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Kaimur Tiger Reserve – Bihar's Bid and What It Tells Us About Project Tiger's Next Frontier

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ENVIRONMENT

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WHY IN NEWS

The Bihar government approved a proposal to notify the Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary as a Tiger Reserve — which would be Bihar's first and India's 54th tiger reserve, pending NTCA clearance. The Kaimur Plateau's tiger population has been growing and surveys have confirmed a viable breeding population that warrants formal protection under Project Tiger.

WHAT IS THE KAIMUR WILDLIFE SANCTUARY?

Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the **Kaimur and Rohtas districts** of Bihar, spread across the **Kaimur Plateau and Rohtas Plateau** — an extension of the Vindhyan hill range. It is Bihar's largest wildlife sanctuary, covering approximately 1,342 sq km.

Ecological character:

Landscape: Mixed dry deciduous forests; plateau terrain with steep escarpments; Son River draining the northern edge

Vegetation: Dry deciduous scrub, sal patches, bamboo, mixed thorn forest

Wildlife: Tigers (confirmed resident breeding population), leopards, wolves (Indian), hyenas, sloth bears, sambar, chital, nilgai, Indian pangolin, raptors

Water bodies: Numerous seasonal streams; Son River in the north; Karmanasa River to the east (UP border)

Connection to the Central Indian tiger landscape: Kaimur sits at the northeastern edge of India's Central Indian Tiger Conservation Landscape — one of the three global tiger strongholds alongside the Terai Arc and Sundarbans. It connects with:

Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve (Madhya Pradesh) to the south/southwest

Bandhavgarh and Panna Tiger Reserves (MP) further west

Son Gharial Sanctuary (MP) forming a river corridor

Proposed Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary (Bihar) corridor

This connectivity is crucial for gene flow between Bihar's isolated tiger population and the larger Central Indian tiger metapopulation.

PROJECT TIGER — ARCHITECTURE AND GOVERNANCE

Project Tiger was launched on **April 1, 1973** under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi — one of India’s most successful wildlife conservation programmes. From 9 tiger reserves in 1973 and an estimated 1,827 tigers, India has grown to 53 tiger reserves (as of 2023) and a population of **3,167 tigers** (2022 census — the most recent All India Tiger Estimation).

National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA):

Established: 2005 (through Wildlife Protection Amendment Act 2006; formally operational 2006)

Legal basis: Chapter IVB, Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (as amended)

Composition: Chaired by the Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change; includes the MoEF Secretary, DGF&SS, and state representatives

Functions: Approve tiger reserve creation; set management standards (Core/Buffer zone); monitor tiger census; disburse Project Tiger funds; handle relocation of villages from core zones

Core Zone vs. Buffer Zone:

A tiger reserve under the NTCA framework has two mandatory components:

Core Zone (Critical Tiger Habitat): Strictly protected; no human habitation or activity except wildlife-related; usually includes the forest department’s existing Protected Area

Buffer Zone: Multiple use zone; local communities can continue traditional uses; acts as a transition between core and the surrounding landscape

For Kaimur, the core would likely be the existing sanctuary area; the buffer would extend into surrounding revenue forests and community lands.

THE TIGER CENSUS AND KAIMUR’S POPULATION

The **All India Tiger Estimation (AITE) 2022** — conducted using camera trap networks and occupancy modelling — recorded **3,167 tigers** across India, making it the world’s largest tiger population. India hosts approximately **75% of the world’s wild tiger population**.

State-wise tiger distribution (2022):

State	Tigers	Key Reserves
Madhya Pradesh	785	Kanha, Bandhavgarh, Pench, Satpura, Panna
Karnataka	563	Nagarhole, Bandipur, BRT, Dandeli
Uttarakhand	560	Corbett, Rajaji
Maharashtra	444	Tadoba, Melghat, Nawegaon
Bihar	54	No dedicated reserve yet (Kaimur landscape)

Bihar’s 54 tigers, confirmed by camera traps and pugmark surveys, are spread primarily across the Kaimur landscape. Without a tiger reserve, this population lacks the institutional protection of dedicated funding, NTCA oversight, and core zone protection.

What a Tiger Reserve designation brings:

Access to **Project Tiger** central funding (100% centrally sponsored scheme)

Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) — dedicated anti-poaching squads

Village relocation schemes for villages inside the core zone (voluntary; Rs 15 lakh per family)

NTCA monitoring and mandatory annual reporting

Eco-tourism framework (buffer zone; can generate local livelihoods)

INDIA’S TIGER RECOVERY — A CONSERVATION SUCCESS

India’s tiger story is one of the rare genuine conservation successes globally:

1973 baseline: ~1,827 tigers (estimated); 9 reserves; after decades of hunting and habitat loss

2022 census: 3,167 tigers; 53 reserves; confirmed breeding populations in corridors outside reserves

Key drivers of recovery:

Zero poaching tolerance: NTCA and Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) operations; INTERPOL Project Predator

Habitat expansion: New reserves added; corridor protection (Wildlife Corridors policy)

