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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

# One Landscape, One Risk: The Case for a Second Home for the Asiatic Lion

THE HINDU

6 July 2026 · ENVIRONMENT · GS3

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# One Landscape, One Risk: The Case for a Second Home for the Asiatic Lion

 **The Hindu**

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**GS3**

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## THE LIFT LINE

A conservation success story can hide a conservation risk. India's Asiatic lions have rebounded to roughly 891 animals, a genuine triumph of protection. Yet every one of them lives in a single landscape in Saurashtra, which means one epidemic, one fire or one disaster could erase the entire wild population of the subspecies on Earth. The lion is national heritage; safeguarding it demands a second, geographically separate home.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Species recovery, single-population risk, translocation science and centre-state cooperation over natural heritage make this a rich Environment and Ecology theme.

**GS Paper 3:** Conservation of biodiversity; environmental protection statutes (Wild Life Protection Act, 1972); species management and translocation; disaster risk to biodiversity.

**GS Paper 2 crossover:** Cooperative federalism (<https://ujyari.com/terms/cooperative-federalism/>) and centre-state coordination on natural resources; implementation of Supreme Court directions.

**Prelims angle:** IUCN Red List status of the Asiatic lion, Schedule I of the WLPA 1972, the 2013 Supreme Court translocation order, Kuno National Park, Project Lion, Project Cheetah, and the 2025 census figures.

**Mains angle:** Discuss why a metapopulation strategy is essential for the long-term survival of the Asiatic lion and analyse the federal and institutional obstacles to translocation.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The 16th Asiatic Lion Census (2025) recorded about 891 lions, up 32.2 per cent from 674 in 2020. The survey was conducted from May 10 to 13, 2025, across about 35,000 sq km, spanning 58 talukas and 11 districts of the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. Roughly 390 lions are within the Gir National Park and sanctuary core, while

about 507 lions, around 44 per cent of the total, now live outside protected areas, in agricultural fields, coastal tracts and revenue forests.

The Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) is listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List and is protected under Schedule I of the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. Its entire wild population is confined to one connected landscape, which is precisely the **vulnerability** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/vulnerability/>) conservationists have warned about for decades.

The Supreme Court saw this danger. On April 15, 2013, it ordered the translocation of some lions to the Kuno sanctuary (now Kuno National Park) in Madhya Pradesh within six months, to establish a geographically separate second population. That order was never implemented. Gujarat resisted, invoking the lion as the “pride of Gujarat.” As of 2026, zero lions have been moved to Kuno, which instead hosts cheetahs under Project Cheetah, running since September 2022.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

### The single-population risk is not theoretical

A concentrated population is a single point of failure. In 2018, a Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) outbreak killed more than two dozen Gir lions, about 28 animals, a chilling preview of what a larger epidemic could do. The precedent from Africa is stark: a 1994 CDV epidemic killed roughly a third of the Serengeti lions. Because India’s Asiatic lions share one landscape and a narrow gene pool, a virulent disease, a forest fire, a cyclone on the Saurashtra coast or an industrial accident could devastate the whole population at once.

### The status is Endangered, and that must not be misread

TAXON	IUCN RED LIST STATUS
Lion (species, <i>Panthera leo</i> )	Vulnerable
Asiatic lion (subspecies, <i>Panthera leo persica</i> )	Endangered

The distinction matters for the exam and for policy. The species as a whole is listed as Vulnerable, but the Asiatic subspecies remains Endangered. Treating the subspecies as if its risk had eased would be a dangerous misreading.

### The translocation gap

The 2013 Supreme Court order remains unfulfilled. Kuno was prepared as the second home, but the space and prey base were redirected to the cheetah reintroduction. Meanwhile, Gujarat’s own strategy, Project Lion (2020) and the “Lion@2047” vision, focuses on in-Gujarat dispersal across the Greater Gir landscape rather than a genuinely separate population in another state. Natural dispersal has produced a promising

development: Barda Wildlife Sanctuary near Porbandar, about 100 km from Gir, now hosts about 17 lions, the first lions there since 1879. That is welcome, but Barda is still within the same Saurashtra landscape and does not remove the single-landscape risk.

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Apply the concept of **metapopulation management**: instead of one large population, conservation biology favours several spatially separated but ecologically linked subpopulations. If one is struck by disease or disaster, others survive and can even repopulate the affected area. A single population, however large, violates the basic risk-spreading logic of extinction avoidance. The correct question is therefore not “are the numbers rising?” (they are) but “is the risk concentrated?” (it is).

Frame the state-centre tension through **shared national heritage**: the Asiatic lion is not the possession of any one state but a heritage of the whole nation, held in trust for future generations. A second home in another state does not diminish Gujarat’s stewardship; it honours it by insuring the species against catastrophe.

## THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Imagine all of India’s wild Asiatic lions painted as a single dense cluster of dots inside one circle labelled Saurashtra. Now draw a lightning bolt, an epidemic, striking that circle. Every dot is at risk simultaneously. The metapopulation solution redraws the picture: the dots are split across two or three circles in different states, connected by thin managed corridors of exchange. The same lightning bolt now strikes one circle, and the others endure. Two circles are **resilience** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/resilience/>); one circle, however full, is a gamble.

## WAY FORWARD

- ① **Implement the 2013 order in spirit.** Establish at least one genuinely separate second population in a suitable habitat outside the Saurashtra landscape, with a credible prey base and community buy-in.
- ② **Adopt a formal metapopulation plan.** Move from single-site protection to a managed network of subpopulations under Project Lion, with defined corridors and disease firewalls.
- ③ **Strengthen disease surveillance.** Routine CDV and other pathogen monitoring, vaccination protocols for domestic dogs and cattle near lion ranges, and rapid-response veterinary capacity.
- ④ **Reduce human-lion conflict outside protected areas.** With 44 per cent of lions outside protected areas, invest in compensation, open-well covering, railway and road **mitigation** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/mitigation/>), and community stewardship.

5 **Resolve the federal impasse** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/impasse/>) **cooperatively**. Frame translocation as shared national heritage, not loss of pride, and use centre-mediated cooperation to break the deadlock.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

The theme links to UPSC's recurring interest in species conservation and habitat management. **UPSC Mains GS3 (2020):** "How does biodiversity vary in India? How is the **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** (<https://ujjyari.com/terms/biological-diversity-act/>) helpful in the conservation of flora and fauna?" It also connects to Prelims questions on IUCN Red List categories, Schedule I species and Project Cheetah versus Project Lion.

**Practice question (Mains, 15 marks, 250 words):** "A rising population figure can conceal a rising extinction risk. In the context of the Asiatic lion, examine the case for a metapopulation strategy and analyse the federal and institutional obstacles to establishing a second home for the species."

*Sources: The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com>)

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