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Tigers Outside the Lines: What the TOTR Initiative Asks of Indian Conservation

 **THE HINDU**

29 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT**GS3**

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 The Hindu

29 July 2026

GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a tiger repeatedly kills livestock outside a reserve boundary, who should decide whether it is relocated, radio-collared, or declared a "problem animal", the forest department, the affected community, or an independent panel? Defend your answer."

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A tiger does not know where a reserve boundary is drawn, and conservation policy that only protects tigers inside that boundary was always, in a sense, protecting a map rather than a species. TOTR is the moment that fiction becomes too expensive to maintain.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The tension between wildlife conservation and forest-dwelling community rights is a recurring, high-value GS3 theme, and TOTR is the most current, concrete vehicle for testing whether candidates can hold both the ecological and the rights-based dimensions of a conservation policy at once.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, [environmental impact assessment](#); biodiversity and wildlife conservation.

GS Paper 2: Welfare schemes and rights of vulnerable/forest-dwelling communities; issues relating to the Forest Rights Act.

For **Prelims**, fix the TOTR initiative's scale (forest divisions, states) alongside the Forest Rights Act's core [entitlement](#) categories, since UPSC frequently tests conservation-versus-rights questions through precise institutional and statutory detail.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY UPSC TESTS IT
TOTR (Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves)	Landscape-scale conservation initiative for tiger populations dispersing outside designated reserves	A current, live example of the reserve-to-landscape conservation shift
Forest Rights Act, 2006	Recognises individual and community forest rights of Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers	Frequently tested for its interaction with conservation and displacement questions
Co-management	Shared decision-making between government agencies and local/community stakeholders, as opposed to top-down administration	The governance model this editorial argues TOTR needs to genuinely adopt
“Problem animal” declaration	Administrative designation that can trigger a tiger’s capture, relocation or, in extreme cases, elimination	A politically sensitive process the editorial flags as vulnerable to pressure absent independent safeguards

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

DEVELOPMENT	DETAIL
1973	Project Tiger launched, reserve-centric protection model established
2006	National Tiger Conservation Authority constituted; Forest Rights Act, 2006 enacted in the same year
2006 to present	Tiger population recovers from 1,411 (2006 estimation) to well over 3,000 in recent cycles
Current	An estimated 35-40 per cent of India’s tigers live at least partly outside designated reserve boundaries
TOTR initiative	Spans 40 forest divisions across 9 states, marking the initiative’s landscape-scale ambition

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Why “beyond reserve” is now a majority-adjacent problem

At 35 to 40 per cent of the national population, tigers outside reserve boundaries are no longer a marginal exception to be handled through occasional case-by-case relocation. This is a structural feature of a successfully recovering population in a country where reserve boundaries were drawn decades ago and have not expanded proportionately to population recovery, and it requires a standing governance framework, not ad hoc responses.

Why the FRA intersection is unavoidable, not incidental

The landscapes where dispersing tigers are found are frequently the same landscapes where forest-dwelling communities hold, or have pending claims to, rights recognised under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, individual forest rights over cultivated land, community forest resource rights, and habitat rights for particularly vulnerable tribal groups. A conservation initiative operating in these landscapes cannot treat FRA rights as a separate legal matter to be addressed elsewhere; any corridor-protection or habitat-management decision in these areas directly implicates those rights.

The risk the editorial flags: political pressure and exclusion

Two specific risks recur in landscape-scale, beyond-reserve conservation: political pressure to declare a tiger a “problem animal” whenever conflict with local livelihoods becomes politically visible, potentially short-circuiting more measured management responses, and the broader risk that forest-department-led implementation, without genuine community co-management, repeats the exclusionary pattern that has historically characterised the relationship between conservation agencies and forest-dwelling communities in India, well before TOTR.

