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World Lion Day 2026: Asiatic Lions Cross 891, But the Kuno Question Remains Open

10 August 2026 ·

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)**ALSO FROM THE CREATOR****BharatNotes**Free UPSC notes, MCQs, PYQ analysis. **100% Free.**bharatnotes.com →**ADVERTISE****Advertise with Ujiyari**

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World Lion Day 2026: Asiatic Lions Cross 891, But the Kuno Question Remains Open

10 August 2026 · 6 min read ·

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

*World Lion Day, observed every August 10 to raise awareness about lion conservation, falls this year against the backdrop of the 16th Asiatic Lion Population Estimation, conducted May 10-13, 2025, which recorded **891 Asiatic lions (Panthera leo persica)** in Gujarat, a 32.2 percent rise from 674 in the 2020 census.*

THE SPECIES AND ITS ONE WILD HOME

The Asiatic lion, *Panthera leo persica*, is a subspecies of lion once distributed across West Asia and into India, now surviving in the wild solely in and around **Gir National Park and Sanctuary** in Gujarat's Saurashtra region, the world's only wild population of the subspecies. The IUCN Red List classifies the Asiatic lion as **Endangered**, and in India it is a **Schedule I** species under the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**, the highest level of legal protection available under Indian law, on par with the tiger. World Lion Day itself was launched in 2013 by conservationists associated with the African Lion & Environmental Research Trust (ALERT), with a first observance in Livingstone, Zambia, and has since become an annual global awareness date for lion conservation broadly, African and Asiatic populations alike; in India it is inseparable from the Gir story because Gir is the subspecies' last refuge.

WHAT THE 16TH CENSUS ACTUALLY FOUND

The Asiatic Lion Population Estimation is conducted roughly every five years by the Gujarat Forest Department. The 16th edition, carried out over May 10-13, 2025, covered an unusually wide survey area of approximately **35,000 sq km across 58 talukas in 11 districts**, reflecting how far beyond Gir's core the population has now spread. The headline number, **891 lions**, breaks down as follows.

CATEGORY	COUNT
Adult males	196
Adult females	330
Sub-adults	140
Cubs	225
Total	891

Of this total, **384 lions** were counted within Gir National Park and Sanctuary itself, while **507**, a majority, were recorded **outside** the traditional protected core, spread across districts including Junagadh, Gir Somnath, Bhavnagar, Amreli, Rajkot, Morbi, Surendranagar, Botad, Porbandar, Jamnagar and Devbhoomi Dwarka. The single largest pride recorded numbered 17 lions in Bhavnagar district, and a small population was documented just 15 km from Porbandar, in Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, the first lion presence recorded there since 1879. The trend across successive censuses shows sustained growth: from roughly 359 lions in 2005 to 411 in 2010, 523 in 2015, 674 in 2020, and now 891 in 2025, an increase of 217 animals, or 32.2 percent, over the five years since the last count.

PROJECT LION: THE CONSERVATION VEHICLE BEHIND THE NUMBERS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced **Project Lion** in his Independence Day address on August 15, 2020. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change formally approved its budget, **Rs 2,927.71 crore over ten years**, in a sanction letter dated November 2, 2022. The project funds a dedicated high-tech monitoring centre and veterinary hospital at Sasan in the Gir region, drone and CCTV-based surveillance, 33 rapid-response units for human-lion conflict management, and roughly 11,000 machans (elevated platforms) to help farmers coexist safely with lions moving through agricultural land outside the sanctuary boundary. The population growth recorded in the 2025 census is, in government messaging, presented as evidence the project's habitat-management and conflict-mitigation approach is working.

THE UNRESOLVED KUNO QUESTION

Population growth of this scale inside a single, geographically confined landscape raises a conservation-biology concern that predates Project Lion by years: a single-site population is inherently vulnerable to a single catastrophic event, whether disease outbreak, wildfire or an epidemic like the canine distemper virus that killed dozens of Gir lions in 2018. This is precisely the risk the Supreme Court sought to address in its judgment of **April 15, 2013** in the *Centre for Environmental Law, WWF-I v. Union of India* matter, when it directed the Ministry of Environment and Forests to expedite the reintroduction of Asiatic lions to **Kuno National Park** in Madhya Pradesh, holding that establishing a second, geographically separate wild population took precedence even over the Ministry's competing plan to introduce African cheetahs to the same

site, and that the reintroduction should proceed within a defined timeframe compliant with IUCN reintroduction guidelines. More than a decade on, that reintroduction has not happened. Kuno National Park instead became the site of India's African cheetah reintroduction programme (Project Cheetah, launched September 2022), while the Gujarat government has continued to resist relocating lions out of the state, citing the animal's status as a symbol of Gujarat's natural heritage. The gap between the Court's 2013 direction and the situation on the ground in 2026 remains one of Indian wildlife law's most cited examples of a binding judicial order going unimplemented, a fact that sits uneasily alongside the otherwise genuinely positive population trend the 2025 census reports.

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, [environmental impact assessment](#); Schedule I species and the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; species-specific conservation projects (Project Lion, Project Tiger, Project Cheetah).

GS Paper 1: Physical geography angle, distribution of flora and fauna and the significance of Gir's dry deciduous forest ecosystem as a single-site habitat.

Mains angle: "A rising population confined to a single landscape can be as much a conservation risk as a population decline." Critically examine this statement with reference to the 2025 Asiatic Lion Population Estimation, Project Lion, and the unimplemented 2013 Supreme Court direction on lion reintroduction to Kuno National Park.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

16TH ASIATIC LION POPULATION ESTIMATION (2025):

Conducted: May 10-13, 2025

Area surveyed: ~35,000 sq km, 58 talukas, 11 districts

Total population: 891 (up from 674 in 2020), a rise of 217 lions (32.2%)

Breakdown: 196 males, 330 females, 140 sub-adults, 225 cubs

Inside Gir National Park/Sanctuary: 384; outside traditional core: 507 (majority, first time)

New site recorded: Barda Wildlife Sanctuary near Porbandar, first lion presence since 1879

SPECIES FACTS:

Scientific name: *Panthera leo persica*

IUCN Red List status: Endangered

Legal protection: Schedule I, Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972

Sole wild habitat: Gir National Park and Sanctuary, Gujarat (Saurashtra region)

PROJECT LION:

Announced: PM Narendra Modi, Independence Day address, August 15, 2020

Budget: Rs 2,927.71 crore, 10-year period, sanctioned November 2, 2022

KUNO REINTRODUCTION:

Supreme Court direction to reintroduce lions to Kuno National Park (Madhya Pradesh): April 15, 2013

Status as of 2026: not implemented; Kuno instead hosts India's cheetah reintroduction (Project Cheetah, launched September 2022)

WORLD LION DAY:

Observed: August 10 annually

Launched: 2013, first observance in Livingstone, Zambia

Sources: *PIB, Down To Earth, The Hindu*

Source: World Lion Day 2026: Asiatic Lions Cross 891, But the Kuno Question Remains Open — Ujjyari.com | Free

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