

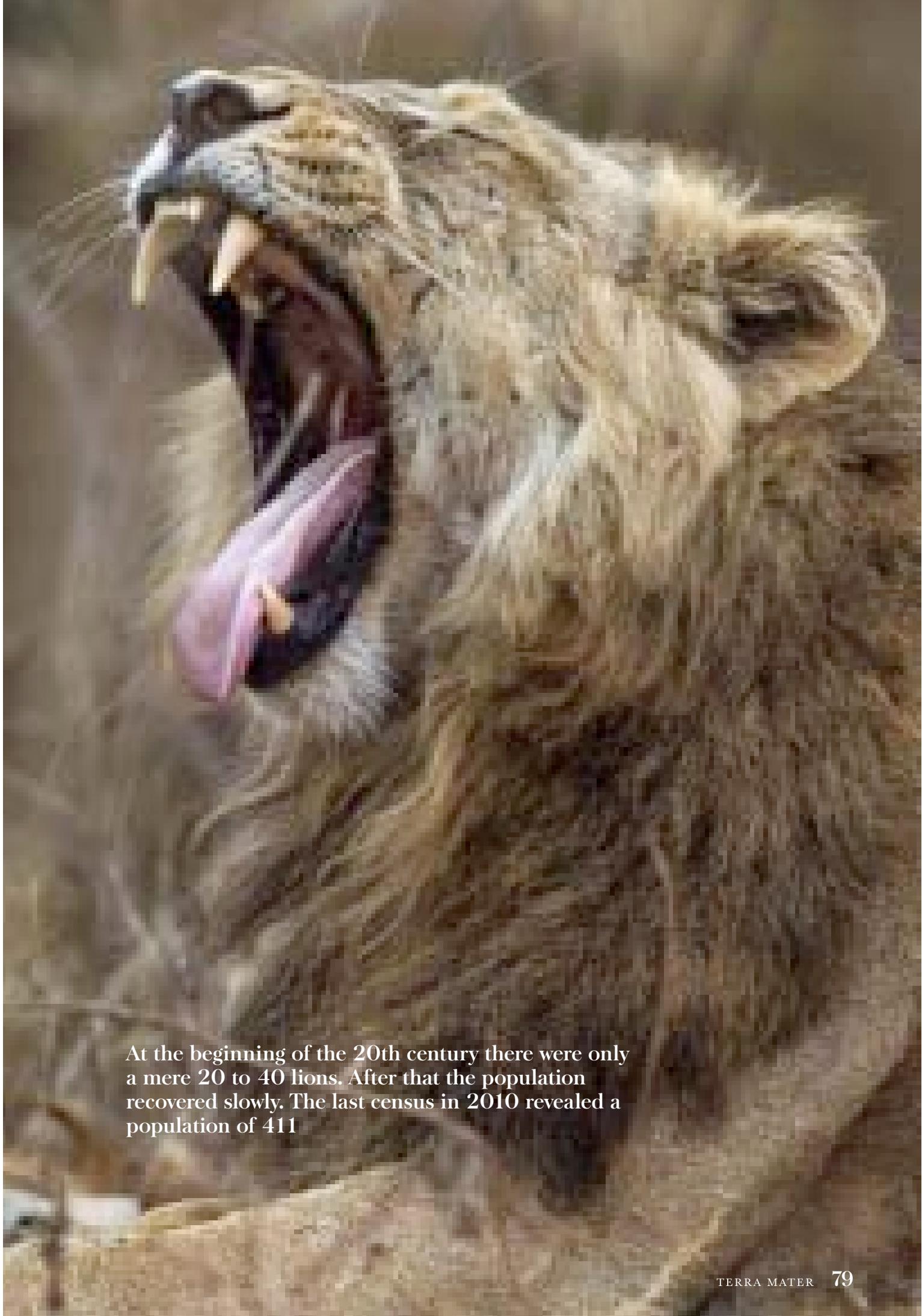




The King's last fight

Once the realm of the Asiatic lion stretched from the Mediterranean to Central Asia. Today its habitat has shrunk to a small protected area in north-west India. Although it is thriving there, the species is not yet out of the woods





