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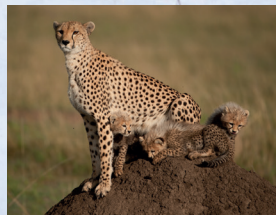
# Big Cats

A magazine by IBCA on wildlife conservation

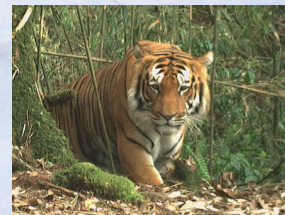
## Amur Leopard Back from the Brink



The Elusive Jaguars  
of Latin America

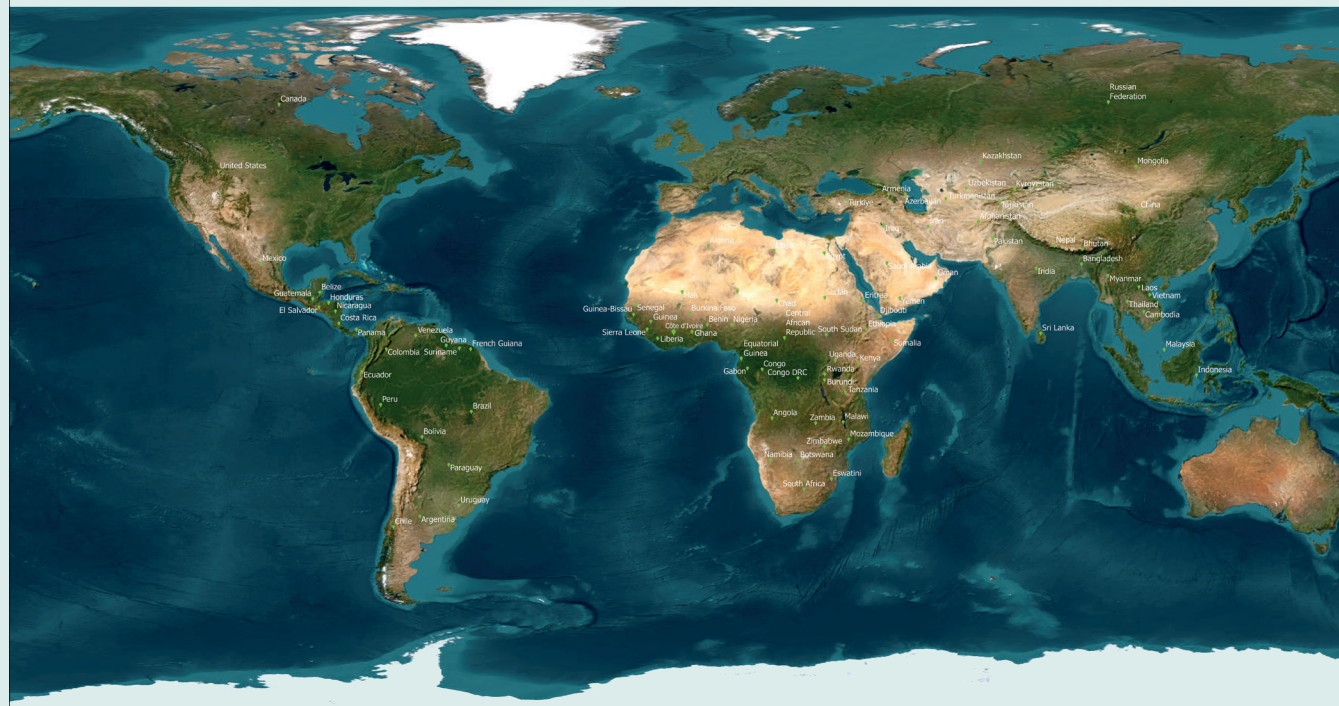


Cheetahs in Maasai  
Mara National Reserve



Bhutan's Big Cat  
Conservation

# Big Cat Range Countries



Source: Earthstar Geographics

**Big cats—cheetah, jaguar, leopard, lion, puma, snow leopard and tiger—are found across Asia, Africa, and in North, South and Central America. Certain sub-species of tiger, lion, leopard and cheetah are listed in the critically endangered category today.**

**Protecting big cats eventually results in supporting valuable natural landscapes and conserving rich biodiversity. Big cat conservation in politically diverse regions encourages cross-border collaboration on environmental issues, benefiting biodiversity conservation and sustainability. The IBCA aspires to be an effective inter-governmental treaty-based alliance comprising 95 big cat range countries in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.**

## Editor's Note



### Hope and Resilience

The year 2024 ends with hope and some apprehension. It was a critical year for climate change, biodiversity and community efforts.