Why co-management, not mere consultation, is the reply

The distinction between co-management and consultation is not semantic. Consultation seeks community input before a forest-department decision is finalised elsewhere; co-management shares actual decision-making authority, including over compensation mechanisms, corridor demarcation, and problem-animal protocols, with Gram Sabhas and FRA rights-holders. Only the latter genuinely addresses the exclusion risk, because it changes who holds power over the outcome, not merely who is heard before the outcome is decided.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Ask whether a policy’s success metric and its legitimacy metric are being tracked by the same people. A conservation initiative can be ecologically successful, more tigers surviving, more corridors protected, while being governed in a way that excludes and alienates the communities living in the same landscape, and vice versa. When evaluating any landscape-scale governance initiative that spans a technical objective (here, conservation) and a rights-based one (here, FRA entitlements), check whether the institutional design gives the rights-holders actual decision authority over outcomes that affect them, or only a consultative role over decisions others make. This frame applies well beyond conservation, to any policy area, infrastructure siting, mining, urban renewal, where a technical objective and community rights intersect in the same physical space.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a tiger reserve as an island with a clearly marked shoreline, inside which one governance rulebook applies. As the tiger population on the island grows, individuals swim to the surrounding mainland, a much larger, populated landscape with its own existing residents and their own established rights to the land. TOTR is the attempt to extend a version of the island's protective rulebook onto this mainland. Done as a simple export, dropping the island's forest-department-led rules onto the mainland unchanged, it collides with the mainland's existing governance, the rights the FRA already recognises for its residents. Done as a genuine adaptation, building a new rulebook jointly with the mainland's residents rather than imposing the island's, it can extend real protection without the collision. The map has not changed; only whether the extension is imposed or negotiated has.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Institutionalise co-management structures** giving Gram Sabhas and FRA rights-holders genuine decision authority in TOTR-covered landscapes, not merely consultative status.
- 2 **Build an independent review mechanism for “problem animal” declarations**, insulating this politically sensitive process from local pressure through transparent, criteria-based review.
- 3 **Fast-track pending FRA claims** in TOTR landscapes, since unresolved claims create legal ambiguity that both conservation planning and community livelihoods suffer from.
- 4 **Ring-fence dedicated, rapid compensation funding** for human-tiger conflict outside reserves, addressing the immediate livelihood cost that erodes community support for coexistence.
- 5 **Publish landscape-level corridor maps publicly**, so affected communities can engage with specific, mapped decisions rather than an opaque planning process.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has tested the Forest Rights Act, wildlife conservation frameworks, and human-wildlife conflict as recurring GS3 and GS2 themes; TOTR offers a current, high-value vehicle for combining both in a single answer.

Practice question: “Landscape-scale conservation initiatives outside protected reserve boundaries cannot be designed as a purely ecological exercise.” Examine this claim with reference to the TOTR initiative and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. (250 words, 15 marks)

Interview angle: If a tiger repeatedly kills livestock outside a reserve boundary, who should decide whether it is relocated, radio-collared, or declared a “problem animal”, the forest department, the affected community, or an independent panel? Defend your answer.

Sources: The Hindu, National Tiger Conservation Authority, Ministry of Tribal Affairs

Source: Tigers Outside the Lines: What the TOTR Initiative Asks of Indian Conservation — Ujjyari.com | Free
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● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

With 35 to 40 per cent of India's recovered tiger population now living outside designated reserve boundaries, the Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves (TOTR) initiative marks a necessary shift from reserve-centric protection to landscape-scale coexistence governance, but it must navigate serious structural tensions the reserve model never had to confront.

✓ SUPPORTING

- Reserve-centric conservation, India's dominant model since 1973, has no ready answer for tigers that disperse into multi-use landscapes where people, livestock and agriculture are already present.
- The TOTR initiative's reach across 40 forest divisions in 9 states signals the scale of the "beyond reserve" population is now too large to treat as an exception requiring only case-by-case management.
- Landscape-scale governance, done well, can convert a growing conflict liability into a broader conservation asset, extending genetic connectivity between core reserve populations through protected corridors.

⚠ COUNTER

Landscape-scale conservation outside reserve boundaries directly intersects with the Forest Rights Act's community land and resource entitlements, and an initiative driven primarily by forest departments risks repeating the top-down exclusion that has historically strained relations between conservation agencies and forest-dwelling communities.

→ WAY FORWARD

Build TOTR's governance structure around genuine co-management with Forest Rights Act rights-holders and Gram Sabhas, rather than treating community consultation as a formality layered onto forest-department-led decision-making.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

India's tiger conservation success within reserves has produced a landscape-scale governance challenge outside them. Examine the structural tensions the Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves (TOTR) initiative must navigate, with reference to the Forest Rights Act. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

India's tiger population recovery, from 1,411 in the 2006 estimation to well over 3,000 in recent cycles, has produced a landscape-scale challenge the reserve-centric model was not designed for: an estimated 35 to 40 per cent of tigers now live at least partly outside designated reserve boundaries, prompting the Tigers Outside Tiger Reserves (TOTR) initiative across 40 forest divisions in 9 states.

BODY

The original Project Tiger model, launched in 1973 and given statutory teeth through the National Tiger Conservation Authority in 2006, was built around protecting demarcated core habitat from poaching and habitat loss. As reserve populations recovered and, in several cases, approached or exceeded carrying capacity, dispersing tigers, particularly sub-adult males seeking new territory, increasingly moved into forest, agricultural and settled land outside reserve boundaries where the reserve model's protections do not apply.

TOTR is designed to extend conservation governance into these multi-use landscapes, but doing so unavoidably intersects with the Forest Rights Act, 2006, which recognises individual and community land, resource and habitat rights of forest-dwelling communities in many of the same landscapes. A TOTR framework designed and implemented primarily by forest departments, without genuine co-management involving Gram Sabhas and FRA rights-holders, risks reproducing the same exclusionary dynamics that have historically strained India's conservation-community relationship, even as it pursues a conservation objective, corridor protection and human-tiger conflict mitigation, that is not inherently opposed to community interests.

CONCLUSION

TOTR's success will depend less on its ecological design, which is sound, than on whether its governance structure treats affected communities as co-managers with a stake in outcomes rather than as populations to be managed around, since the same landscapes TOTR must protect are, in many cases, the same landscapes the Forest Rights Act already recognises community claims over.

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