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Project Tiger at 53 – Kaimur's Nomination and the Next Chapter in India's Tiger Conservation Story

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MAINS RELEVANCE: **GS Paper 3**



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India has 3,167 tigers in 53 reserves. Is the Project Tiger model sustainable as populations grow and human-wildlife conflict intensifies?"

WHY IN NEWS

Bihar approved a proposal to notify Kaimur Wildlife Sanctuary as a tiger reserve — Bihar's first and potentially India's 54th — pending NTCA clearance. The proposal comes at a moment when India's tiger conservation success is generating new challenges: population growth is pushing tigers into human-dominated landscapes, and existing reserves face corridor fragmentation, climate stress, and resource competition.

PROJECT TIGER AT 53: THE NUMBERS

When Project Tiger was launched on April 1, 1973 — under Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, with Jim Corbett National Park as the founding reserve — it was an emergency conservation measure for a species on the brink. India's tiger population was estimated at fewer than 2,000. Nine reserves were designated and notified.

Five decades later, the numbers are transformed:

3,167 tigers (2022 All India Tiger Estimation)

53 tiger reserves covering approximately 75,796 sq km

India hosts approximately **75% of the world's remaining wild tigers**

This is a genuine conservation success — one of the few examples where a mega-fauna species in a densely populated developing country has been not just stabilised but grown. The institutional architecture that produced this success deserves examination.

THE GOVERNANCE ARCHITECTURE BEHIND THE SUCCESS

Three layers of protection underpin India's tiger conservation:

1. Protected Area (PA) designation: Tiger reserves consist of a Core Zone (Critical Tiger Habitat, CTH) — declared under Section 38V of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (as amended 2006) — where no human activity is permitted, and a Buffer Zone where controlled activity is allowed. The PA designation creates a legal no-go zone for extractive industry, agriculture, and settlement.

2. NTCA oversight: Unlike forest departments, which have competing mandates (timber production, forest revenue, wildlife), the National Tiger Conservation Authority has a singular mandate: tiger conservation. NTCA funds Project Tiger reserves entirely through central grants (100% CSS), removing state budget constraints from reserve management. NTCA also mandates annual monitoring (camera traps, pugmark surveys) and submits reports to Parliament.

3. Anti-poaching infrastructure: Each tiger reserve maintains a Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) — a dedicated anti-poaching unit with better training, equipment, and pay than general forest guards. The WCCB (Wildlife Crime Control Bureau) coordinates intelligence across state boundaries and links with INTERPOL's Project Predator.

The village relocation achievement: Over 3,000 families have been relocated from core zones since 1973 — a socially complex undertaking. Voluntary relocation with compensation (currently Rs 15 lakh per family + land allocation) has been more effective than forced eviction. Reserves that have completed core zone relocation (Kanha, Panna, Corbett) show higher tiger densities than those that haven't.

WHY KAIMUR MATTERS — AND WHY IT'S COMPLICATED

The conservation case for Kaimur as a reserve is strong:

Bihar's 54 tigers exist in the Kaimur-Rohtas landscape without the institutional protection of a tiger reserve designation. They receive no STPF, no dedicated NTCA funding, no mandated monitoring, and no management plan that prioritises tiger conservation over competing land uses. Any expansion of infrastructure — roads, mining, irrigation projects — in the Kaimur landscape proceeds without the Environmental Impact Assessment scrutiny that a protected area would trigger.

The connectivity argument is equally compelling. Kaimur connects to the Central Indian tiger metapopulation — the tiger landscape spanning MP, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand. Kaimur's tigers are genetically linked to this broader population through dispersal corridors along the Son River and Rohtas plateau forests. Formal protection prevents corridor fragmentation.

The complications are real:

Kaimur is not pristine wilderness. The plateau has significant human habitation — villages, agriculture, quarrying operations, and road networks. The NTCA’s core/buffer zoning process will need to negotiate:

Which villages sit within the proposed core (requiring relocation/compensation)

How to accommodate continued quarrying in buffer areas

How to manage conflict between tiger presence and agricultural activity (crop raiding by deer prey, tiger livestock depredation)

Interstate coordination: Kaimur’s ecosystem extends into Uttar Pradesh (Chandauli, Mirzapur) and Madhya Pradesh — requiring cross-state conservation planning

HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT: THE SUCCESS PROBLEM

India’s tiger population growth is generating a new challenge: **human-tiger conflict**. As reserves fill to ecological carrying capacity, sub-adult tigers — typically males dispersing to establish new territories — move into human-dominated landscapes outside reserve boundaries.