At the beginning of the 20th century there were only a mere 20 to 40 lions. After that the population recovered slowly. The last census in 2010 revealed a population of 411





From their ambush lions attack with lightning speed.
The herdsmen of the region have learned to live
with the losses, even if it hurts: a cow or a buffalo is
worth 500 euros, a small fortune in India



India
Gujarat province
Gir sanctuary

IN THE EARLY MORNING it is still cool in Gir. Slowly the heat of the incipient day dissolves the fog in the treetops. The morning sun illuminates the forest honey yellow. Against the first light of day the teak trees appear as in a whimsical painting. It is quiet, only the shrill call of the peacocks penetrates the forest. At a water source a lioness lies in the protection of a tree. She dozes. Again and again she opens her eyes to scan the light deciduous forest to see if a chital or nilgai carelessly approaches the water. It's just ten metres away. There is an electrifying tension in the air. But in the forest nothing moves.

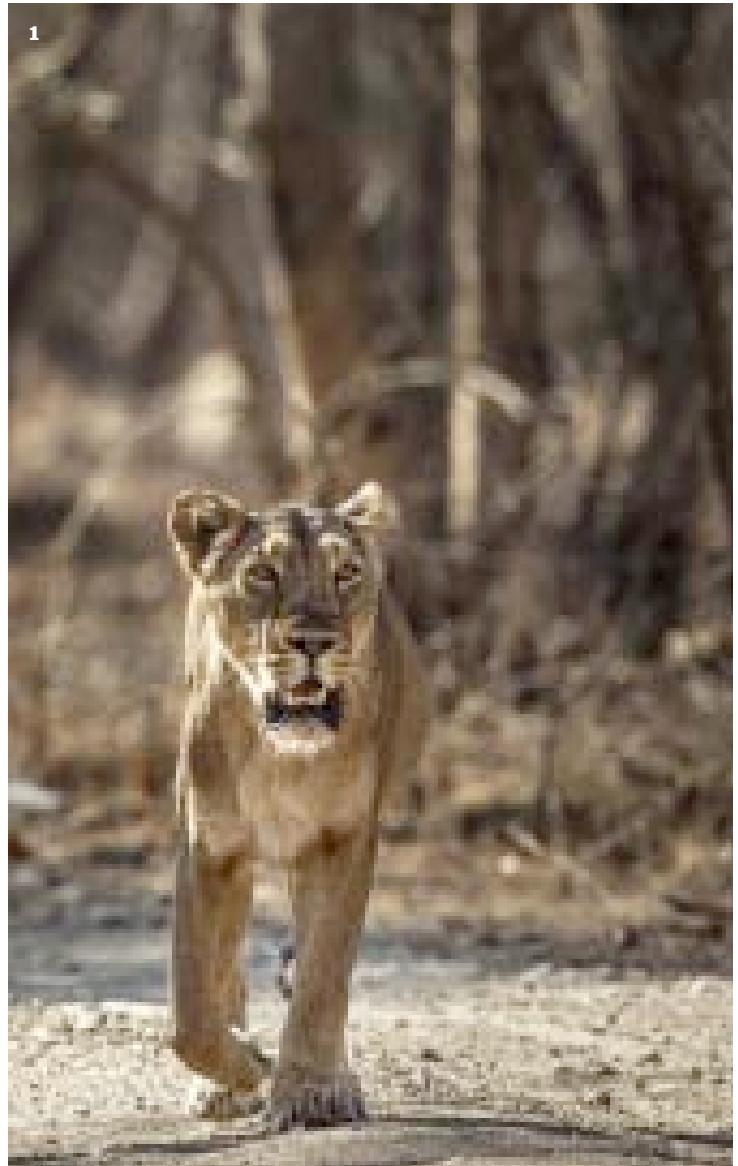
A Maldhari herdsman's high-pitched cries and loud tongue-clicking gives a signal to the lioness: a herd of cows and buffalo is advancing. Her ears perk up. When the first animals get out of the woods, she straightens up. She hears the sand crunching under the hooves of cattle, the leaves rustle. In a crouched position, she sneaks out of her cover and sizes up the calves. Twenty metres, ten metres, then just a stone's throw away.

