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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

After the Count: Why Rising Tiger Numbers Meet Shrinking Room to Roam

 DOWN TO EARTH

22 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT

GS3

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GS3
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THE LIFT LINE

India's tiger story is one of the great conservation successes of our time. From the brink of collapse, the population has climbed to about **3,682** in the 2022 estimate, the large majority of the world's wild tigers. But success has produced a new and harder problem. There are more tigers and less unbroken forest for them to live in. As young tigers disperse in search of territory, they walk into farms, roads and villages. The count went up. The room to roam went down. The next chapter of Project Tiger is not about counting tigers. It is about giving them somewhere to go.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Wildlife conservation, protected-area management and human-wildlife conflict are recurring GS3 themes, and Project Tiger is a flagship programme UPSC returns to. The shift from a numbers-focused story to a corridors-and-coexistence story is a nuanced, current angle that rewards deeper understanding.

The wider significance is conceptual: it reframes conservation success as the beginning of a landscape-management challenge, not the end of the problem.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental degradation; biodiversity and protected areas; issues of human-wildlife conflict and habitat management.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **Project Tiger** was launched in **1973**; the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** is a **statutory body** established under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**; the **2022 All India Tiger Estimation** put the population at about **3,682**, the large majority of the world's wild tigers; the estimation uses **camera-trap** surveys and the **M-STrIPES** monitoring system; **tiger corridors** connect reserves and counter habitat **fragmentation**; and the tiger is both an **umbrella species** (protecting it protects many others) and a **keystone species** (central to its ecosystem's balance).

For **Mains**, the argument to carry is that the next phase of tiger conservation must secure corridors, manage coexistence and reduce conflict, because rising numbers inside shrinking, fragmented habitat turn a success into a landscape-scale governance challenge.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Project Tiger, launched in **1973**, began as an emergency response to a crashing population. Over five decades it built a network of tiger reserves and, later, the statutory oversight of the **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**. The results are real. The **All India Tiger Estimation**, one of the largest wildlife surveys in the world, uses **camera traps** and the **M-STrIPES** software system to track tigers, and the **2022** exercise counted about **3,682**, making India home to most of the planet's wild tigers.

The tiger is an **umbrella species**: securing enough habitat for a viable tiger population automatically protects the prey, forests and water systems beneath it. It is also a **keystone species**, an **apex** predator whose presence keeps herbivore numbers and vegetation in balance. Protecting tigers, in other words, protects entire landscapes.

But those landscapes are shrinking and breaking up. Reserves are increasingly islands of forest surrounded by farms, highways, mines and settlements. A tiger population that grows inside a reserve eventually exceeds it. Young tigers must disperse to find territory, and when the forest between reserves, the **corridors**, is degraded or built over, they move through human-dominated land instead. The result is rising **human-wildlife conflict**: livestock killed, occasional human deaths, and tigers injured or killed in retaliation or on roads. The success of the count has outrun the security of the habitat.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central argument is that conservation success has created a coexistence and corridor challenge, and that the next phase must secure connectivity, manage the human-wildlife interface and reduce conflict, rather than measure progress by population numbers alone.

Corridors Are as Vital as Reserves

A reserve without connections is a genetic and **demographic** trap. **Tiger corridors** let animals disperse, breed across populations and recolonise, preventing inbreeding and local extinction. Protecting these corridors from roads, mines and settlements is now as important as protecting the reserves themselves.

Coexistence Is the Real Frontier

As tigers spill into human-dominated landscapes, the question is no longer only how to protect tigers from people but how people and tigers can share space. Coexistence means compensation that works, early-warning systems, secure livestock and communities that see tigers as an asset rather than a threat.

Conflict Management Determines Long-Term Support

Every human death or livestock loss erodes local tolerance, and conservation cannot survive without local support. Reducing conflict through rapid response, fair and fast compensation and prevention is therefore not a side task but central to sustaining the gains.

DIMENSION	OLD FOCUS	NEXT-PHASE FOCUS
Measure of success	Rising tiger count (about 3,682)	Secure, connected habitat
Spatial unit	Individual reserves	Reserves plus corridors
Human interface	Keep people out	Manage coexistence
Key risk	Poaching	Fragmentation and conflict

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Think in landscapes, not islands. A tiger population is viable only if its habitat is connected, so the meaningful unit is the reserve-plus-corridor network, not the reserve alone. Apply the carrying-capacity lens: a reserve can hold only so many tigers, and once it is full, growth necessarily pushes animals outward, which means conflict is a predictable consequence of success, not a random misfortune. Add the social-licence lens: conservation depends on the tolerance of people who live alongside wildlife, and that tolerance is spent every time conflict goes unmanaged, so protecting people's interests protects tigers. Finally, apply the umbrella-species lens: securing tiger corridors secures forests, prey, rivers and carbon stores across whole landscapes, so the payoff of getting this right extends far beyond a single charismatic animal. Read this way, the rising count is not the finish line. It is the moment the harder work begins.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Project Tiger since 1973 -> population recovers to about 3,682 in 2022, most of the world's wild tigers -> reserves fill to capacity -> young tigers disperse to find territory -> but corridors between reserves are fragmented by roads, farms and mines -> tigers move through human-dominated land -> human-wildlife conflict rises, tolerance falls -> next phase: secure corridors, manage coexistence, reduce conflict -> connected landscapes sustain both tigers and the people who share them

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Legally secure tiger corridors.** Identify, notify and protect corridors between reserves from roads, mining and settlement, and build wildlife-friendly crossings where infrastructure is unavoidable.

- ② **Invest in coexistence.** Fund early-warning systems, predator-proof livestock enclosures and prompt, fair compensation so communities can live alongside dispersing tigers without ruinous loss.
- ③ **Strengthen conflict response.** Equip and train rapid-response teams to manage straying tigers humanely, reducing both human deaths and **retaliatory** killings.
- ④ **Share conservation benefits.** Channel eco-tourism revenue and jobs to local communities so they gain from tigers, turning them from adversaries into partners in protection.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC regularly examines wildlife conservation and human-wildlife conflict (2016 Mains on the causes and management of man-animal conflict; recurring Prelims questions on Project Tiger, the NTCA and tiger reserves; 2019 on the significance of umbrella and keystone species). This editorial anchors those with the 2022 estimate and the corridors-and-coexistence argument.

Practice question: “The success of Project Tiger has turned tiger conservation into a challenge of corridors and coexistence rather than of counting.” Examine this statement with reference to habitat fragmentation and human-wildlife conflict in India. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: Down To Earth, National Tiger Conservation Authority

Source: After the Count: Why Rising Tiger Numbers Meet Shrinking Room to Roam — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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