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# State of India's Environment 2026: Tigers, Lantana and a Conservation Warning

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ENVIRONMENT

GS3

CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator

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# State of India's Environment 2026: Tigers, Lantana and a Conservation Warning

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✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources **HOW**

## WHY IN NEWS

The **State of India's Environment (SOE) 2026** report, the annual flagship of the **Centre for Science and Environment (CSE)** and **Down To Earth**, has highlighted how the invasive weed **Lantana camara** is altering tiger habitat across India, pushing tigers into thickets, changing their behaviour and raising human-wildlife conflict. The report's central warning is that **rising tiger numbers alone do not signal healthy ecosystems**; the quality of habitat matters as much as the count.

## WHAT THE REPORT FLAGS

FINDING	DETAIL
Habitat change	Tigers are moving from open forests and grasslands into dense Lantana thickets
Behaviour	Altered movement and territorial behaviour, with rising infighting deaths in reserves
Conflict	More human-tiger encounters as habitat degrades and tigers stray
The lesson	Conservation must look beyond numbers to habitat quality

## UNDERSTANDING LANTANA CAMARA

ASPECT	DETAIL
What it is	An ornamental shrub introduced around 1807 to 1809 (Calcutta Botanical Garden)
Status	One of India's worst <b>invasive alien species</b>
Spread	Has invaded <b>over 40% of India's tiger habitat</b> , threatening roughly <b>300,000 sq km</b> of forest; worst-hit are the Shivalik hills, Central India and the southern Western Ghats
Harm	Crowds out native vegetation, degrades grazing and habitat, and is hard to remove

An **invasive alien species** is a non-native organism that spreads aggressively and harms the local ecosystem. Lantana is a textbook case: introduced as a garden plant, it has become a vast, self-spreading weed that displaces the native grasses and plants that herbivores, and therefore tigers, depend on.

### The Bigger Invasive-Species Picture

Lantana is one of many. The **IPBES Invasive Alien Species Assessment (2023)** found that invasive species cost the world over **\$423 billion a year** and are implicated in **60 per cent of recorded extinctions**, ranking among the top five direct drivers of biodiversity loss. India has **no dedicated national law** for invasive-species management, and other major invasives include **Prosopis juliflora (vilayati kikar)**, **water hyacinth** and **Mikania micrantha**.

## INDIA'S TIGER CONSERVATION FRAMEWORK

ELEMENT	DETAIL
<b>Tiger numbers</b>	The <b>2022 census counted 3,682 tigers</b> (up from 2,967 in 2018 and 2,226 in 2014), about <b>75%</b> of the world's wild tigers
<b>Project Tiger</b>	Launched in <b>1973</b> (with 9 reserves); India now has <b>58 tiger reserves</b> (about 84,000 sq km)
<b>Legal basis</b>	The tiger is on <b>Schedule I</b> of the <b>Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972</b> (highest protection)
<b>NTCA</b>	The National Tiger Conservation Authority, the statutory body constituted in <b>2006</b> (after the 2005 Sariska local-extinction crisis and the Tiger Task Force)
<b>Monitoring</b>	The four-yearly <b>All-India Tiger Estimation</b> , using camera traps and the <b>M-STripES</b> app
<b>IBCA</b>	The <b>International Big Cat Alliance</b> , launched in 2023 on Project Tiger's 50th anniversary, headquartered in India, covering seven big cats

India's success in raising tiger numbers is real, but the SOE 2026 report argues that this success now depends on **habitat quality**, managing invasive species, restoring grasslands and reducing conflict, rather than on counts alone.

## THE ANALYSIS: BEYOND THE NUMBERS

- ❶ **A count is not a guarantee.** As source reserves fill to carrying capacity, tigers spill into fringe landscapes; a rising count in degraded habitat is fragile and conflict-prone.
- ❷ **The grassland blind spot.** India's conservation effort is focused on forest and tree cover, while grasslands are often mis-classified as "wastelands." That neglect lets Lantana invade degraded grasslands unchecked, hollowing out the prey base.
- ❸ **A governance gap.** India has no dedicated national programme or law for managing invasive alien species; responses are project-level, not systemic.
- ❹ **The metric must shift.** Success should be measured by **habitat quality, prey base and corridor connectivity**, not population counts alone, with invasive removal, grassland restoration and buffer management at the core.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

### Prelims

- The **State of India's Environment (SOE)** report is the annual flagship of **CSE** and **Down To Earth**
- **Lantana camara** is an **invasive alien species** (introduced around 1807-09) covering **over 40% of India's tiger habitat**
- The **2022 census counted 3,682 tigers** (~75% of the world's wild tigers); India has **58 tiger reserves**
- **Project Tiger** (1973); the tiger is on **Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**; the **NTCA** (2006) is the statutory body
- The **IPBES 2023** assessment put the global cost of invasive species at over **\$423 billion a year**
- The **International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA)**, headquartered in India, covers seven big cats

### Mains Angles

- ❶ **GS3 Conservation:** "Rising tiger numbers do not by themselves mean successful conservation." Examine, with reference to habitat quality, carrying capacity and invasive species.
- ❷ **GS3 Biodiversity / Governance:** Invasive alien species are a top driver of biodiversity loss, yet India lacks a dedicated law. Examine the threat (e.g. Lantana camara) and the governance gap.

- 3 **GS3 Human-Wildlife Conflict:** Analyse the link between habitat degradation, the grassland blind spot and rising human-wildlife conflict, and strategies to reduce it.

## FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Report	State of India's Environment 2026 (CSE / Down To Earth)
Tigers (2022)	3,682 (from 2,967 in 2018); ~75% of the world's wild tigers
Lantana camara	Invasive (introduced ~1807-09); over 40% of tiger habitat
Tiger reserves	58 (Project Tiger, 1973; ~84,000 sq km)
Legal basis	Schedule I, Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; NTCA (2006)
Monitoring	All-India Tiger Estimation (4-yearly); M-STripes
Invasive cost	IPBES 2023: over \$423 billion a year globally
Global alliance	IBCA (2023, India-HQ, seven big cats)

Sources: *Down To Earth*, *Centre for Science and Environment*, *NTCA*

Source: State of India's Environment 2026: Tigers, Lantana and a Conservation Warning — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

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[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)[Read Full Article on Ujiyari →](#)<https://ujiyari.com/daily/2026/06/12/state-of-indias-environment-2026-lantana-tigers/>

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