Then she sees the herdsmen. The large feline hesitates for a moment, she finally turns away and disappears into the undergrowth empty-handed.

The Gir Forest in the western Indian state of Gujarat is home to the only wild lions outside of Africa. They are the last animals of the subspecies *Panthera leo persica*. 50,000 to 100,000 years ago, the Asiatic lion separated itself from its closest relatives, the African lion.

Once the king of beasts ruled a vast territory that stretched from the Mediterranean to India. Just 150 years ago the big cats crossed through the steppes of the Middle East and Central Asia. But man's relentless hunting brought them to the edge of extinction. In Turkey, the last lion was shot in 1870, in Syria in 1895, in Iraq in 1918. Only in India were some of the animals able to survive. The Gir forest is something like an ark for them today.

Thanks to one man, the lions have survived: Muhammad Mahabat Khanji III, governor of the nearby district capital Junagadh after 1911. The





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forests of Gir belonged to his hunting ground. His father had forbidden lion hunting but poaching continued. At the turn of the 20th century there were only an estimated 20 to 40 of the big cats left in the wild. After taking office the young governor was successful in stopping the poachers.

As a result the population recovered: in 1936 there were already 287 lions. In 1965 a part of the Gir forest became the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary which, ten years later, was declared to be the heart of the Gir Forest National Park. Since 1989 the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary, the Gir National Park and the adjacent Pania reserve form the 1,452 square

kilometre Gir Conservation Area. Since then, the lion population has steadily increased. The last official census of 2010 revealed 411 animals.

Nevertheless the pressure of a growing population, the small gene pool and possible diseases could threaten the future of the Asiatic lion. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has therefore classified the lions as “threatened”. And to the same extent to which the increasing number of wild lions in and around the park lets hunters rejoice, so do the conflicts between man and beast.



1 In the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary, founded in 1965, the lions can move freely

2 Unlike in the savannah of Africa, man and beast live almost oppressively side by side



To keep the lions at bay, it is enough to threaten with the herdsman's staff. Most of the time, that is

Vejabhai Amra, a man of slender build, sits on a wooden bed frame in front of the adobe walls of the small settlement of Dudhala in the middle of the Gir Wildlife Sanctuary. He is wearing the white dress of the Maldhari herders, two gold earrings and a wide overhanging moustache. A white cloth

is wrapped around his head. His family has lived here for five generations, he was born in the Gir Forest 71 years ago. Hardly anyone knows more about buffalo than him. And about lions, too. They follow the herd for hours. They patiently lie in wait and watch every

move. Then they attack. Then again it's a match of lion versus cow – and Maldhari versus lion. In most cases, man wins, but not always. Amra himself was once attacked by a lion. That was one of the worst moments of my life," he says. But the old man does not want to reveal the story to us. Not now.

In general, lions are associated with the African savannah. However, the Gir forest is clearly different from the African home of the big cats. Here people and animals live together in a confined space. The largest part of Gujarat state is densely populated and used for agriculture. The animals are used to having people nearby and they are not nearly as aggressive as their African relatives. To keep them at bay, the Maldhari make a usually sufficiently threatening gesture with the Lathi, the herdsman's staff, or they use a self-made slingshot.

Asiatic lions are slightly smaller than African ones. The males do not have as magnificent manes, that would just get in the way in the forest. They also have a more pronounced stomach fold.

Their hunting behaviour is also different: while African lions go on the prowl in large packs of up to thirty animals, their Asiatic counterparts hunt either alone or in small groups of up to a maximum of four animals, because a lightning-like attack from an ambush promises greater success in the forest.



too well what the loss of a cow or a buffalo means. His family has five cows and fifty buffalo. Each year they lose four to five animals to the big cats. The Maldhari do not eat the flesh of their livestock, but as Hindus, they consider cows to be sacred

animals. Nevertheless, the cattle represent the livelihood of nomads: they feed on the milk and ghee, a clear butter oil. What's left is sold. A buffalo produces about six litres per day, three of them go to the factory. Depending on the fat content, you get between 10 and 12 rupees (about 15 cents) per litre there.

When his family loses a buffalo or a cow they lose, Amra calculates, 45 cents a day or 160 euros a year. Based on a Maldhari's average annual income of about 1,300 euros, losses like that really hurt.

