

**RESEARCH ARTICLE****Gir National Park and Asiatic Lions: Steps Taken To Protect Them****Pratibha Singh**

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Received: 21st Nov. 2013, Revised: 28th Dec. 2013, Accepted: 3rd Jan. 2014**ABSTRACT**

In GIR one can touch the history of India before humanity itself. Many human beings come to GIR because it is the place where lions exist other than the Africa. Here evolution and migration of lion connected with climate changes. Lions are dweller of open country savannah, sparse subtropical dry deciduous scrub forests and dry thorny forests. Like other wild animals they migrant from outside the country. Entered from north western passes and spreader over north and western part of India from Sindh to Bengal and Ganges and Indus on the North to Narmada. Lions firstly appeared in Mitiyala forests in 1917.the census of lions takes place every five years. Population from census- lowest rate recorded in 1968 was 177 in numbers then 180, 205, 239, 284, 304 329 359 in year 1974, 1979, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2005 respectively. After that continuous growth was registered and maximum growth rate was noticed in between year 2005- 2010 from 359 to 411 means increment of 52 lions. The 2010 census said that Gir forest having 411 Asiatic lion which includes 77 cubs, 120 males, 185 lionesses and 29 lions whose sex could not be ascertained. The lion breeding program creates and maintains breeding centers. It deals with study of behavior of the Asiatic lions and practice of artificial insemination. One such center setup in the Sakkarbaug Zoo at the district headquarters of Junagarh. Till now this center successfully bred about 180 lions.

STEPS TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT TO PROTECT THEM

Efforts to Conserve the Asiatic lions was firstly done in year 1910. When nawab of Junagarh imposed a ban on hunting of lions within the boundaries of his provinces and the ban was continued till 1944. In 1960 and 1970s Gir forest was converted into national park and sanctuary. Presently KUNO PROJECT is being in process to reduce the overcrowding at Gir. Under this project government basically try to relocate the excess population of the lions in Gir. From 18 years, conservationists have been tried to move a pride of Gir lions to the kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh, but Gujarat straightly refused to do so. Finally on 15 april, after 8 years of litigation, supreme court of India agreed on translocation of lions. Than Gujarat government filled a review petition, even as angry locals protest the translocation. The Gujarat government said- Gir lions are the “pride of the state”, in court the lions were described as “family members who could not be parted with”. But most of the wildlife experts agree that while the state has done so well, the lions have outgrown the Gir forest, and a single epidemic or calamity could wipe out the entire population. That can be seen in Tanzania in year 1994 when 1000s of lions were killed by an epidemic of canine distemper. As a result Supreme Court rejected the appeal of Gujarat state and said-“the cardinal issue is not whether the Asian lion is a family member, but the preservation of an endangered species” and directing that the lions be moved within 6 months to Kuno National Park.

The government of the western state of Gujarat, where that Gir national park is situated, setup an Asiatic lion protection cell after 10 lions were found dead. Minister of state for environment and forests (Gujarat) mentioned about steps taken to conserve lions in the country- threatened species of wildlife are placed in the schedules of the wild life (protection) act, 1972, basically to provide highest degree of protection. Lions are included in the schedule I of the act, the wild life (protection) act 1972 has been amended from time to time and made more stringent against wild life related offences, the concept of greater Gir has been adopted and additional suitable habitats for lion are being

developed for the conservation of lion, the manpower and infrastructure have been strengthened for intensive protection and conservation of lions and habitats, modern information and communication technology has been introduced for the better protection of the Gir areas. On August 14 2013 Gujarat launches awareness program to protect Asiatic lions. For that forest department of Gujarat has launched a "Sinha rath" (lion chariot) from Gir in Junagarh to be taken across 130 villages to spread awareness about wildlife conservation.

GIR INTERPRETATION ZONE, DEVALIA

Basically Gir national park and sanctuary is not designated as area for tourist. But people come to visit their son to reduce the tourism hazard to the wild life and to promote nature education; this zone was established within the sanctuary. Within its chained fences, it covers all habitant types and wildlife of Gir with its feeding-cum-living cages for the carnivores and a double-gate entry system.

