

Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project

The Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project is a project by the government of India to protect the remaining population of the Asiatic lion through relocation to other parts of the country via reintroduction.

This is because the Asiatic lions are only found in the [Gir National Park](#) in Gujarat and as such vulnerable to events like floods, droughts or epidemics and should such events come to pass then the lions may be rendered extinct altogether.

This article will give details about the Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project within the context of the IAS Exam

History of Asiatic Lion Conservation

The Asiatic lions, once found in West and Southern Asia, eventually were reduced to a single population in the Gir National Park. Before the Asiatic Lion Conservation Project, the Maharaja of Gwalior carried out a conservation project of his own.

Advised by Lord Curzon in 1905, he introduced African lion cubs in the wilds near Sheopur. But it turned out to be a mistake as the cubs, when fully grown, attacked livestock and even killed humans. This forced the Maharaja to track and hunt them all down.

It was in post-independence India that the idea of reintroduction for conservation took off. In 1956 the Indian Wildlife Board proposed that the Chakia forest in Uttar Pradesh be designated a second home. Two lionesses and one lion were transported Gir and after they were placed in Sakkarbaug zoo in Junagadh for a time, they were relocated to ChandraPrabha Sanctuary near Varanasi in 1957.

Although the lions thrived initially their population died out. The following theories were put forth to explain their unfortunate demise.

1. Insufficient ranging area
2. Lack of proper monitoring system
3. Restricted grazing movement
4. Human-Lion conflict
5. Inactivity due to the extended period of captivity at the Junagadh zoo.

Formation of the the Asiatic Lion Reintroduction Project

The Wildlife Institute of India (WII) in 1990 suggested the creation of a second wild population in order to protect the primary population of the Asiatic Lion species in the Gir National Park. To this end, several assessments were made regarding viable habitats based on ranging and availability of prey.

The data from the WII was used by the Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) in 1993 to prepare a report on viable sites that was presented to the state forest department of Gujarat

The sites were as follows:

- Kuno-Palpur Wildlife Sanctuary
- Sita Mata Wildlife Sanctuary
- Darrah - Jawahar Sagar Wildlife Sanctuary
- Kumbhalgarh Wildlife Sanctuary
- Barda Wildlife Sanctuary

It was decided that the Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary was the most suitable habitat for the reintroduction of Asiatic Lions. The other sites were rejected on account of being inadequate in prey, unstable terrain or too much likelihood of human interference.

Thus it was on March 10 2004, that the framework for the Asiatic Lion Reintroduction project was created. Through this framework, the Monitoring Committee was formed by the Government of India for a smooth implementation of the project.

The committee planned the implementation of the project in three phases:

- Phase 1 (1995-2000)
- Phase 2 (2000 - 2005)
- Phase 3 (2005-2015)

Meanwhile, the Madhya Pradesh state forest earmarked about 345 square kilometres of the Kuno-Palpur area as a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1981.

Current Status of the Project

It was in the middle of phase 2 in 2004 that the lion reintroduction project ran into considerable opposition from the State Government of Gujarat.

The Gujarat Government refused to part with its lion population citing that they were part of the cultural heritage of the state. Instead they proposed that the lions be reintroduced in other parts

of Gujarat such as the Barda Wildlife Sanctuary and Bhavnagar Amreli Forest instead of relocating some to Madhya Pradesh itself.

The continued opposition by the Gujarat government prompted Madhya Pradesh to consider procuring zoo-bred Asiatic Lions to be shifted to Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary.

The arguments put forth by the State of Gujarat was that Kuno sanctuary was ill-suited for the Asiatic lions on account of inadequate prey and the presence of South African Cheetahs reintroduced much earlier.

The dispute between the two states reached the Supreme Court of India who ruled in favour of Madhya Pradesh on 15 April 2013, rejecting the objections of Gujarat. The Supreme Court ruling caused much outrage in the state with protests in various parts of Gujarat being carried out.

The ruling was challenged by the state of Gujarat through many petitions filed by it. At the same time it refused to carry out the Supreme Court's directives in providing the pride of lions to Madhya Pradesh.

As of 2021, the project is still on hold with the Lions still remaining in Gujarat. Instead the Kuno-Palpur sanctuary will become India's first cheetah sanctuary.