



ICMR Recommends Vaccine for Lions

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The Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR) has confirmed that the Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) was responsible for lion deaths in the Gir forest of Gujarat and recommended that the remaining lions be vaccinated to prevent further outbreaks.

- This goes against recommendations by wildlife biologists that wild animals shouldn't be vaccinated as it may compromise their immunity against future infections.
- Laboratory tests have confirmed that four of the 23 lions had been infected by the Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) while 10 others had been infected Babesia protozoa, an infection spread by tick parasite.
- Apart from vaccination, ICMR has also recommended that the animals should be placed in 2-3 different sanctuaries.
- The devastating link between the CDV and potential epidemics has been known since 1994, when within the Serengeti-Mara ecosystem of East Africa (Tanzania) nearly a third of the lion population died or disappeared.
- The same pattern is being repeated in Gujarat today, with the forest department confirming the spread of the CDV from dogs to the lions.

Issue of Relocation of Lions

- The 2015 lion census by the Gujarat government showed that it was home to 523 lions, a 27% increase compared with the 2010 Census.
- The population of lions has started spilling outside the protected areas and one-third of the 523 lions in the region are living outside the core, making them susceptible to viruses.
- Experts say the paucity of big animals inside the park's wildlife area, their increasing dependence on domestic cattle and congestion are some reasons for the spread of CDV.
- Also because of rapid urbanisation in the area, large influx of human population has increased man-animal conflicts. Therefore, the government also needs to give more support to the local community for better conservation of lions.

- Moreover, it is also a question of genetic diversity. A species which is bottle-necked, becomes more susceptible to disease. The risks to population also include catastrophes like a forest fire or an extreme weather event.
- Earlier in September 2011, the Centre for Animal Disease Research and Diagnosis (CADRAD), Bangalore, and Indian Veterinary Research Institute (IVRI), Uttarakhand, analysed tissues from a 2007 Gir lion carcass. They found the presence of highly contagious peste des petits ruminants virus (PPRV) which is also highly contagious and carries an 80-100% chance of mortality.

The Legal Tussle

- In 1990, the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) proposed the creation of a second wild population of Asiatic lions to safeguard the species against potential calamities in Gujarat's Gir National Park. It favoured shifting of about 40 lions from Gujarat to Madhya Pradesh's Palpur Kuno sanctuary.
- Gujarat, however, refused to part with 19 animals for an initial relocation plan.
- In 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that Gujarat needed to relocate some of its lions to neighbouring Madhya Pradesh to avoid the possibility of disease or some other disaster wiping out the entire population.
- The Gujarat government refused to translocate the lions to Kuno in Madhya Pradesh over concerns of its co-existence with the tiger, insufficient prey density and the difference in the climatic condition of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

Canine Distemper Virus

- Canine distemper virus is known mainly to cause a severe infection in dogs respiratory, gastrointestinal, respiratory and central nervous systems, as well as the conjunctival membranes of the eye.
- CDV may also affect wild carnivores such as wolves, foxes, raccoons, red pandas, ferrets, hyenas, tigers, and lions.
- The prevalence of this virus and its diversity in wildlife of India is not adequately studied.
- A lion does not eat the entire prey at one go. In between, the dogs consume the kill and infect it with the CDV. Once the lion returns to finish it off, it gets the deadly disease.
- The CDV is more dangerous for lions than tigers. This is because lions move together in large numbers, making them more vulnerable to the virus as compared to tigers that are more isolated and territorial animals.

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