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## Rise in the Population of Asiatic Lions

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### Why in News

Recently, the Gujarat Forest Department has announced an **increase in the population of Asiatic lions in the Gir forest region.**

- Total **674 lions** were recorded compared to the **523 in the Lion Census of 2015.**
- The count was estimated from a **population observation exercise** called **Poonam Avlokan** in place of the **15<sup>th</sup> Lion Census.**
  - The 15<sup>th</sup> lion census was due to be conducted on 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> June, but was postponed indefinitely due to the **Covid-19 outbreak.**
  - Poonam Avlokan is a **monthly in-house exercise** carried out **every full moon.** It was a mechanism developed by the Forest Department in 2014 as part of preparations for the 2015 Lion Census.

### Key Points

- **Numerical Analysis:**
  - The lion population has **grown** by **almost 29%** from the last count in 2015. The lion population in the state of Gujarat has **doubled since 2001.**
  - Moreover, the distribution of the lions has **expanded from 22,000 sq. km in 2015 to 30,000 sq. km in 2020.** Thus, the **geographical distribution area** for Gir forests's lions has been **increased by 36%.**

- **Significance of 2020 Count:**

- The 2015 Census had counted 523 lions, **up from 411 in 2010.**  
But 12 lions were killed in a **flash flood in Amreli** just a month after the 2015 Census.
- The deaths of lions in 2015 was followed by deaths of more than two dozen lions in an **outbreak of Canine Distemper Virus (CDV) and babesiosis in 2018.**  
Babesia is a tiny parasite that infects red blood cells and is usually transmitted by a tick bite. Infection with Babesia is called babesiosis.
- Additionally, the **babesiosis outbreak was also reported in Gir in 2020,** and around two dozen lions were reported to be killed.

- **Reasons for Increase:**

- Over the last several years, the lion population in Gujarat has been **steadily rising.**
- This increase has been powered by **community participation, emphasis on technology, wildlife healthcare, proper habitat management and steps to minimise human-lion conflict.**

## Regular Lion Census

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- **History:**

- The **first Lion Census** was conducted by the **Nawab of Junagadh** in **1936.**
- **Since 1965, the Forest Department** has been regularly conducting the Lion Census every five years.

- **Procedure:**

- **Time Period:**

- The regular Lion Census is conducted **once every five years**. The **last Census** was conducted in **2015**.
- The Lion Census usually runs **for more than two days**, including a preliminary census and a final census.
- However, the Poonam Avlokan is carried out for **24 hours assessing the number of lions** and their locations in their respective jurisdictions.

- **Participation:**

- The Forest Department **invites NGOs, experts and wildlife enthusiasts** to join the Census for transparency and augmenting manpower.
- Whereas the Poonam Avlokan exercise is conducted **only by forest staff**.
- Thus, the Lion Census experiences **larger participation** of the people compared to the Poonam Avalokan exercise.

- **Methodology Used:**

- The Lion Census is done using the **block counting method** — in which census enumerators remain stationed at water points in a given block and estimate abundance of lions in that block, based on direct sighting of lions who need to drink water at least once in 24 hours during the summer.
- Under Poonam Avlokan exercise, the teams keep moving in their respective territories and make their estimates based on **inputs provided by lion trackers and on chance sightings**.

## **Gir National Park**

- The Gir National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the **Junagadh district of Gujarat**.
- The Gir Forests is the **only natural habitat of Asiatic lions**. It was declared as a sanctuary in 1965 and a national park in 1975.
- Gir is often linked with "**Maldharis**" who have survived through the ages by having a symbiotic relationship with the lions.  
Maldharis are religious **pastoral communities** living in Gir. Their settlements are called "**nesses**".

## **Protection for Asiatic Lions**

- **Protection Status:**
  - **IUCN Red List:** Endangered
  - **CITES:** Appendix I
  - **Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972:** Schedule I
- **Conservation Efforts:**
  - The “**Asiatic Lion Conservation Project**” has been launched by the Union Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC).
  - The project has been approved for **three financial years from 2018 to 2021.**
  - The project envisages scientific management with the involvement of communities in coordination with multi-sectoral agencies for disease control and veterinary care for overall conservation of Asiatic lions.

## Way Forward

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- Earlier, the lions from the gir forest had faced the **threat of extinction** but **timely intervention** has shown **extraordinary recovery.**
- Lions have recorded a healthy growth in population due to **effective conservation and management efforts** by the state government with support from the Centre.
- Further, **more focussed protection programmes and health care programmes** need to be implemented to control diseases like CDV, babesiosis which continue to take lives of lions from the Gir forest.

**Source:PIB**