

On World Wildlife Day, a call to protect India's critically endangered species

On World Wildlife Conservation Day (December 4), a look at India's rich biodiversity and the critically endangered species that find a home in the country

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Despite possessing only 2.4% of the world's land area, India accounts for 7-8% of all recorded species, which includes 45,000 species of plants and 91,000 species of animals. This rich biodiversity is one of the reasons that it has been historically identified as a megadiverse country. India has 10 biogeographic zones and is home to 8.58% of the mammalian species documented so far, with the corresponding figures for avian species being 13.66%, for reptiles 7.91%, for amphibians 4.66%, for fish 11.72% and for plants 11.80%.

World Wildlife Conservation Day (December 4) serves as an occasion to not only celebrate the country's rich biodiversity but also evaluate if enough is being done to protect the critically endangered species that find a home here.

Four of the 34 globally identified biodiversity hotspots, namely the Himalaya, Indo-Burma, the Western Ghats-Sri Lanka and Sundaland, are located in India. With only about 2.4% of world's total land surface, India punches far above its weight in encompassing the breadth that evolution has to offer. However the natural bounty is often at odds with India's economic trajectory. As the most populous country in the world and with 65% of the population aged under 35, India's growth trajectory implies a hunger for natural resources: land, wood, timber, forest produce, precious metals, coal and more. This unfortunately conflicts with wildlife habitat, bringing several species — of the land and air — too close to comfort with human settlements. Humanity's relationship to hunting predates, paradoxically, the human species itself. The need to hunt was driven by the need to eat. However in the modern era, hunting has taken on inglorious avatars — ranging from the sport of carousing in medieval times to trophy hunting, to poaching, trafficking and attacks to defend cultivated lands. The latter is said to be the catalyst of man-animal conflict in India. Indian civilisation has absorbed a tolerance, even reverence for several wild animals as is evidenced in its religious mythology. The wildlife reserves and sanctuaries in India, set up to conserve certain endangered species, are unfenced, unlike the big game reserves in Africa and neither is hunting permissible in India as a licensed, recreational sport like in many countries around the world.

However this doesn't imply that India is a haven for wildlife. There are 73 "critically endangered" species in India as of 2022 — the most updated estimates made available by the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) classifies species as critically endangered when they are at the highest risk of extinction in the wild. The number of critically endangered species has risen from 47 in 2011, though this also due to improvements in data availability and monitoring and not entirely due to animals of a species getting decimated.

Of the nine species of mammals considered critically endangered, eight are endemic, which means that their habitat is limited to a small geographic area within India. These include the Kashmir Stag or Hangul, Malabar Large-spotted Civet, Andaman Shrew,

Jenkin's Shrew, Nicobar Shrew, Namdapha Flying Squirrel, Large Rock Rat and Leafletted Leaf-nosed Bat.

While the carnivores of the cat family — lions, tigers, cheetahs — garner considerable attention because of their appeal to tourism, they are only three on the list of critically endangered animals.

Birds such as the Great Indian Bustard face threats from sources such as powerlines in Rajasthan and often fail to garner the attention they deserve for their conservation.

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