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Beyond Tiger Numbers: Governing 58 Reserves

 **DOWN TO EARTH**30 June 2026 · **ENVIRONMENT** · **GS3**

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Beyond Tiger Numbers: Governing 58 Reserves

 **Down to Earth** 30 June 2026 **GS3**

Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"India's tiger numbers have doubled, yet human-wildlife conflict is rising. Is a growing tiger population a sign of success or of a management problem? Argue both sides."

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [Down to Earth](#)

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WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

India is home to about 3,682 tigers, roughly three-quarters of the world's wild tigers, and now manages 58 tiger reserves after Madhya Pradesh's Madhav National Park was notified as the 58th in 2025. By any measure, Project Tiger has succeeded. But the very success is generating new pressures: tigers spilling into human landscapes, rising conflict, and reserves increasingly cut off from one another. The question has shifted from how to grow the number to how to govern the recovery.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

India's tiger numbers have quadrupled since 2006, but a headcount is not a health check. Across 58 reserves, conflict is rising, corridors are fragmenting and prey bases are thinning. Numbers alone cannot guarantee survival. The NTCA must move to landscape-level governance, protecting corridors, restoring prey, and building genuine human-wildlife coexistence, so success does not become the source of the next crisis.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Tiger reserve	A protected area notified for tigers under the Wildlife (Protection) Act	India now has 58; core and buffer zones structure protection
Carrying capacity	The number of tigers a habitat can sustain	Once reached, tigers disperse into human areas, raising conflict
Wildlife corridor	A connecting strip between habitats	Enables gene flow; fragmentation isolates populations
Prey base	Herbivore populations tigers hunt	Without it, protection alone cannot sustain tiger density
Human-wildlife conflict	Losses of life, livestock and crops at reserve edges	The frontline test of whether conservation is socially durable

THE ANALYSIS

- ① **The recovery is genuine.** From 1,411 tigers in 2006 to about 3,682 in the 2022 estimation, India holds around 75 per cent of the world's wild tigers. Project Tiger's protection-led model worked.
- ② **Success breeds conflict.** As core reserves fill, tigers disperse into farmland and settlements. The result is livestock predation, human casualties and **retaliatory** (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/retaliatory/>) poisoning that can undo years of protection.
- ③ **Reserves are becoming islands.** Roads, mining, canals and settlements sever the corridors that link the 58 reserves. Isolated populations lose genetic diversity and **resilience** (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/resilience/>) even as their headcount looks healthy.
- ④ **Prey base is the quiet constraint.** In several reserves, depleted herbivore populations cap carrying capacity. A protected tiger without adequate prey is not a secure tiger.
- ⑤ **Governance, not counting, is the frontier.** The metrics that mattered for recovery, population and protection, must now be joined by connectivity, prey density and conflict-resolution outcomes at the level of each reserve and landscape.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

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CARRY THESE INTO THE EXAM HALL.

India's tigers: about 3,682 (2022 estimation), roughly 75 per cent of the world's wild tigers; up from 1,411 in 2006.

58 tiger reserves across 18 states; Madhav National Park (MP) notified as the 58th in 2025; MP has the most reserves (9).

Project Tiger launched 1973; National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) is the statutory (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/statutory/>) body.

Legal basis: Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (<https://ujivari.com/legislation/wildlife-protection-act-1972/>) (reserves notified under Section 38V).

Monitoring: quadrennial All India Tiger Estimation; M-STrIPES patrolling and monitoring system.

Concepts: core-buffer model, corridors, prey base, carrying capacity, coexistence.

THE DEBATE

For a numbers-and-cores focus: A larger, well-protected tiger population is the surest insurance against extinction. Effort and funds should concentrate on securing and expanding thriving core reserves, and conflict can be handled locally as it arises. Do not dilute a winning formula.

For a landscape-and-coexistence focus: High numbers on fragmented, prey-poor land are fragile. Isolated populations lose genetic health, and unmanaged conflict erodes the public support conservation depends on. Without corridors, prey recovery and community stakes, the count will not hold. Governance, not more counting, is the binding constraint.