The 29th UN Climate Change Conference (COP29) in Baku, Azerbaijan, agreed that by 2035 rich countries would triple climate finance for developing countries. Of course, skeptics saw it as another lost opportunity, while optimists said Baku gave another chance to all to make the planet livable.

At the COP16 in Colombia, representatives from finance, indigenous peoples and people of African descent and environmental organisations came together to address crucial issues for nature and society. The delegates pledged to restore 30% of degraded ecosystems by 2030, reducing pollution, and phasing out harmful subsidies in agriculture and other sectors. The next five years will be crucial in planning for the planet. How we decide for this ambitious plan for the planet and who all plan for it continues to be a challenge.

In this issue, we bring several stories of hope and resilience. Our cover story is about how the Amur leopard has made a comeback in Russia. We have in this issue some exclusive pictures of the Amur leopard from the Land of Leopard National Park, Vladivostok, Russia. Equally compelling is our report on the jaguar's survival plans in Latin America. Both these big cats need innovative conservation programmes to prevent them from extinction.

A stunning photo feature on cheetahs from Africa tells us about the beauty and vulnerability of these big cats. Their speed and stealth continue to make them a fascinating subject for research and the camera. A ground report from Bhutan emphasises the critical contribution humans can make in restoring balance in the ecosystem.

This issue reiterates IBCA's commitment to the Sustainability Development Goals, and elaborates on its key goals for the future. Five international experts have contributed for this issue. We hope to bring more experts and in-depth stories in the next issue.

Happy New Year! 🐾

MALVIKA KAUL

# Big Cats

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Cover Image: A male Amur leopard in the Land of Leopard National Park, Russia. Photograph by Nikolay Zinoviev

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## Our Contributors for this Issue



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Head of Public Relations at the Land of the Leopard National Park, Russia. The park has been established to exclusively protect the Amur leopard, and he highlights efforts to save the critically endangered leopard. Through engaging storytelling he fosters global awareness of conservation, inspiring people to value and protect nature. His mission is to turn attention into action for the world's shared natural heritage.



### KALYAN VARMA

A wildlife photographer, filmmaker, naturalist and explorer dedicated to documenting wildlife and the environmental issues that define our times. He has contributed to organisations like Nat Geo and BBC. His work has also appeared in Nature, The Guardian, BBC Wildlife. He is also one of the founders of NatureinFocus Foundation, a platform dedicated to wildlife and environment conservation.



### DR KAUSIK BANERJEE

A carnivore biologist dedicated for past two decades to conserving the apex predators not only for their intrinsic value but also for the critical roles they play in maintaining ecological balance and the overall health of ecosystems. His work on Asiatic lions, tigers and leopards involved a combination of science, advocacy, policy, and community engagement. He works as Lead Specialist, IBCA.



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Secretary General, Global Tiger Forum, India. He is closely associated with 'Project Tiger' in India for almost 35 years. He was the Director of several tiger-rich reserves in Central India, like Kanha and Bandhavgarh and took many initiatives to protect the tiger, its habitat and prey. He has authored three books on wildlife management and policy.

An Amur Leopard cub at the Land of the Leopard National Park

# AMUR LEOPARD Back from the Brink

In the Siberian Forest conservation efforts at the Land of the Leopard National Park in Russia have pulled the magnificent creature from the precipice of extinction

TEXT BY IVAN RAKOV PHOTOS BY NIKOLAY ZINOVIEV

VLADIVOSTOK, RUSSIA  
NOVEMBER, 2024:📍

The female Amur leopard, a creature of sun and shadow, moves with silent precision in the Leopard National Park. Her spotted coat is a camouflage designed for the dappled shade of jungle canopies, not the stark, open spaces of a Siberian winter. Her whiskers twitch as she moves cautiously through the trees. The bitter cold bites at her fur, but she is undeterred.

This elusive predator has recently given birth to a litter of kittens. Driven by the instinct to provide, she ventures into the frozen wilderness, her keen eyes scanning for the slightest movement. Each step is deliberate as she embarks on the vital hunt to sustain her young. Nestled deep within a snow-laden hollow, her vulnerable cubs await her return, their lives inextricably tied to the success of her hunt.

Amur leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis*) is a leopard subspecies native to the Primorsky region of southeastern Russia and northern China. It is listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List. In 2024, only 150 were estimated to survive in southeastern Russia and northeastern China.

The Amur leopard, which lives in the Far East of Russia, is a predator that, when not bringing up cubs, is something of a loner. Its fur is paler than that of other subspecies, and its paws are designed like snowshoes, but it's surprisingly agile and can leap up to 5 meters.

