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State of India's Environment 2026 — Tiger Success Now Strains Habitat

5 June 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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State of India's Environment 2026 — Tiger Success Now Strains Habitat

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WHY IN NEWS

The **Centre for Science and Environment (CSE)**, through its journal **Down To Earth**, released the **State of India's Environment 2026** report around World Environment Day. Its most striking finding: **tiger deaths from territorial infighting have nearly doubled over 15 years** in flagship reserves such as **Kanha** and **Ranthambore** — a paradox in which conservation success has saturated reserves, pushing tigers into conflict with one another and with human settlements.

THE CORE FINDING: SUCCESS THAT STRAINS THE SYSTEM

India's tiger population recovery — from a low of **1,411 tigers in 2006** to **3,682 tigers in 2022** (latest "Status of Tigers" estimate) — is one of the world's great conservation success stories. But the State of India's Environment 2026 report argues that the recovery has run into an **ecological ceiling**: many reserves are now at or beyond carrying capacity.

When reserves saturate, tigers compete violently for shrinking territory. Deaths from **intra-species territorial fighting** have roughly doubled in 15 years. The report frames this as a shift in the conservation challenge — **from raising numbers to managing landscapes**.

INDICATOR	DETAIL
Tiger population 2006	1,411
Tiger population 2022	3,682
Reserves cited for infighting	Kanha, Ranthambore
Infighting deaths trend	Nearly doubled in 15 years
Tiger range overlapping human habitation	~40% of tiger territory

THE LANTANA CRISIS

A second major finding concerns **Lantana camara**, an **invasive alien shrub** introduced to India in the **early 19th century** as an ornamental plant. The report estimates Lantana now covers nearly **half of India's forests and scrublands**.

Lantana:

- Forms dense thickets that **suppress native grasses and undergrowth**, degrading the **grassland habitat** that prey species (deer, antelope) depend on
- Forces tigers to shift hunting and movement into Lantana-choked terrain
- Is extremely difficult and expensive to eradicate once established

This connects the tiger crisis to a wider truth: **invasive species are a leading driver of biodiversity loss** worldwide, recognised by the Convention on Biological Diversity and the IPBES (Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services).

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK BEHIND TIGER CONSERVATION

Project Tiger (1973)

Launched in **1973** under the Ministry of Environment, **Project Tiger** is India's flagship species-conservation programme. It began with **9 tiger reserves** and has expanded to **57+ reserves** today.

National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)

The NTCA is a **statutory body** constituted under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** (via the **2006 amendment**). It is chaired by the **Union Environment Minister** and is responsible for:

- Approving tiger reserve management plans
- Laying down conservation standards
- Coordinating the **All India Tiger Estimation** (every 4 years)

Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972

The tiger is listed in **Schedule I** of the WPA — the highest level of protection. The Act was significantly amended in **2022** to streamline schedules and align with the **CITES** (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species) framework.

BODY / LAW	DETAIL
Project Tiger	Launched 1973; 57+ reserves today
NTCA	Statutory body under WPA 1972 (2006 amendment)
NTCA chair	Union Environment Minister
Tiger protection status	Schedule I, WPA 1972
IUCN Red List (tiger)	Endangered
Tiger estimation cycle	Every 4 years (All India Tiger Estimation)

WHY THIS MATTERS: FROM NUMBERS TO LANDSCAPES

The report's central policy message is that India's conservation model must mature:

- **Corridor management** — protecting forest corridors that connect reserves, so dispersing tigers have somewhere to go rather than dying in fights or straying into villages
- **Invasive-species removal** — systematic Lantana eradication and grassland restoration
- **Human-wildlife conflict mitigation** — compensation, early-warning systems, and co-existence frameworks for the ~60 million people living near tiger landscapes
- **Beyond the flagship** — using the tiger as an “umbrella species” whose protection conserves entire ecosystems

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- **Publisher:** Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) / Down To Earth
- **Tiger population:** 1,411 (2006) → 3,682 (2022)
- **Invasive shrub:** Lantana camara — ~50% of forest/scrubland cover; introduced 19th century
- **Project Tiger:** launched 1973
- **NTCA:** statutory body under WPA 1972 (2006 amendment); chaired by Environment Minister
- **Tiger:** Schedule I (WPA 1972); IUCN — Endangered

Mains Angles

- 1 **GS3 — Conservation Policy:** “India has won the battle for tiger numbers but not the war for tiger habitat.” Critically examine in light of reserve saturation and habitat fragmentation.
- 2 **GS3 — Invasive Species:** Discuss the ecological and economic costs of invasive alien species like Lantana camara, and evaluate India’s response.
- 3 **GS3 — Human-Wildlife Conflict:** Suggest a rights-based, landscape-level framework to reduce human-wildlife conflict around tiger reserves.

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Report	State of India’s Environment 2026
Publisher	Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) / Down To Earth
Key finding	Tiger infighting deaths nearly doubled in 15 years
Reserves cited	Kanha, Ranthambore
Invasive species	Lantana camara (~50% forest cover; introduced 19th c.)
Tiger population 2006	1,411
Tiger population 2022	3,682
Project Tiger launched	1973
Tiger reserves today	57+
NTCA basis	Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 (2006 amendment)
NTCA chair	Union Environment Minister
Tiger WPA status	Schedule I
Tiger IUCN status	Endangered

Sources: *Down To Earth, The Hindu, NTCA*

Source: State of India's Environment 2026 — Tiger Success Now Strains Habitat — Ujjiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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