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International Tiger Day: Save tigers, conserve wildlife

India is the land of tigers. More than 70% of the world's tiger population is found in India.

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Over the years, the Government of India has taken several initiatives to provide a safe and favourable environment for tigers without human interference.

By **Priya Agarwal Hebbar**,

I was a 7-year-old when I went for my first wildlife safari in Bandhavgarh, Madhya Pradesh. That was the day I learnt the true meaning of the phrase 'patience is a virtue'. We waited for several days to catch one glimpse of a tiger and when I finally saw her, I was awestruck. That feeling of seeing a tiger in its natural habitat for the first time is an out of the world experience. That day on, I have spent almost every vacation in a nature reserve. Being amongst nature is my way to ensure I am in touch with the real essence of Mother Earth. We must ensure that our future generations get to experience the same exhilarating feeling and not merely read about this most wonderful animal in books. Learning to respect and live harmonically with all other life forms on Earth is crucial to ensure a positive future for generations.

India is the land of tigers. More than 70% of the world's tiger population is found in India.

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Not just tigers, India is actually home to the largest number of wild cats in the world. India has 15 species of wild cat, accounting for 40% of all species found worldwide. Unfortunately, 9 of these 15 cats are either endangered, vulnerable or near threatened. This is a red flag.

When apex predators like big cats thrive, the entire ecosystem thrives. Apex predators keep the general animal population in control, which in turn ensures equilibrium in nature. Sadly, over the last 150 years, there has been a massive drop of nearly 95% in the global tiger population, making these charismatic animals vulnerable to extinction.

Fortunately, the world and India have taken note. In the wake of the rapid decline in the global population of the tiger several countries signed an agreement at the Saint Petersburg Tiger Summit in Russia on July, 29, 2010 committing to take concrete measures to preserve the species. Ever since then July 29 is celebrated as International Tiger Day to raise awareness about tiger conservation.

In India, in the year 1900, we had 100,000 tigers, which went down to just 1,411 by 2006. Over the decades, the government of India has taken several measures to protect and increase the number of tigers in the country. In terms of releasing funds, enforcing conservation laws, and raising awareness, India has done very well to protect tigers. Owing to their continuous efforts, India's total tiger population increased to 2967 in 2019. But it needs to grow much more.

According to the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), there were about 3,900 tigers across the globe in 2021. This is well short of the 6,000 that was targeted at the St Petersburg Summit for the year 2022. Even though countries are striving hard to increase the population of tigers, there are several issues that need to be addressed to help meet more ambitious targets

Data suggests that every year more than 100 tigers die due to unnatural issues, many because of habitat destruction which lead to human-animal conflict. Due to the depletion of natural habitat, tigers often enter human settlement areas. They attack livestock and occasionally human beings for survival. Habitat destruction also leads to prey depletion which in turn leads to health and survival concerns for tigers. Nature does not like an imbalance.

Over the years, the Government of India has taken several initiatives to provide a safe and favourable environment for tigers without human interference. Unique initiatives like the establishment of Tiger Conservation Foundations, sharing of profits gained through tiger tourism with local communities, and incentivized voluntary relocation of humans have been proven beneficial in avoiding wildlife and human conflict. Ultimately, it is joint action by the Government, communities and the wider public including private sector initiatives which will help swell the number of tigers in the world.

At the same time, there need to be awareness campaigns internationally which dissuades any commodification of the tiger and its body parts. If the demand for products made from poached tigers is reduced to zero, then there will be no incentive for poaching. The global community needs to come together to eradicate this scourge. This not only threatens endangered species like tigers but entire even puts human health at risk. Moreover, wildlife welfare



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has received far less attention than welfare for farm or companion animals, although attempts have been made. Needless to say, India must and will play a lead role. Our country is one of the top 17 mega-diverse countries in the world according to the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC), and therefore has a very big responsibility towards conserving flora and fauna. Let us pledge to protect our jungles and their king, the majestic tiger.

(The author **Non Executive Director, Vedanta Limited**. Views expressed are personal and do not reflect the official position or policy of the FinancialExpress.com.)

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