Data on conflict:

India records approximately **250–300 big cat attacks** on humans and livestock annually (tigers + leopards combined; tigers account for 50–80 annually)

Sundarbans records 80–100 tiger attacks on humans each year — fishermen, honey collectors, and wood cutters entering the reserve

Maharashtra’s Vidarbha region (outside Tadoba, Melghat, Nawegaon reserves) has seen a significant rise in tiger-human conflict as tiger numbers grew from 190 (2018) to 444 (2022)

The compensation gap: State governments are mandated to compensate victims of wildlife attacks. But compensation processes are slow (bureaucratic delays), often inadequate (livestock compensation at market rate minus depreciation; human death compensation Rs 5–10 lakh in most states), and perceived as unfair by communities that bear the cost of hosting tigers for the benefit of national and global conservation goals.

The corridor imperative: Properly functioning wildlife corridors — connecting Kaimur to Sanjay-Dubri, or Corbett to Rajaji, or Bandipur to Nagarhole — allow dispersing tigers to move between reserves without traversing densely populated areas. India’s 2022 Wildlife Corridors policy identified 32 critical corridors; implementation remains partial.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND TIGER HABITATS

Climate projections for India’s tiger habitats raise long-term concerns:

Sundarbans: Sea level rise projections (3–8 mm/year) threaten to submerge significant portions of Sundarbans by 2050. Mangrove species can migrate inland, but only if inland areas aren't agriculturally developed — a condition increasingly under threat.

Central India: Changing monsoon patterns (more intense but shorter rainy seasons) affect prey population dynamics. Reduced ground water recharge could reduce water holes critical for tigers in summer.

Western Ghats: The Nilgiris-Brahmagiri landscape (Nagarhole, Bandipur, Mudumalai, Anamalai, Periyar) is projected to see temperature increases of 1.5–2°C by 2050 — potentially shifting the optimal habitat range of tigers southward.

A **climate-adaptive conservation approach** — which India's tiger conservation framework has not yet fully articulated — would model future habitat suitability shifts and plan reserve network expansion accordingly, rather than simply protecting current range.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims: Kaimur WLS (Bihar; Kaimur + Rohtas; Kaimur Plateau; India's 54th TR if notified); Project Tiger (1973; Corbett first; 53 reserves; NTCA; WPA 1972 as amended); AITE 2022 (3,167 tigers; India 75% world population; MP 785 highest); CTH (Critical Tiger Habitat; Section 38V WPA); STPF (Special Tiger Protection Force; anti-poaching); WCCB (Wildlife Crime Control Bureau; MoEFCC; 2007); Village relocation (Rs 15 lakh/family; voluntary; 3,000+ families relocated).

Mains GS-3: Project Tiger governance: institutional architecture of NTCA, core/buffer zoning, and anti-poaching | Human-wildlife conflict as a consequence of tiger conservation success — compensation, corridors, and community costs | Climate change and tiger habitat — Sundarbans vulnerability and adaptive conservation | Wildlife corridors policy: implementation and bottlenecks.

★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

PROJECT TIGER — COMPREHENSIVE DATA:

Launch: April 1, 1973; PM Indira Gandhi; 9 founding reserves

Legal basis: Chapter IVB, Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (inserted by 2006 amendment)

Current reserves: 53 (2023); Kaimur would be 54th if notified

NTCA: Statutory body; chaired by Union MoEFCC Minister; funding: 100% CSS

AITE 2022: 3,167 tigers; 6.1% annual growth since 2018 (2,461 tigers in 2018)

India's share of world tigers: ~75%

TIGER RESERVE ZONE FRAMEWORK:

Core Zone (CTH): Critical Tiger Habitat; Section 38V WPA; strictly protected; no human activity

Buffer Zone: Multiple-use; traditional forest rights may continue; eco-tourism permitted

Eco-Sensitive Zone (ESZ): Surrounds the buffer; no new industry; regulated development

KEY TIGER RESERVES:

Corbett (Uttarakhand): India's first TR (1973); also India's first NP (1936 as Hailey NP); ~520 sq km core

Kanha (MP): Highest tiger density; barasingha (swamp deer) recovery success; ~917 sq km core

Sundarbans (WB): Only mangrove TR; UNESCO WHSite; ~1,699 sq km core; sea-level rise threat

Panna (MP): Local extinction 2009 → reintroduction success → 70+ tigers today

Sariska (Rajasthan): Local extinction 2004 → tigers translocated from Ranthambhore; now 25+ tigers

HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT DATA:

National compensation scheme: Under state jurisdiction; ranges Rs 5–10 lakh for human death; livestock at market rate

Sundarbans attacks: 80–100 tiger attacks on humans/year

Maharashtra dispersal: Vidarbha region outside reserves — growing conflict as population grew

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

CITES Appendix I: Tigers are listed on CITES Appendix I (strictest trade ban); trade in tiger parts is prohibited globally

Tiger range countries: 13 globally (India, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, China, Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam); India has the largest population

Tx2 target: Global goal to double wild tiger numbers by 2022 (from 3,200 in 2010); India achieved this target; global population ~5,500 (2022 estimate)

Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act 2022: Latest amendment; introduced provisions for species recovery programmes, invasive species management, and e-permits

Sources: NTCA, MoEFCC, The Hindu, PIB

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