals, despite covering a mere 2.4% of the Earth's land. The extraordinary richness of wildlife is due to the country's diverse geography and climate which in turn have paved way for different ecosystems ranging from the snow capped Himalayas to forests, grasslands, wetlands, deserts and coastal mangroves like the Sunderbans. India also has four of the world's 34 major biodiversity hotspots-the Himalayas, the Western Ghats, the Northeast region, and the Nicobar Islands, making it important for global conservation. India has over 1022 protected areas covering about 5.3 % of the country's total geographical area, 18 Biosphere Reserves, 107 National Parks, 573 wildlife Sanctuaries, 58 Tiger Reserves, 123 Conservation Reserves and 220 Community Reserves. However, this exceptional biodiversity faces constant threat due to rapid urbanization, industrialisation, pollution, deforestation and habitat fragmentation resulting in degradation of ecosystems, human-wildlife conflict and finally loss of wildlife. This has led the Government to take multiple initiatives for the conservation of wildlife in the country.

Wildlife conservation is the practice of protecting wild plant and animal species and their natural habitat. Numerous conservation projects have been implemented in our country to protect and preserve endangered species and their habitats through focus on scientific monitoring, anti-poaching measures, habitat protection, nurturing human-wildlife coexistence, reintroduction of species, community participation and awareness and many more. This article aims to

bring into light the major wildlife conservation projects in India and their outcomes along with few exceptional success stories of wildlife conservation.

Project Tiger

Launched in the year 1973 at Jim Corbett National Park, Project Tiger was the pioneer in conservation projects implemented in India and is managed by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) under Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. This project protects tigers and their habitats using a core-buffer strategy, where the core areas have legal status of a national park or a sanctuary and the buffer areas are a mix of forest and non-forest land. The success of Project Tiger is apparent from the recent assessment data that shows the tiger population has surged to about 3682 from a dwindling population of 1411 in 2006, making India home to nearly 75% of the world's wild tiger population.

Project Elephant

With a global Asian elephant population of over 60 %, India has initiated significant measures to protect and conserve these magnificent animals. Started in the year 1992, Project Elephant aims to strengthen elephant conservation and their migration corridors, thus minimizing habitat loss, poaching and human-elephant conflict. Initiatives like Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) Programme, Project RE-HAB and the Haathi Mere Saathi campaign have amplified groundbreaking approaches to the conservation increasing India's wild elephant population from 26,786 (2018 census) to 29,964 in 2022.

Project Lion

Initiated in the year 2020, Project Lion aims on conserving the Asiatic Lion found

exclusively in the Gir National Park, Gujarat by focusing on landscape ecology-based conservation, habitat restoration and securing additional areas for lions, community participation to mitigate human wildlife conflict, creating livelihood opportunities for local residents and disease management. Through rigorous conservation efforts, the Asiatic lion population has shown a consistent increase from fewer than 50 lions in 1900s to 674 lions in 2020. India's conservation initiatives, have led the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to reclassify Asiatic lion from "Critically Endangered" to 'Endangered' in 2008.

Project Rhino/ Indian Rhino Vision 2020

The alarming rate of population decline of the one horned rhino due to poaching for their horns and its illegal trafficking, habitat loss due to human encroachment and environmental degradation, low population density in fragmented habitats prompted the government to introduce Indian Rhino Vision 2020 in the year 2005 in a joint effort involving the Assam Forest Department, Bodoland Territorial Council, International Rhino Foundation (IRF), World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). IRV 2020 aimed to increase India's rhino population to 3,000 by the year 2020 and also included translocation of 22 young rhinos from Kaziranga National Park and Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary to Manas National Park. As a result of such conservation efforts, poaching has significantly decreased thereby increasing the rhino population in Assam to over 4000 in 2024 from Around 600 in the 1960s.