Community participation: Buffer zone eco-tourism (Panna, Satpura, Kanha — successful); NTCA Community Conservation Zones

Scientific management: Camera trap monitoring; prey base surveys (tigers follow prey); water hole creation

Village relocation: Voluntary relocation of villages from core zones with compensation (over 3,000 families relocated from tiger core zones since 1973)

The remaining challenges:

Human-tiger conflict: As tiger populations grow, dispersal into human-dominated areas causes conflict; compensation for livestock kills is inadequate

Corridor connectivity: Tiger movement between reserves is blocked by roads (NH44 through Pench), railways, canals, and agriculture; wildlife crossing structures are needed

Prey depletion outside reserves: Hunting pressure on deer and wild pig reduces prey availability in forests outside protected areas

Climate change: Changed monsoon patterns affecting water availability in critical tiger habitats (Sundarbans sea-level rise)

THE SUNDARBANS CONTRAST: THREATS TO TIGER HABITATS

While Kaimur represents a growth opportunity for India's tiger conservation, the **Sundarbans** — India's only mangrove tiger reserve — faces existential threats:

Sea level rise: Bangladesh and West Bengal Sundarbans are experiencing 3–8 mm of sea level rise per year; some islands have already submerged

Cyclone frequency: Cyclones Amphan (2020), Yaas (2021), Remal (2024) damaged core forest areas

Tiger-human conflict: Sundarbans tigers regularly enter human settlements; honey collectors and fishermen are attacked; India records 80–100+ tiger attacks in Sundarbans annually

Shrinking habitat: Sundarbans TBCA (Tiger Reserve) shrunk by ~7% in effective area over two decades due to salinity intrusion and submergence

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Kaimur WLS (Bihar; Kaimur + Rohtas; Kaimur Plateau; Bihar's first TR if notified; India's 54th); NTCA (National Tiger Conservation Authority; est. 2006; under WPA 1972 as amended; chaired by MoEFCC minister); Project Tiger (1973; PM Indira Gandhi; 9 original reserves); AITE 2022 (3,167 tigers; India hosts 75% world tiger population; MP largest tiger state 785); Core/Buffer zone distinction; STPF (Special Tiger Protection Force); Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB).

Mains GS-3: Project Tiger's success story — governance architecture and drivers of recovery | Tiger reserve notification process — core/buffer zoning, village relocation, NTCA role | Challenges in tiger conservation: corridor loss, human-wildlife conflict, climate impact | Sundarbans vulnerability and sea-level rise as an ecological threat.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

KAIMUR TIGER RESERVE (PROPOSED):

State: Bihar; Districts: Kaimur and Rohtas

Area: Approx. 1,342 sq km (existing sanctuary area); buffer to be added

Plateau: Kaimur Plateau + Rohtas Plateau (Vindhyan range; easternmost extension)

Tigers (2022 AITE): ~54 in Bihar (primarily Kaimur landscape)

Significance: Bihar's first tiger reserve; India's 54th (if notified)

Connected landscape: Central Indian Tiger Landscape (Sanjay-Dubri, Bandhavgarh, Panna)

PROJECT TIGER — KEY DATA:

Launched: April 1, 1973; PM Indira Gandhi

Original reserves: 9 (1973); Current: 53 (2023)

Legal basis: Chapter IVB, Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (as amended 2006)

Funding: 100% Centrally Sponsored Scheme (CSS) by Central Government

NTCA: National Tiger Conservation Authority; established 2006; chaired by MoEFCC minister

All India Tiger Estimation (AITE): Conducted every 4 years using camera traps + occupancy modelling

AITE 2022 KEY FINDINGS:

Total tigers: 3,167 (world's largest single-country tiger population)

India's share of global tiger population: ~75%

Top states: MP (785), Karnataka (563), Uttarakhand (560), Maharashtra (444)

Growth: 6.1% annual increase since 2018 (2,461 tigers in 2018 → 3,167 in 2022)

INDIA'S TIGER RESERVES (SELECTED):

First: Corbett Tiger Reserve (Uttarakhand; 1973; also first national park of India — 1936)

Largest: Nagarjunasagar-Srisaillam (Telangana/AP); ~3,728 sq km core+buffer

Smallest: Bor TR (Maharashtra; 138 sq km)

Sundarbans TR: Only mangrove tiger habitat; West Bengal; UNESCO World Heritage Site; 2,585 sq km

Panna TR: Successful reintroduction story (tigers locally extinct 2009; reintroduced; now 70+ tigers)

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

WPA 1972 (Wildlife Protection Act): Schedules I–VI; Schedule I = highest protection (includes tiger, lion, rhino, elephant); Schedule IV = birds; amended multiple times (1991, 2002, 2006, 2022)

WCCB (Wildlife Crime Control Bureau): Under MoEFCC; established 2007; coordinates anti-poaching; India's CITES management authority

Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC) Compensation: Under NTCA guidelines; states required to pay compensation for crop damage, livestock kills, and human deaths; rates vary by state

Vasundhara programme: NTCA initiative to empower village eco-development committees in buffer zones

Sources: NTCA, MoEFCC, PIB, GKToday

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