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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Yadav's World Lion Day Argument: The Lion Recovery as a Template, Not Just a Trophy

 HINDUSTAN TIMES

10 August 2026 ·

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Yadav's World Lion Day Argument: The Lion Recovery as a Template, Not Just a Trophy

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A minister citing a species recovery as proof that India's institutions work is also, implicitly, asking to be judged by the same standard on species where the numbers have not improved. Should a government invite that comparison, or is celebrating one success without inviting the harder audit simply how public communication works?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)

Hindustan Times

 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

A recovered species is a fact. A recovered model is a claim, and claims need to be tested somewhere the first case did not already stack the deck.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Ujiyari's daily coverage today already gave you the numbers behind the 2025 Asiatic Lion Population Estimation. This editorial does the other half of the job UPSC actually tests: reading a minister's op-ed not for its facts but for its argument. Bhupender Yadav is not merely reporting a recovery, he is making an institutional-design claim, that law plus science plus community is a transferable template. Learning to separate a genuine data point from the policy argument built on top of it, and to test whether that argument generalises, is a Mains-grade skill this editorial trains directly.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental policy and species-specific conservation projects; effects of government policies on conservation outcomes.

GS Paper 2: Government policies and interventions for development; institutional design and governance models; issues relating to [statutory bodies](#).

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Landscape-level conservation	Managing habitat and prey across a wide area, not only inside a protected core	Distinguishes Project Lion's approach from a purely enforcement-based model
Species-specific vs generalisable policy	Whether lessons from one species' recovery can be transferred to others	The core analytical tension this editorial tests
Coexistence infrastructure	Physical and institutional measures (machans, compensation) enabling wildlife and communities to share landscapes	Explains why 507 of 891 lions now live outside the formal sanctuary
Schedule I species	Highest legal protection tier under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972	Shared status of lion and tiger; a recurring Prelims fact
Great Indian Bustard programme	A comparably resourced species recovery effort that has not produced comparable results	The strongest available counter-example to the "template" claim

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

World Lion Day, observed every **10 August**, coincided in 2026 with the release of India's **16th Asiatic Lion Population Estimation**, conducted **10-13 May 2025**, which recorded **891 lions**, up **32.2 per cent** from **674** in 2020. Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change **Bhupender Yadav** marked the occasion with an op-ed in **Hindustan Times** framing the recovery not simply as a wildlife statistic but as validation of India's conservation approach.

MILESTONE	DETAIL
Population, early 1900s	Reduced to roughly 40-60 individuals after decades of hunting
Population, 2025	891 , across five censuses since 2005 (359, 411, 523, 674, 891)
Range, 1990	Approximately 6,600 sq km
Range, 2025	Approximately 35,000 sq km , across 11 districts
Wild prey share of diet, 1974	26 per cent
Wild prey share of diet, 2025	Approximately 74 per cent
Lions outside Gir's formal protected core, 2025	507 of 891 (majority, first time)
Legal protection	Schedule I , Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972
Project Lion budget	Rs 2,927.71 crore , 10 years, sanctioned November 2022

The minister's argument rests explicitly on three claimed pillars: **strict legal protection** (the Wildlife Protection Act framework), **scientific conservation strategy** (Project Lion's prey-base restoration and monitoring infrastructure), and **community participation** (coexistence measures for the majority of lions now living outside the sanctuary). Together, the op-ed presents these as a sequence, not a coincidence, of factors that revived a species from the brink and, by extension, as a model for wildlife governance more broadly.

THE ANALYSIS

- 1. The recovery's scale is genuinely unusual and worth taking seriously as data.** A population reduced to perhaps 40-60 individuals recovering to 891 across a documented, consistent multi-decade [trajectory](#) is a rare conservation outcome globally, not only within India. The minister is not exaggerating the underlying fact.
- 2. The argument moves from "this happened" to "this is how India does conservation," which is a different and larger claim.** Yadav's op-ed does not simply narrate the recovery, it offers a causal sequence, law creates the space, science manages the landscape, community sustains the outcome, and asks readers to treat that sequence as India's conservation method rather than as one favourable case.
- 3. The community-participation pillar is the most policy-significant of the three, and the hardest to standardise.** That 507 of 891 lions live outside Gir's boundary means the recovery's second half depended on tens of thousands of individual farmers tolerating a large predator near their land, sustained by compensation and [mitigation](#) infrastructure. Community tolerance of this kind is not purely a policy output, it is also a function of Gujarat's specific cultural relationship with the lion as a state symbol, which is not a variable a policy template can simply reproduce elsewhere by administrative order.
- 4. The Great Indian Bustard is the case that tests the template claim honestly.** A comparably resourced, comparably legally protected species recovery effort has not produced a comparable outcome, in part because the bustard faces different threat vectors, power-line collisions, habitat fragmentation across open grasslands with competing land uses, that the lion's forest-and-scrub landscape does not. The same sequence of law, science and community involvement has not, so far, replicated the lion's result.
- 5. The unresolved Kuno question undercuts the model claim from within the lion story itself.** The 2013 Supreme Court direction to establish a second wild population at Kuno National Park, intended precisely to hedge the single-site risk a model conservation programme should anticipate, remains unimplemented more than a decade later. A genuinely validated model would have already diversified its own risk; that it has not is the clearest internal evidence that the recovery, however real, is not yet a complete governance success.
- 6. What the claim gets right, carefully stated.** The specific, transferable components, sustained multi-year budgetary commitment, prey-base restoration as a [deliberate](#) strategy rather than passive protection, and investment in coexistence infrastructure, are genuinely worth testing in other landscapes. The error is treating