This leopard is a native of these forests in the southwest of Primorsky Krai (near the borders of Russia, China and North Korea) and has always lived here. This unique area combines northern and southern flora features and is distinguished by various animal species.

A creature of beauty and grace, Amur leopard is an apex predator, a crown jewel of the ecosystem. Its survival is a barometer of our planet's health, a testament to the delicate balance of nature. To safeguard the leopard is the intricate web of life

that sustains us all. In protecting this magnificent cat, we protect the forests, the rivers, and air we breathe. Through the preservation of the leopard, we discover a profound truth: our destiny is intertwined with the wild, and in saving them, we ultimately save ourselves.

At the beginning of the 20th century, leopards lived peacefully in the south of the Russian Far East, as well as on the entire Korean Peninsula and part of northeastern China. Once a thriving population graced these lands, their golden forms a common sight in the coastal forests. But the relentless march of human progress had cast a long shadow over this magnificent predator. Hunting, deforestation, and

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**The Amur leopard is recognised as one of the most endangered big cat species globally. A 2024 estimate by IUCN claimed that only 150 Amur leopards are left in the wild**

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habitat loss conspired to push the Amur leopard to the brink of oblivion. By the turn of the millennium, a mere handful of these elusive cats clung to survival in a world that seemed intent on their demise – only 35. Only a few leopards remained near Vladivostok in the southernmost part of the Russian Far East.

## Cat-friendly park

Spring has arrived. The time when more prey appears in the forests and the task of the young mother is made easier. But at least another year will pass before the young kittens begin an independent

life. Amur leopards don't have a specific breeding season. Their gestation period lasts around 12 weeks, and the females give birth to a litter of 2-3 cubs. The cubs are born blind and weigh around half a kg. As they're so vulnerable when they're first born, the mother keeps her cubs hidden for around 6-8 weeks.

Will the leopards survive?

The Land of the Leopard National Park provides hope. Created in April 2012, the park has striven to save the last of Amur leopards on the planet. A bastion against extinction emerged as a beacon of hope for this beleaguered species. This national park is a continuation of conservation efforts in this part of the region, following the small local reserves that began that were established in the 1970s. With meticulous care and unwavering dedication, scientists and conservationists embarked on a mission to restore the Amur leopard to its rightful place in the ecosystem. Some believed that this was no longer possible, that humankind was too late – every single leopard needs to be caught and placed in zoos, the only way they, or so to say just their shadow, can survive. But they underestimated the will of wildlife to live and the ability of people who set themselves a clear goal.

Today, as leopard poaching appears to have been eradicated and ungulates (the leopard's prey base) taken under protection, forests have ceased to burn out annually and suffer from timber cuts. The leopard population has not only been pushed back from the brink of extinction but has more than tripled and now accounts for 130 adults on the Russian side of the range (and there are 20 more in China).

The park is called the most cat-friendly protected area in Russia. After all, only here can you find four species of wild cats at once—the Amur leopard, the Amur tiger, the Lynx, and the Leopard cat. Land of the Leopard National Park holds the highest local number of Amur tigers: 58 individuals out of 750 estimated in Russia.

Through the lens of camera traps, the lives of these enigmatic creatures unfold



The kittens have left the mother and set out on their own

revealing a tapestry of survival, love, and resilience. Each leopard, a unique individual with a story to tell, is meticulously

monitored, its movements tracked, and well-being ensured. Slowly but surely, the population has started to rise, a testament

to the power of human determination and the indomitable spirit of nature. The largest camera trap network in Russia, consisting

of more than 400 cameras, operates in the Land of the Leopard National Park.

Each adult predator is assigned an ID

**Climate change is reducing the suitable habitat for Amur leopards. This is primarily due to alterations in their forest environment and decreased availability of prey species**

number, and many of them get their own Leopard Patron and a name. Some of the most famous patrons are Pope Francis, actress Pamela Anderson, and actor Steven Seagal.

Summer changes temperature from winter's  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $+35^{\circ}\text{C}$ . A grown leopard family heads to the sea, first spotted near the Gamov Peninsula.

As the population increases, the territory also expands. Amur leopards began to resettle in the territories where they had not been seen for decades. Leopards are now recorded close to the Korean peninsula. Thanks to the preservation of the core of the population in Russia, leopards are spreading westwards to China, where a mirror for the Land of the Leopard protected area was created – Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park.

In 2024, these protected areas united in the world's first transboundary reserve for the Amur leopard and Amur tiger – the Land of Big Cats.