THE ASIATIC LION REINTRODUCTION PROJECT

It is an initiative of Indian government to provide protection to lions. The concept of reintroduction for conservation was proposed by Indian wildlife board. This population faces threats of natural disasters, epidemics and other anthropogenic factors. Under this project government took initiative to introduce Asiatic lions in different areas of country. First relocation was done at Chandraprabha in 1957 and made second population in the Chakia forest. Starting was done from Gir only, when one lion and two lionesses were found and placed them in Sakkarbuagh Zoo in Junagarh. The WII wildlife institute of India started studying about Asiatic lions and its habitat from 1986 and collected fundamental data about lions. In 1990, the WII proposed the creation of a second wild population of Asiatic lions to safeguard the species against potential calamities in Gir National park. In 1993 on PHVA population and habitat viability assessment one workshop was held. And by that a report was presented to the state forest department in Vadodara, Gujarat. As per request of state forest department to suggest some suitable sites for reintroduction and provide the basic ecology data. A number of teams were formed and focused on various aspects of the conservation biology of the Asiatic lion like habitat, monitoring, prey base requirements, population modeling, lion-human interactions, public education, veternity, reproductive, translocation, captive zoo animals and genetic aspects etc. The PHVA report strongly favored the scientific management of reintroduction of Asiatic Lions to another site:-

"The overwhelming consensus of the Workshop was that an alternative habitat for the Asiatic lion must be established with all possible speed, but without compromise of the accepted strategies and principles governing systematic and scientific reintroduction. This should be done simultaneously with strengthening effective protection and management of the Gir Forest and assuring the viability of the captive population and alternative genetic resources".

The monitoring committee was setup by government of India to make the framework of lion introduction project effective, which came as an effective implementation of the reintroduction at Kuno from 10 March 2010.

Central government has taken some steps in order to protect lions- the wildlife(protection) act 1972 has been enacted to deal with the issues of protection and conservation of wildlife in India, a network of protected areas has been established to conserve wildlife and their habitats including animals like Asiatic lions, financial and technical support from the ministry is being provided under the centrally sponsored scheme of "integrated development of wildlife habitats" to state/UT governments for the conservation and protection of wildlife including lions and its habitats, wildlife crime control bureau, with a network of five regional and three sub regional offices, has been set up to control poaching.

Gujarat government take ample of steps to protect them constitution of the Gujarat lion conservation society, restriction/regulation of hotels and resorts around Gir protected area, Eco development Gir Soil & Moisture Conservation (Tribal and Non-Tribal) - in this scheme government tried to plant trees of mangrove, coastal in the forest premises and did their best to upkeep the plantation areas. Long term objectives- protection conservation of natural resources through active involvement of the people, keep check on land degradation, deforestation and loss of diversity, restoration and conservation of ecology and environment and eco-development as well.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGETIONS

The above overall discussion is important to display the steps taken by government of India and government of Gujarat. They both tried their best to preserve and protect the life of pride of India- Asiatic lions. But there are some points must have to disclose and will be help in betterment of these habitants. Government of India should pay preferable attention towards these types of improvements. As Minister of state for environment and forests stated that they submitted a project proposal for the conservation of Asiatic lions in greater Gir region and demanding the amount to rs.262.36 cr. Planning commission approved the proposal but didn't sanction the amount and it will make project delay and ineffective. There is matter still pending in Supreme court related to moving of Asiatic lions to MP, that is somewhat related to political interference, so it will be better to keep these type of matters away from political influence and try to adjudicate as soon as possible just for the betterment and upliftment of wildlife. Like US we may setup "anti-hunters create litigation division" in respect to animal protection litigation functions. Basically the hunting of lions is done for monetary benefits as lions bones are a source of huge income because it having "medicinal" properties and this trade is booming. So the first duty to control and make them totally ban, bring them under offences and charge huge penalty and punishment for that as well. First duty is of the human beings it can be visualize by the "global march" held in London 15th March 2014 across 60 cities that was only in the favor of protection of lions. This type of activities strengthens approaches that have to come into existence for the protection of wildlife.