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Saudi Arabia Joins International Big Cat Alliance as 26th Member

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WHY IN NEWS:

On May 22, 2026, **Saudi Arabia formally joined the India-led International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) as its 26th member country**. The alliance now spans 26 member states with 5 additional observer nations awaiting ratification. The accession was announced in the run-up to the IBCA Summit 2026 preparations being coordinated from the alliance's New Delhi headquarters. Saudi Arabia's entry extends the IBCA footprint into West Asia and the Gulf — a geography hitherto absent from the platform — and aligns the Kingdom's Vision 2030 wildlife agenda with India's flagship multilateral conservation initiative.

ABOUT THE INTERNATIONAL BIG CAT ALLIANCE (IBCA)

The International Big Cat Alliance is a **treaty-based inter-governmental international organisation** founded on the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in conservation, with its **headquarters in New Delhi**. It is the second major multilateral platform incubated by India after the International Solar Alliance (ISA).

Founding Timeline

DATE	MILESTONE
April 9, 2023	Launched by PM Narendra Modi at the <i>Commemorating 50 Years of Project Tiger</i> event at Mysuru, Karnataka
February 29, 2024	Union Cabinet approved formal establishment of IBCA as an inter-governmental body headquartered in India
January 23, 2025	IBCA became a treaty-based inter-governmental international organisation after the 5th instrument of ratification
May 22, 2026	Saudi Arabia joins as 26th member country

Founding Ratifiers (5 Nations)

The treaty came into force after five founding ratifications:

- 1 **India** (host and seed funder)
- 2 **Nicaragua**

- 3 Eswatini
- 4 Somalia
- 5 Liberia

Seed Funding

India has committed a **₹150 crore seed fund** for IBCA covering the five-year period **2023–2028**, alongside member contributions, to anchor operations until self-sustaining financing mechanisms mature.

THE SEVEN BIG CATS UNDER IBCA

The IBCA covers seven species of large felids — five of which are native to India and two (jaguar and puma) confined to the Americas.

BIG CAT	SCIENTIFIC NAME	IUCN RED LIST	NATIVE TO INDIA
Tiger	<i>Panthera tigris</i>	Endangered	Yes
Lion	<i>Panthera leo</i>	Vulnerable	Yes (Asiatic Lion)
Leopard	<i>Panthera pardus</i>	Vulnerable	Yes
Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Vulnerable	Yes
Cheetah	<i>Acinonyx jubatus</i>	Vulnerable	Reintroduced (2022)
Jaguar	<i>Panthera onca</i>	Near Threatened	No
Puma	<i>Puma concolor</i>	Least Concern	No

INDIA'S FLAGSHIP BIG CAT CONSERVATION PROJECTS

India's institutional architecture for big cat conservation is among the most developed in the world and forms the operational template for IBCA.

Project Tiger (1973)

- **Launched:** April 1, 1973, from **Jim Corbett National Park**, Uttarakhand, under PM Indira Gandhi
- **Implementing body:** **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** — a statutory body under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (amended 2006)**
- **Tiger Reserves:** 58 (as of 2025) covering tiger landscapes across 18 states
- **Tiger population:** **3,682** (All-India Tiger Estimation 2022, NTCA)

- **Global share:** India hosts approximately **70%** of the world's wild tiger population

Project Lion (2020)

- Focuses on conserving the **Asiatic Lion** (*Panthera leo persica*) — the only wild lion population outside Africa
- Confined entirely to **Gir National Park** and surrounding landscapes in **Gujarat**
- Population: **891** (16th Asiatic Lion Census 2025, conducted May 12-13, 2025) — up 32.2% from 674 (2020)

Project Cheetah (2022)

- **Site:** Kuno National Park, Sheopur district, Madhya Pradesh
- **First translocation:** 8 cheetahs from **Namibia** on September 17, 2022 (PM Modi's birthday)
- **Second batch:** 12 cheetahs from **South Africa** in February 2023
- World's first inter-continental large carnivore translocation project

Project Snow Leopard (2009)

- Landscape-level conservation across **Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh**
- Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAI) framework operational since 2019

SAUDI ARABIA'S ROLE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Saudi Arabia's entry is geopolitically and ecologically substantive.