a bundle of favourable conditions as a portable formula rather than isolating which parts of the bundle can travel.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*): Schedule I, Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; IUCN status Endangered

Population trajectory: ~40-60 (early 1900s) to 359 (2005), 411 (2010), 523 (2015), 674 (2020), 891 (2025)

Range expansion: ~6,600 sq km (1990) to ~35,000 sq km across 11 districts (2025)

Wild prey share of diet: 26 per cent (1974) to ~74 per cent (2025)

Project Lion: announced 15 August 2020; sanctioned Rs 2,927.71 crore over 10 years, November 2, 2022

Lions outside Gir's formal protected core in 2025: 507 of 891 (majority, first time in the census's history)

Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change: Bhupender Yadav

Unresolved comparator: Supreme Court's 15 April 2013 direction (*Centre for Environmental Law, WWF-I v. Union of India*) to reintroduce lions to Kuno National Park, still not implemented as of 2026

WATCH THE TRAP: THE MINISTER'S OP-ED ARGUMENT IS ABOUT A CONSERVATION MODEL, DISTINCT FROM THE CENSUS DATA ITSELF, WHICH UJIYARI'S DAILY COVERAGE ALREADY GIVES YOU. DO NOT ANSWER A MAINS QUESTION ON THIS EDITORIAL BY SIMPLY RESTATING THE POPULATION FIGURES, THE TESTABLE CONTENT IS THE INSTITUTIONAL-DESIGN CLAIM AND ITS LIMITS.

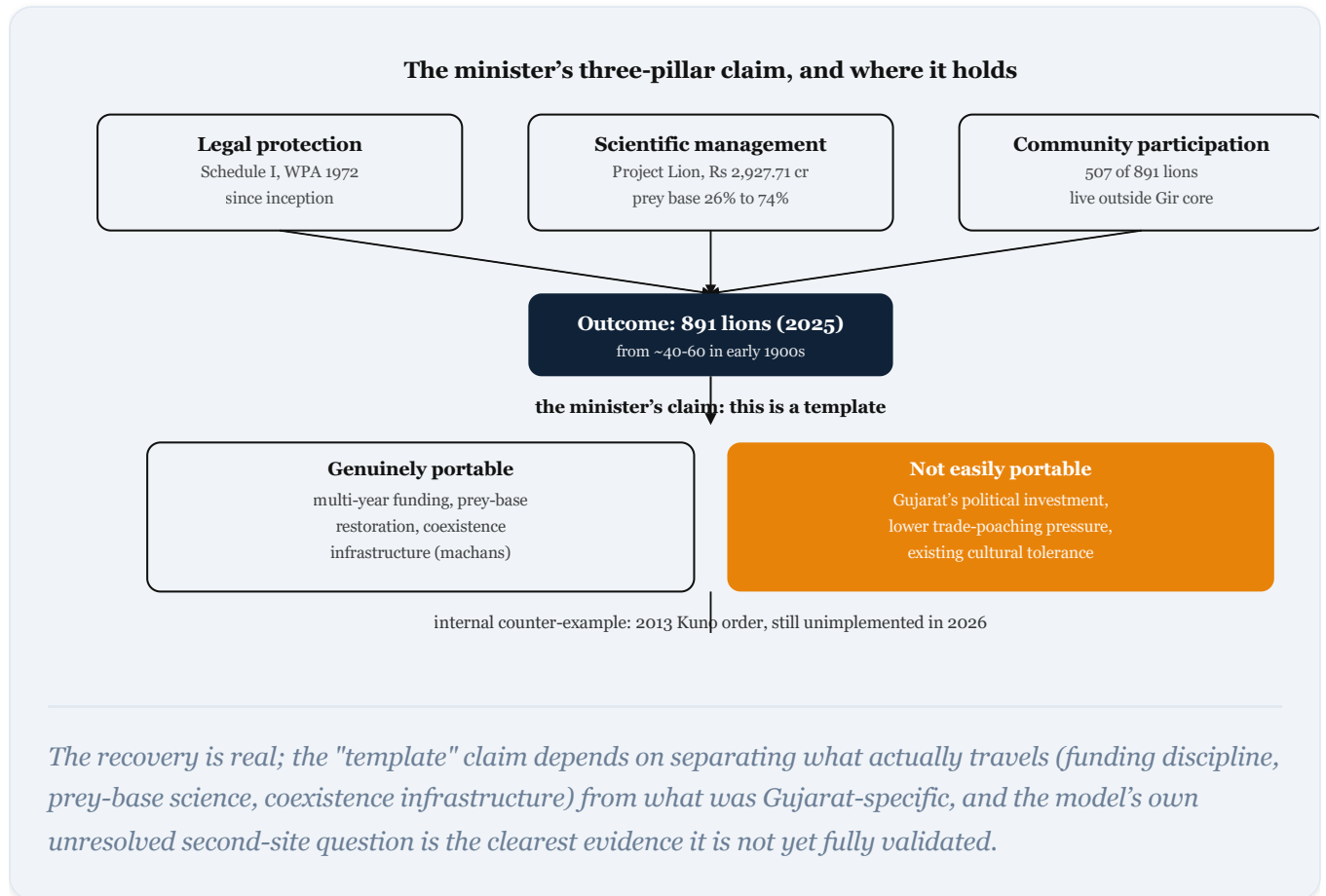
HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when an official cites a single success as proof of a general model, separate the outcome from the argument, and ask what the case would need to show to actually validate the model, not just illustrate it.**