Project Snow Leopard

Launched in 2009, Project Snow Leopard aims to protect and conserve the critically endangered snow leopards and their fragile high-altitude ecosystems across Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. The major threats to snow leopards include poaching for its pelt and body parts,

decline in prey base, retaliatory killings by village communities, hydroelectric projects, mining and climate change. By promoting sustainable land use and involving local communities in conservation efforts, the project aims to preserve the snow leopard's habitat, reduce human-wildlife conflict and combat poaching while enhancing the protection of its prey species. In Himachal Pradesh, the estimated snow leopard population increased from 51 in 2021 to 83 in 2025.

Project Cheetah

In 2022, Project Cheetah was initiated by reintroducing eight cheetahs from Namibia to Kuno National Park in Madhya Pradesh., followed by twelve cheetahs from South Africa in 2023. The project marks the world's first intercontinental translocation of a large carnivore for conservation purposes and an exceptional initiative by the Government of India to reintroduce cheetahs into the wild after they were declared extinct in 1952. Project Cheetah aims to restore the ecological balance, promote biodiversity, and enhance wildlife tourism and conservation efforts in India. Once an extinct species, India now hosts a population of 30 cheetahs, with efforts underway to expand suitable habitats, ensuring long-term survival and ecological balance in India's grassland ecosystems. The project has also provided employment opportunities to over 350 'Cheetah Mitras' (Cheetah Friends) from surrounding villages to educate the public on cheetah behaviour and human-wildlife conflict mitigation, encouraging peaceful coexistence.

Project Hangul

Project Hangul was launched in 1970 to protect and conserve the critically endangered Kashmir stag (Hangul), the only Asiatic survivor of the red deer species, primarily found in Jammu and Kashmir's Dachigam National Park. The project aims to reduce anthropogenic pressure, protect migratory corridors, and increase hangul population by generating precise knowledge on corridor usage, identifying the prevalent threats and protecting the animal from these

threats by taking appropriate measures, like involving local communities, the local government and non-government organisations. Based on the last census carried out in 2021 by the Department of Wildlife Protection, J&K., the current population of the Kashmir stag has been recorded as 263 adult animals.

Project Crocodile

Launched in 1975 in Odisha with assistance from the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the Indian Government launched Project Crocodile (Crocodile Conservation Project) to protect the last remaining wild population of the Saltwater crocodile, Gharial, and Mugger by protecting their natural habitats, ensuring species survival through captive breeding by the “Grow and Release Program”.

Project Great Indian Bustard

This project was launched by the Government of Rajasthan in the year 2013, to protect the remaining population of the critically endangered Great Indian Bustard. The Project Great Indian Bustard involves a combination of both in-situ (on-site) and ex-situ (off-site) conservation strategies which includes establishing and expanding protected areas (Desert National Park in Rajasthan) where the birds are known to breed, reviving degraded grasslands and developing favorable environments for the bird’s survival, engaging local communities in conservation efforts to lower disturbances in breeding areas and foster sustainable land use practices. The project’s captive breeding program breeds the

birds in controlled environments and aim to release them into the wild.

Project Dolphin

Project Dolphin announced in 2020 and operationalised in 2021, aims to conserve India’s national aquatic animal, the Gangetic River Dolphin, enhance its population by curbing threats like net entanglement, pollution, vessel noise, and waterway construction. The project seeks to reduce river pollution, improve riverine habitats and initiate community based awareness programs. The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) along with state forest departments have carried out a recent nationwide survey for tracking the dolphin population in our country.

Conclusion

Despite successful conservation projects, wildlife conservation in India faces numerous challenges such as significant habitat fragmentation and loss due to urbanization, human-wildlife conflicts in buffer areas, poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking, climate change affecting species migration and breeding patterns, limited local awareness and community participation. In view of these recurring challenges, the way forward is to improve technology-based monitoring systems, boost community-led conservation models, fortify anti-poaching networks and legal frameworks, incorporate wildlife corridors in developmental projects, extend public awareness and eco-tourism initiatives for sustainable coexistence.

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