The Arabian Leopard

- **Species:** *Panthera pardus nimr* — a subspecies of leopard
- **IUCN status:** **Critically Endangered**
- **Estimated wild population:** fewer than 200 individuals across its range
- Saudi Arabia is undertaking captive-breeding and habitat-restoration through the **Royal Commission for AlUla**

Royal Reserves and Vision 2030

- Saudi Arabia operates a **system of six Royal Reserves** covering roughly 7% of national territory
- The **National Centre for Wildlife** is the lead conservation agency
- Wildlife protection is integrated into **Kingdom Vision 2030** under the Saudi Green Initiative

Diplomatic Significance

DIMENSION	IMPACT
Geographic reach	First Gulf/West Asian member — extends IBCA into MENA biogeography
Bilateral	Strengthens India–Saudi Arabia Strategic Partnership Council (2019) on non-traditional security
Financing	Sovereign wealth ecosystem opens potential conservation funding routes
Soft power	Reinforces India’s status as a convenor of biodiversity multilateralism

IBCA IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The IBCA is being positioned as a biodiversity counterpart to the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** — another India-incubated treaty body.

FEATURE	ISA	IBCA
Launched	November 30, 2015 (COP-21 Paris, India + France)	April 9, 2023 (Mysuru, India)
Treaty status	2017	January 23, 2025
Members	120+	26 + 5 observers
Headquarters	Gurugram, India	New Delhi, India
Theme	Solar energy deployment	Big cat conservation

FUNDING MECHANISMS

IBCA financing combines:

- **India’s seed contribution** of ₹150 crore (2023–28)
- **Annual member contributions** scaled to capacity
- **Concessional bilateral assistance** from partners such as Germany’s KfW
- **Multilateral conservation finance** from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and World Bank
- **Public–private partnerships** for habitat work in member states

CONSERVATION CHALLENGES FOR BIG CATS

Despite institutional progress, the seven IBCA species face severe pressures:

- **Habitat fragmentation** from linear infrastructure (highways, railways, transmission lines) and agricultural expansion
- **Human–wildlife conflict** — India records significant annual mortality from tiger and leopard attacks, with retaliatory killings in return
- **Poaching and illegal wildlife trade** — bones, skins, and body parts feed organised transnational networks
- **Climate change** — snow leopard habitat is shrinking with treeline shift; prey-base disruption affects all montane cats
- **Disease** — outbreaks such as canine distemper virus (CDV) threaten small isolated populations

CRITIQUE AND OPEN QUESTIONS

- Conservation outcomes depend on **on-ground habitat cooperation**, not summit declarations alone
- Risk of **duplication** with existing frameworks: CITES (1973), Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), Convention on Migratory Species (1979)
- **Sustained financing** beyond India's seed grant remains uncertain
- Need for **science-led monitoring protocols** harmonised across 26 members with very different baseline capacities

UPSC RELEVANCE

- **GS Paper 2** — International Relations: India-led multilateral institutions, soft power, biodiversity diplomacy, India–Saudi Arabia relations
- **GS Paper 3** — Environment: Conservation of species, IUCN Red List categories, protected area network, project-based conservation, climate-biodiversity linkages
- **Prelims** — IBCA founding date and members, 7 big cats and IUCN status, NTCA, Project Tiger/Lion/Cheetah/Snow Leopard, Arabian leopard

FACTS CORNER

IBCA HQ: New Delhi

Launched: April 9, 2023 by PM Modi at Mysuru, Karnataka

Treaty status acquired: January 23, 2025

Founding ratifiers (5): India, Nicaragua, Eswatini, Somalia, Liberia

Membership: 26 members + 5 observers (post Saudi Arabia accession, May 22, 2026)

Seven big cats covered: Tiger, Lion, Leopard, Snow Leopard, Cheetah, Jaguar, Puma

Native to India (5): Tiger, Lion, Leopard, Snow Leopard, Cheetah (reintroduced)

India's seed funding: ₹150 crore (2023–2028)

India's tiger population: 3,682 (NTCA, All-India Tiger Estimation 2022)

Project Tiger: Launched April 1, 1973 at Jim Corbett NP; NTCA is statutory under WLPA 1972

Project Cheetah: Launched 2022, Kuno NP, MP — translocations from Namibia (Sept 17, 2022) and South Africa (Feb 2023)

Saudi Arabia hosts: Arabian leopard (*Panthera pardus nimr*) — IUCN Critically Endangered, fewer than 200 individuals

Sources: [PIB](#), [NTCA](#), [MoEFCC](#)

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