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MAGAZINE NOTES

The Success Trap: When Saving Tigers Becomes a Management Crisis

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The Success Trap: When Saving Tigers Becomes a Management Crisis

 **Down to Earth** Chapter 1 · 2 min read

Source: Down to Earth, June 1-15, 2026 (cover package; opinion by Ravi Chellam, June 4, and DTE Staff analysis, June 2)

India's tiger story is usually told as a triumph: from **1,411 tigers in 2006 to 3,682 in 2022**, with India now holding 70-75 percent of the world's wild tigers. The DTE cover package argues the triumph has produced its own crisis, a "success trap".

THE DISTRIBUTION PROBLEM

Tigers are not spread evenly across the 58 reserves:

- **5 reserves had zero tigers and 10 had fewer than 10 each** in the 2022 census
- Flagship reserves push against **carrying capacity** while marginal ones sit empty
- **35-40 percent of tigers live outside protected areas**, in human-dominated landscapes, which is where conflict concentrates

Chellam's argument: the relocation-heavy "**fortress conservation**" model is not evidence-based, since tigers demonstrably persist alongside people; the priority should shift from creating inviolate cores to managing coexistence and **source-sink dynamics** through corridors.

THE FUNDING PROBLEM

The DTE staff analysis tracks the money:

YEAR	PROJECT TIGER BUDGET
2008-09	Rs 154.7 crore
2024-25	Rs 245 crore
2025-26 (BE)	Rs 290 crore

But CPI roughly tripled over the period, so the 2025-26 allocation is worth only about **Rs 95 crore in 2008-09 terms**, below the actual 2008-09 figure, while conservation units grew from 38 to 60+. The result: **NTCA's 2024 findings** flag invasive species in 40 reserves and inadequate anti-poaching staff in 20, with ~40 percent staff shortages at Dampa, Mukundara and Mudumalai.

MAINS ANGLE

The reframe: conservation success must now be measured by ecological function (corridors, prey base, coexistence) rather than headline numbers; more tigers in fewer reserves is a fragility, not a strength. **Ethics dimension (GS4):** the case against forced village relocation pits conservation outcomes against the rights of forest-dwelling and tribal communities under the Forest Rights Act. **Way forward:** index Project Tiger funding to inflation and units, fund corridor protection and conflict-compensation as core line items, and treat coexistence landscapes as conservation assets rather than failures.

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TIGERS AND RESERVES:

1,411 (2006) to 3,682 (2022); India holds 70-75 percent of wild tigers

Project Tiger: launched 1973 with 9 reserves; now 58 over ~84,488 sq km

2022 skew: 5 reserves with zero tigers, 10 with fewer than 10; 35-40 percent of tigers outside PAs

GOVERNANCE AND FUNDING:

NTCA: statutory body under WPA 1972, created 2006 after Sariska's 2004 local extinction

Project Tiger 2025-26 BE Rs 290 crore, below 2008-09 in real terms

NTCA 2024: invasive species in 40 reserves; 20 reserves short of anti-poaching staff

Sources: [Down to Earth](#), [NTCA](#)



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