Balanced verdict: Both are right about their piece. Protecting cores remains essential, but it is no longer sufficient. The next phase must add landscape connectivity, prey-base restoration and coexistence institutions to core protection. The measure of success should evolve from how many tigers there are to how securely and peaceably they, and the people around them, can live.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

A headline number (tiger count, forest cover, literacy rate) is a stock. It can look healthy while the system producing it, habitat connectivity, prey, community consent, quietly weakens. Always ask what maintains the stock and whether those flows are intact. This "stock versus system health" lens prevents mistaking a good number for a good outcome, across conservation, welfare and economic indicators alike.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

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Protection since 1973 → tigers rise 1,411 (2006) to ~3,682 (2022) → cores fill → tigers disperse into human land → conflict + retaliatory killing + fragmented, prey-poor corridors → (IF landscape governance: corridors + prey recovery + coexistence + NTCA reserve-level stewardship) → durable, connected, socially-accepted tiger population

THE WAY FORWARD

- 1 Secure and restore corridors.** Protect connecting landscapes from roads, mining and encroachment (<https://ujivari.com/vocab/encroachment/>), and restore degraded links so populations stay genetically connected.
- 2 Rebuild the prey base.** Invest in herbivore recovery and habitat quality so protected reserves can actually sustain their tigers.
- 3 Institutionalise coexistence.** Deliver prompt, fair compensation, early-warning systems and community stewardship so people at reserve edges gain from conservation rather than bearing its costs.
- 4 Govern reserve by reserve.** Have the NTCA drive landscape-specific management plans across all 58 reserves, moving beyond a single national headcount.
- 5 Broaden the metrics.** Track connectivity, prey density and conflict outcomes alongside population, so success is measured by ecological and social health, not numbers alone.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

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Argue that conservation success must be judged by system health, not headcount. Use the tiger recovery to show how numbers can rise while connectivity, prey and coexistence weaken, then propose landscape-level, NTCA-led governance.

“The count proves the strategy of the past worked; sustaining it demands a new one, governing reserves as connected landscapes shared with people.”

~3,682 tigers (2022), ~75% of world’s wild tigers, up from 1,411 (2006); 58 reserves across 18 states; Madhav NP the 58th (2025); Project Tiger 1973; NTCA statutory under WPA 1972 (Section 38V); M-StrIPES.

Balancing the rights and safety of forest-edge communities against wildlife protection is a justice question at the heart of conservation ethics.

Connects to GS3 questions on conservation, protected-area management, human-wildlife conflict and biodiversity governance.

Project Tiger, wildlife corridors, human-wildlife conflict, Wildlife (Protection) Act, forest rights and community conservation.

Sources: *Down To Earth* (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in>), *NTCA* (<https://ntca.gov.in>)

Source: Beyond Tiger Numbers: Governing 58 Reserves – Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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India's rise to about 3,682 tigers is a genuine conservation success, but rising human-wildlife conflict, habitat fragmentation and management gaps across 58 reserves mean numbers alone are not enough, so the NTCA must strengthen landscape-level governance, prey-base recovery and community coexistence.

 **SUPPORTING**

- The 2022 estimation put India at about 3,682 tigers, roughly 75 per cent of the world's wild tigers, up from 1,411 in 2006.
- Success has crowded habitats and pushed tigers into human landscapes, raising conflict, retaliatory killings and losses of livestock and life at reserve edges.
- Reserves are increasingly isolated islands, and without protected corridors, prey-base recovery and genetic connectivity, high numbers become ecologically fragile.

 **COUNTER**

Some argue the priority should remain protecting and expanding core populations, since a larger tiger base is the surest insurance against extinction and conflict can be managed locally.

 **WAY FORWARD**

Shift from a numbers-first to a landscape-first approach: secure corridors, restore prey base, resolve conflict through compensation and coexistence models, and strengthen NTCA-led, reserve-specific governance across all 58 reserves.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

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QUESTION

India's tiger population has recovered strongly, but conservation success cannot be measured by numbers alone. Examine the governance challenges across India's tiger reserves and the reforms needed. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's tiger recovery is one of the world's great conservation stories, but a rising population is only the first test. The harder one is governing the landscapes and communities that must live alongside the animal.

BODY

The 2022 estimation counted about 3,682 tigers, some 75 per cent of the global wild population, up from 1,411 in 2006. Yet success has consequences.

Reserves fill, and tigers disperse into human-dominated landscapes, driving human-wildlife conflict, livestock loss, human casualties and retaliatory killing at the edges. Many of the 58 reserves function as isolated islands, their corridors fragmented by roads, mines and settlements, which threatens genetic connectivity and long-term viability.

Prey depletion in several reserves undermines carrying capacity even where protection is strong. These are governance problems, not counting problems.

The National Tiger Conservation Authority, working with states under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, must therefore pivot from a numbers-first metric to landscape-level stewardship: securing and restoring corridors, rebuilding prey base, and institutionalising coexistence through prompt compensation, early-warning systems and community stewardship. Tigers thrive where local people have a stake in their survival, so participation is not a soft add-on but the core of durable conservation.

CONCLUSION

The count proves the strategy of the past worked. Sustaining it demands a new one, governing reserves as connected landscapes shared with people, so that a conservation success does not curdle into a management crisis.


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