The Maldhari have good reasons to be angry with the lions. But they are not, at least most of them are not. Their respect for the animal's presence is due to the fact that the lion plays an important role in the Hindu faith. Many temples display Chamunda, the fearsome mother →



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Hardly a day goes by on which the lions in the Gir forest do not kill a cow or a buffalo. Although the structure of the lion's prey has changed – just a few decades ago the cattle provided about three-quarters of their food, and today it's only a quarter. Due to the efforts of conservation the numbers of chital and sambar deer, nilgai, Indian gazelles and wild boar have greatly increased. Wild animals have thus moved to the top of the big cat's menu.

However, in absolute numbers, the death toll in cattle is still deplorable because now there are more lions. Between 1995 and 2007 predators in Gir killed an average of 1,700 buffalo and cows annually. From 2007 to today this number has increased to more than 2,500 with lions far ahead of leopards as the main culprits.

Amra lights a clove cigarette. He knows only

**1 Maldhari
herdsman Amra
Vejabhai survived
a lion attack**

**2 Amras herd: at
night Maldhari
protect their animals
against lion attacks
with logs and briar**

**3 If Amra loses a
buffalo to a lion,
this costs him more
than 10 percent of
his annual income**



The lion is a very important symbol in India: the official seal of the Republic is decorated by three lions – and not by a tiger

goddess, riding a lion. It symbolises her overwhelming power. Narasimha, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is also known as the Lion God. He is also depicted as a hybrid being – half-man, half-lion.

Second, the king of beasts is of great importance, even from a worldly perspective: since the independence of India in 1947, three lions, but no tigers, adorn the official seal of the Indian Republic. The lion is depicted on all banknotes and coins and adorns every public building.

And third, the last lions of Asia are also a prime tourist magnet which secures the attention of the government and creates jobs leading to prosperity in the region. Not long ago only 200 inhabitants of the park region worked in tourism, today there are 3,000 jobs here. From 2009 to 2012 the number of visitors to the sanctuary rose from 120,000 to 460,000. Dozens of hotels have been built nearby.

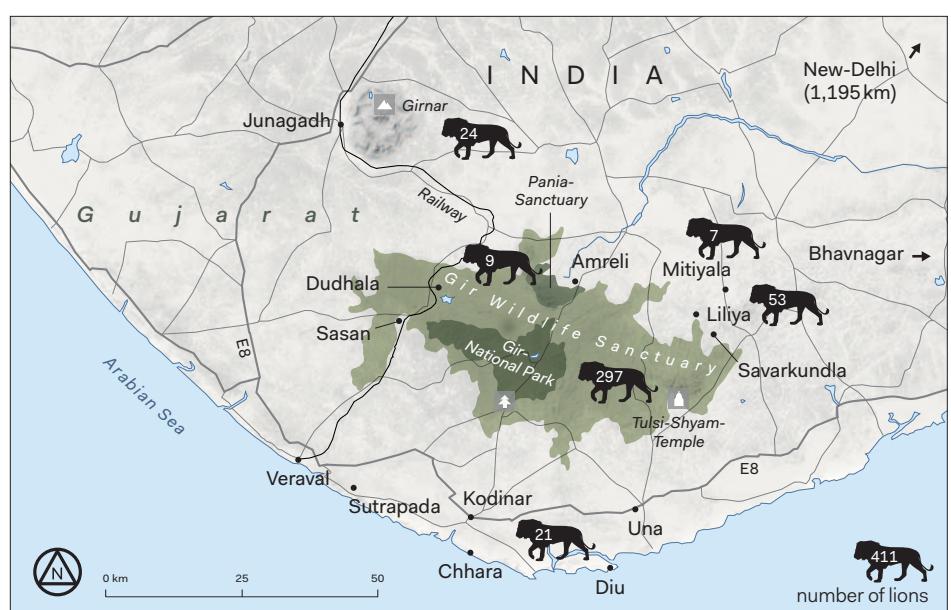
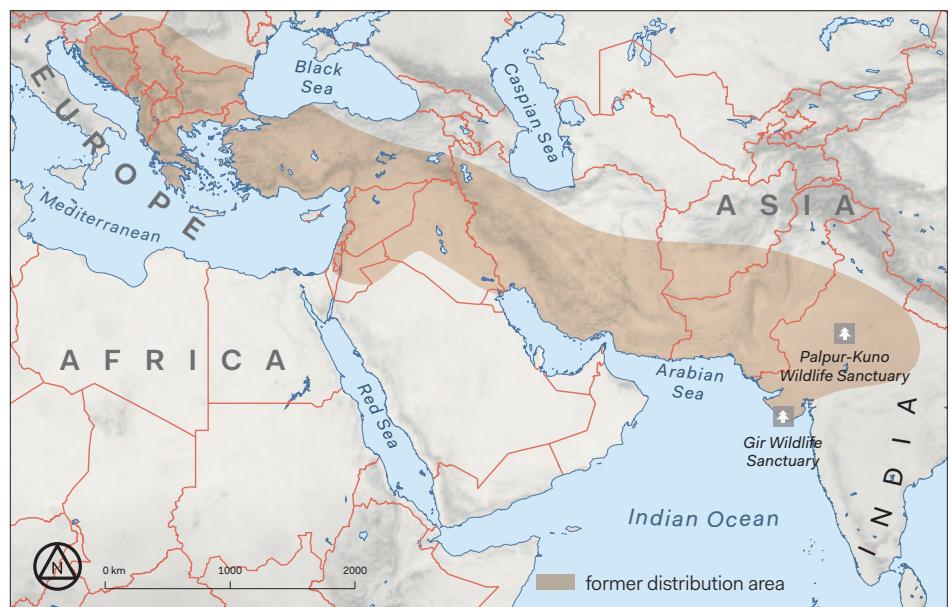
Even now, more and more roads are being built. Currently, the government is planning a ring road around the Gir forest – a project which is quite controversial. Although it may be good for tourism, it endangers the life of lions – increasing traffic kills more than a dozen lions in accidents with cars or trains every year.

