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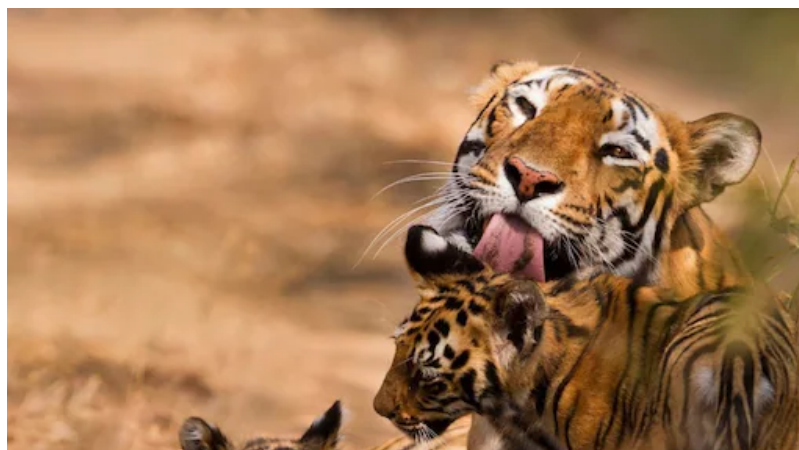
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EXPLAINED: Why 2021 Saw Highest Tiger Deaths In Decade And What That Means For Efforts To Save The Big Cat



There were more than 120 tiger deaths in the country in 2021 per NTCA data with poaching and man-animal conflict of major concern vis-a-vis conservation efforts

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KENNETH MOHANTY

Man-animal conflict is a major concern when it comes to tiger deaths, experts have said

It's a high India would have loved not to end the year on, but 2021 has registered biggest margin of drop in tiger numbers in a decade at more than 120 of the big cats having fallen prey to everything from poachers and accidents to natural causes with man-animal conflict, too, extracting a toll. India is home to a third of the global tiger population and the country's success in saving the big cat is crucial to global efforts to protect their numbers. Here's what you need to know.

HOW MANY TIGERS DOES INDIA HAVE?

According to the Union environment ministry, the fourth round of the country-level assessment done in 2018 showed that the estimated tiger population stood at 2,967. That marks an improvement over the last such

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India now accounts for 75 per cent of the global tiger population "owing to its long history of conserving the species through Project Tiger", the ministry told Parliament in August 2021. Nineteen states have received funds for tiger conservation with the country now home to 51 tiger reserves spread across 18 states that account for 2.24 per cent of India's geographical area.

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Madhya Pradesh leads the states in tiger numbers and, per the 2018 figures, counted 526 of the big cats within its territory. Karnataka was a close second with 524 tigers while Uttarakhand had the third-highest population of 444 tigers.

WHERE WAS TIGER DEATHS THE HIGHEST?

The [National Tiger Conservation Authority](#) (NTCA), which has reportedly maintained a public record of tiger deaths since 2012, has listed a total of 126 tiger deaths in 2021. That marks an increase of just a little under 20 per cent over the 106 tiger deaths recorded in 2020.

In 2021, Madhya Pradesh led in tiger deaths, too, and saw 42 fatalities, followed by Maharashtra, which counted 26 tiger deaths till December 29, 2021. Karnataka had 15 tiger deaths.

Experts and government sources are reported to have said that the actual death count could be higher as many deaths deep inside forests go unreported. [The Times Of India](#) said in a report, based on data put together by NGO Wildlife Protection Society of India (WPSI), that there was a close to 50 per cent jump in tiger deaths in the country in 2021 over 2020 with over 160 fatalities.

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The NGO had said in [July](#) this year — after providing a count of 94 tiger deaths till then in the country — that the “review of half-yearly data... shows the increase in deaths is shocking” Nitin Desai, WPSI’s central India director, had said then that “with six months still to go, the number of deaths may further go up”.

A separate report quotes the field director of the Dudhwa Tiger Reserve, Sanjay Pathak, as saying that a larger tiger population naturally implies there will be more deaths, too. “The mortality rate being high should not be a cause for alarm. The death toll this year is less than 5 per cent. Officials are putting efforts across India for the conservation of forests and wildlife species,” he said.

WHAT ARE THE LEADING CAUSES OF TIGER DEATHS?

According to NTCA, 65 deaths were reported inside a tiger reserve with the remaining having occurred outside of sanctuary limits. While the break-up of the causes of deaths was not available, poaching has remained one of the major causes behind tiger deaths. For the three years from 2018 to 2020, poaching accounted for 57 of the 303 total tiger deaths reported.

During the same period, 112 tiger deaths were put down to natural causes while the cause of 100 deaths had not been determined.

Man-animal conflict is increasingly turning out to be of concern, taking a substantial toll in both human and tiger lives. In 2020, the environment ministry had said that 44 persons had died due to tiger attacks while a report said that 2021 saw more than 80 deaths due to man-animal conflict involving tigers and leopards.

WHAT IS BEING, AND WHAT MORE NEEDS TO BE DONE, TO BRING DOWN DEATHS?

The Centre had in 1973 launched '[Project Tiger](#)' that is said to be "the largest species conservation initiative of its kind in the world". India's success with efforts to protect the species, classified to be 'endangered' in the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, have been hailed by experts even as the country has sought to strengthen monitoring and assessment of conservation strategies.

In 2006, the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972, was amended to pave the way for the setting up of NTCA while efforts have been made to strengthen anti-poaching activities by providing funds for states with tiger reserves for the

deployment of anti-poaching squads. Locals near tiger reserves are also included in the conservation efforts per the government strategy. A Special Tiger Protection Force (STPF) has also been established in some of the tiger reserve states.

The government has also pursued reintroduction of tigers in reserves like Sariska and Panna where the species was found to have become locally extinct. "The successful reintroduction of wild tigers in Panna is a unique example and one of a kind in the world as the rewilded and reintroduced tigresses are breeding," the environment ministry has told Parliament. Tigers have also been reintroduced in the western part of the Rajaji Tiger Reserve in Uttarakhand.

But experts say that urgent steps are needed to avoid tiger deaths due to man-animal conflict where a key intervention would be to create corridors allowing for the safe movement of tigers, which are known to travel for hundreds of kilometres to lay stake to their territory even as the rate of shrinking of wildlife habitats raises concerns.

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