A single case, however well-documented, can show that a combination of factors is *sufficient* under the conditions it occurred in. It cannot, on its own, show that the same combination is *necessary*, or that the same combination will produce the same result under different starting conditions. The rigorous move is to identify the case's favourable, non-generalisable conditions (Gujarat's political investment, the lion's comparatively lower international-trade poaching pressure, existing cultural tolerance) separately from its genuinely portable mechanisms (sustained funding, prey-base restoration, coexistence infrastructure), and to treat only the latter as exportable.

This same discipline applies whenever a single state's welfare scheme, a single sector's reform, or a single institution's turnaround is cited as a national template, the question is always which parts of the success travel and which parts were local conditions doing unacknowledged work.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS



TAKEAWAY BOX

One species recovering in one landscape is a result. Calling it a model asks a harder question: would the same law, the same science and the same community response happen again somewhere that is not Gujarat?

*Asiatic lion population **891** (2025), up from **674** (2020), **32.2 per cent** rise; range **~35,000 sq km** (2025) versus **~6,600 sq km** (1990); wild prey share of diet **~74 per cent** versus **26 per cent** in 1974; **Schedule I, Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972; Project Lion, Rs 2,927.71 crore, sanctioned November 2022; 507 of 891 lions** now live outside Gir's formal protected core; Union Minister **Bhupender Yadav**; World Lion Day, **August 10**.*

is it appropriate for a government to cite a conservation success as proof of a governance model without simultaneously naming the case, such as the unimplemented Kuno order, where the same government's record does not support the claim?

UPSC has repeatedly tested species-specific conservation efforts (Project Tiger, Project Cheetah) and the Wildlife (Protection) Act's Schedule framework; this editorial adds the institutional-design dimension, testing whether a single success generalises, which is a distinct and higher-order analytical skill.

"A single species' recovery is evidence of what worked in one landscape, not proof of a replicable national model." Examine this claim with reference to the Asiatic lion's conservation trajectory and India's wider wildlife governance record.

Sources: *Hindustan Times, PIB, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change*

Source: Yadav's World Lion Day Argument: The Lion Recovery as a Template, Not Just a Trophy — Ujjyari.com |
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• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav's World Lion Day op-ed argues that the Asiatic lion's rise from a population of roughly 40-60 animals in the early twentieth century to 891 in the 2025 census, with its range expanding from about 6,600 sq km in 1990 to nearly 35,000 sq km today, is not merely a wildlife success story but evidence that a specific combination, strict legal protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972, scientific landscape-level management through Project Lion, and active community participation, constitutes a working, replicable model for Indian conservation policy more broadly.