The Gujarat Forest Department is responsible for the Gir sanctuary and for the last four years the man in charge here has been Dr Sandeep Kumar. In a green plaid shirt, Kumar is sitting at a sweeping marble table in his office in Sasan, a town on the edge of the sanctuary. A monumental depiction of two fighting lions hangs on the wall behind him. The shutters are closed because of the heat, the fan runs constantly. “Of course, conservation leads to conflicts between man and animal. The more big cats you have, the greater the conflict”, the wildlife conservationist admits. “All our energy is therefore devoted to reducing these tensions.”

Since 1972 the government has moved hundreds of families. Today no more Maldharis

THE LAST REFUGE

There used to be Asiatic lions even in Europe. Today the last of their kind live in a forest in India



live in the national park itself. In the buffer zone, the adjacent Gir Wildlife Sanctuary, there are about 300 families still living. In the future Kumar wants to resettle more Maldharis from here to places outside of the conservation area. But →



Mealtimes: since there is now sufficient wildlife in the forests of Gir, the lion's bill of fare has changed

that's not easy. You cannot force anybody," Kumar explains. And those who have not yet moved away, want to stay. Although the Maldhari do not own the land in the conservation area, they do have extensive grazing and water rights. Moreover, Kumar authorities don't have enough money. It isn't cheap to find land and build houses for so many people. India is a densely populated country.

However, the number of lions continues to grow. At least 500 are expected in the next official census in 2015. It's getting a bit cramped for the animals in the Gir forest. The lions are therefore continuously extending their habitat to areas outside of the park – a total of a quarter of the population has already left the boundaries of the conservation area. Today, a group of more than 50 big cats lives in the middle of densely populated areas around the towns of Savarkundla, Liliya, Amreli and Bhavnagar. Some of them have even ventured out to the coast 80 kilometres away. Just recently a pack was spotted on the beach near Kodinar.

Although the lion populations are developing almost too well in their asylum in the forest of Gir, the species as a whole is still nowhere near being out of the woods. Nearly 500 animals may seem quite a bit for the region, but for a whole species,

the number is disconcertingly low. "Their biggest problem," zoologist and Asiatic lion expert Ravi Chellam explains, "is their small gene pool. After all, these animals all come from those same two dozen ancestors that were rescued by the Governor of Junagadh at the beginning of the 20th century. This makes them susceptible to disease."