SUPPORTING

- The scale of the recovery is the minister's strongest evidentiary claim: from a population reduced to perhaps 40-60 individuals after decades of colonial-era trophy hunting, the lion has recovered to 891 by 2025, a trajectory sustained across five successive censuses since 2005 (359, then 411, 523, 674 and now 891), which is a longer and more consistent recovery curve than most single-species conservation narratives can show.
- Yadav's framing rests on three specific, named mechanisms rather than a vague appeal to political will: Schedule I status and legal protection dating to the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; scientific management under Project Lion, sanctioned at Rs 2,927.71 crore over ten years in November 2022, which funds monitoring infrastructure, veterinary care and human-lion conflict mitigation; and a revived prey base, wild prey now forming roughly 74 per cent of the lion's diet against 26 per cent in 1974, which required active habitat and grassland management outside as much as inside the protected core.
- The community-participation element is not incidental to the argument, it is central to it, because the majority of the 2025 count, 507 of 891 lions, now lives outside Gir's formal protected boundary, in revenue and agricultural land across eleven districts, meaning the population's growth has depended on local tolerance and coexistence mechanisms like the roughly 11,000 machans built for farmers, not solely on enforcement inside a sanctuary fence.
- By presenting this as a transferable template rather than a one-off achievement, the minister is making an institutional-design argument, that the sequence of legal foundation, then scientific strategy, then community buy-in, is the generalisable formula, and inviting it to be read against India's other flagship conservation efforts.



COUNTER

The template claim strains under scrutiny precisely where the lion story is least representative. The Asiatic lion recovery is a single-species, single-landscape success achieved under an unusually favourable combination of factors, a socially and politically influential state government invested in the species as a heritage symbol, a rural population historically more tolerant of a specific, familiar predator, and a species that, unlike the tiger, has not faced comparable levels of poaching for international wildlife trade.

The same 'law plus science plus community' formula has not produced comparable results for the Great Indian Bustard, whose population remains critically low, or for many freshwater and marine species facing habitat loss the model does not address. Generalising from one favourable case risks understating how much of the lion's success depended on Gujarat-specific political and cultural conditions that cannot simply be replicated by administrative fiat elsewhere.



WAY FORWARD

Treat the lion recovery as a documented case study with identifiable, transferable components, not a universal template. Isolate which elements are genuinely portable, prey-base restoration, community compensation and coexistence infrastructure, dedicated multi-year budgetary commitment, and long-term census discipline, and pilot them explicitly in landscapes with different social and political starting conditions before claiming replication. Simultaneously, use the lion's own unresolved second-site question, the unimplemented 2013 Supreme Court direction on Kuno reintroduction, as the honest counter-example: a model is not fully validated until it succeeds at diversifying risk, not only at growing numbers in one place.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

The recovery of the Asiatic lion population is often cited as validation of India's conservation model of legal protection, scientific management and community participation. Critically examine whether a single-species, single-landscape success can be generalised into a template for India's broader wildlife governance. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav's World Lion Day 2026 op-ed uses the Asiatic lion's recovery, from an estimated 40-60 individuals in the early 1900s to 891 in the 2025 census, as evidence for a broader claim: that a specific sequence of strict legal protection, scientific landscape management and community participation constitutes a working template for Indian wildlife governance. The claim deserves to be examined on its own institutional-design terms, not only as a conservation result.

BODY

The minister's argument rests on three named pillars. First, legal protection: the Asiatic lion has held Schedule I status under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 since the law's inception, the same tier of protection given to the tiger, which foreclosed legal hunting and gave enforcement agencies unambiguous authority.

Second, scientific management: Project Lion, announced in 2020 and sanctioned at Rs 2,927.71 crore over ten years in November 2022, funded not just anti-poaching infrastructure but prey-base restoration, monitoring technology and 33 rapid-response units, reflecting a landscape rather than a fortress approach to conservation. Third, and most emphasised in the minister's framing, community participation: the fact that 507 of the 891 counted lions in 2025 live outside Gir's formal protected boundary, across eleven districts, meant the population's expansion depended on farmer tolerance, supported by roughly 11,000 machans and a functioning conflict-mitigation system, not solely on fencing off a sanctuary.

This sequencing, law first, science second, community third, is the generalisable claim. It weakens where the lion case is least typical: Gujarat's specific political investment in the lion as a state symbol, and the species' comparatively lower vulnerability to the international wildlife trade that drives poaching pressure on the tiger or pangolin, are advantages not easily replicated by administrative decision elsewhere.

The Great Indian Bustard's continued decline despite a dedicated species recovery programme is the clearest available counter-example showing the formula does not travel automatically.

CONCLUSION

The Asiatic lion recovery is real and well-documented, and its component mechanisms, prey-base restoration, sustained multi-year funding, and locally embedded coexistence infrastructure, are genuinely worth exporting to other conservation landscapes. But a single successful case, however well-managed, is evidence of what can work under favourable conditions, not proof of a universally replicable model.

The more rigorous claim is conditional: this sequence works where political commitment, social tolerance

and species-specific risk factors align, and testing which of those conditions can be manufactured elsewhere, rather than assumed, is the real policy task the celebration should lead to.

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