Chellam, who in 1993 wrote his doctoral thesis on the habitat and behaviour of the Asiatic lion, is particularly concerned that even a single pathogen could wipe out the entire *Panthera leo persica* population forever.

This fear is not unrealistic as history has shown: in 1994 more than a third of the Serengeti's 3,000 lions died from canine distemper. And as

Nearly 500 animals may seem like quite a bit for the region – but for the species as a whole, the number is disconcertingly low

recently as 2009 there were anthrax epidemics among cattle in several Indian states – the anthrax bacterium could easily spread to predators. "With such a small population, the spread of a disease could have catastrophic consequences," Ravi Chellam explains. "We are sitting on a time bomb. It makes no difference whether you have a dozen or a hundred eggs. If you have all your eggs in one basket and it falls to the ground, then all the eggs will break."

In order to ensure the survival of the animals in the long term, Chellam and other →



1 A buffalo herd on Kamleshwar reservoir in the sanctuary: in the dry season in April it is one of the last large water reservoirs

2 A paw print: it's gradually getting a bit cramped for lions in the Gir forest. Now they can often be found outside the boundaries of the conservation areas

3 National Park Manager Kumar in his office: "Of course, conservation leads to conflicts between man and animal. The more big eats you have, the greater the conflict"



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1 The conservation area has many hundreds of man-made drinking spots. Here, lions too refresh themselves

2 A lion sculpture in front of the Tulsi Shyam Temple: a symbol of power and glory

independent scientists have called for the establishment of a separate lion population at sufficient distance from Gir. Specifically, some animals are to be moved 800 kilometres away to the Palpur-Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary in the neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh – until 1873 the area was also home to the Asiatic lion.

But the Gujarat government doesn't want to share its lions with anyone. The income from tourism is too important and its people are extremely proud of the fact that the animals have survived right here in their region.

After seven years, accompanied by countless skirmishes and legal studies, the dispute has now ended up in New Delhi's Supreme Court. It was not until mid-April that it was decided that the survival of an endangered species has priority over the particular interests of state. Some of the lions are now to be resettled within a period of six months to the Palpur-Kuno Wildlife Sanctuary. An expert committee will decide how many animals are to be brought to Madhya Pradesh.

However, it's not over yet: the Government of Gujarat has announced that the decision will undergo examination and is considering an appeal.

It is almost evening in the Gir forest, the light dissipates on the horizon. Old Amra is still sitting

on the bed frame in front of his village. He has been wrestling with the idea for quite a while, but now the 71-year-old does, after all, want to tell us the story of the lion attack. It was ten or eleven years ago.

Early in the morning he and his brother brought their herds to pasture. At noon the brothers

“With such a small population, the spread of a disease could have catastrophic consequences”

stopped for a break under a tree. From the shade they watched their animals and chatted when, out of the blue, two stately lions attacked one of the buffalo calves.

With his staff Amra tried to drive the predators off. Then one of them rushed from behind the herdsman and tore him to the ground. For a moment Amra lost consciousness. The big cat's teeth were wedged in his neck. Seconds later the second lion ripped a deep flesh wound in his back.

But then the unexpected happened: when the buffalo saw what was happening, they started after the attacker. For fear of being overwhelmed by →



Playful eats:
Fortunately it doesn't
happen often that
herdsman are
attacked by lions

their sheer mass, the lion ran away. With their last bit of strength Amra and his brother dragged themselves home. Then the ambulance arrived. Amra can hardly remember what happened next. He spent ten days in the hospital until regaining consciousness. A ranger later named the two lions after the brothers: Amra and Natha.

Fortunately it doesn't happen often that herdsman are attacked by lions. But Amra is not unforgiving. For him, it is clear that he and his family will stay in the sanctuary. Some years ago, his two sons Veera and Jetha took over the herd.

"They grew up here and they will die here," the old man tells us as he says goodbye with a firm handshake, as if to express the strength of the Maldhari to us. "And if we live here – why shouldn't the lions?"