The population is also expanding to the north; some individuals even managed to cross the wide anthropogenic corridor along the valley of Razdolnaya River, which is formed by agricultural lands, a federal highway, and the largest railway in the country. To help them, a reintroduction programme was launched, relocating some leopards to another protected area—the

Ussurisky Nature Reserve on the other side of this barrier.

The population of threatened subspecies is supported by an auspicious prey base—according to aerial survey estimates, the total number of ungulates, including sika deer, roe deer, water deer, and wild boar, across southwest Primorye reached 30 thousand individuals.

Future well-being isn't estimated only by size. A sustainable inner population structure is crucial too. Research in early 2000s showed that there were only 0.62 females per male, but since 2014, the proportion of females has been increasing to an average of 1.55 females per male. Besides, the magnificently high survival rate promotes sustainable population establishment, estimated at 41%

for cubs to the age of reproduction and 82% for adults.

### No longer a ghost

Ecological plasticity, vigilance, and elusiveness allow leopards to coexist with two formidable neighbours: a more sympatric predator, the Amur tiger, and the most dangerous creature on Earth—humans. No direct aggression towards humans has been documented for centuries, and visual observations are also rare. However, humans still pose a danger due to forest fires, poaching of ungulates, and infrastructure development outside of the national park.

Looking back, specialists recall how this work began. "Every great moment in mankind history began with a dream. Those willing to devote themselves entirely to the cause achieved each bold leap forward. Once a man set a goal – to save the Amur leopard, the rarest of all, from complete extinction," says Viktor Bardyuk, Director of the Land of the Leopard National Park. Today, the Amur leopard is no longer a ghost in the Siberian Forest. It is a symbol of hope, a testament to the enduring power of conservation.

All three kittens have survived. They leave their mother and set out to live independently in the wild. Winter will now

A male Amur leopard scouts the park



## All about Creature of Camouflage

1. The sub-species is listed as critically endangered since 1996
2. Amur leopard population trends indicate that populations are recovering in both China and Russia and that there is potential for further expansion.
3. Camera trap analyses have shown that Amur leopards move between Russia and China, so it's difficult to determine a total population estimate.
4. Like humans, amur leopards have unique fingerprints and spot patterns, which allows to identify them individually.
5. The hairs of its summer coat are 2.5 cm long, but in winter, they are replaced by 7 cm long ones.
6. Sometimes, Amur leopards wrap their tail around themselves to keep warm.
7. Amur leopards are nocturnal and solitary, so we use infrared camera traps to photograph in the dark when surveying elusive animals.
8. Amur leopards can climb trees—and are so well camouflaged when in trees they sometimes can only be seen by the twitching of their tail
9. The tongue of an Amur leopard has sharp-pointed rasps, called papillae, which are used to scrape the meat off the bones of its prey.

The Amur leopard, a true masterpiece of nature, captivates with its breathtaking beauty and **unique coat**. Unfortunately, this allure has made it a prime target in the illegal wildlife trade, where its **striking fur** is highly coveted

be easier since ungulates – the leopard's main prey – are supported at special feeding points. What awaits ahead? Everything will be fine now. After all, this is their land—the Land of the Leopard.

On 16 May, 2024, in Beijing, in the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, the Agreement on the Establishment of the

Transboundary Reserve Land of the Big Cats was signed. The new reserve includes the Land of the Leopard National Park of Russia and the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park. The main objective of the cooperation is to unify photo monitoring methods for accurately counting the size of tiger and leopard populations. This is critically important,

since many animals cross the border, and there is a risk of double counting of individuals. Joint anti-poaching patrols, exchange of information on forest fires, and eco-campaigns will also be launched.

Hope springs eternal. 🐾

Ivan Rakov is Head of Public Relations, with Land of Leopard National Park, Russia

A jaguar (*Panthera onca*) stands in water while checking out a clay lick, Yasuni National Park, Ecuador, Amazon Rainforest

# Elusive Guardians Jaguars of Latin America

BY VALERIA BORON

Photo: naturepl.com/Karine Aigner/WWF

Jaguars (*Panthera onca*), the elusive big cats of the Americas, embody the mystery and beauty of the rainforest. The word 'jaguar' comes from the Indigenous word 'yaguar', which means 'he who kills with one leap'. As the third-largest cat species in the world after tigers and lions, jaguars have long captivated human imagination with their power, beauty, and enigmatic presence.

Jaguars are apex predators, playing a crucial role in maintaining the balance of their habitats by controlling the populations of other species, such as prey and smaller carnivores. Their presence often indicates a healthy, functioning ecosystem, and their decline can signal environmental degradation. Jaguars need large areas to survive; hence, protecting jaguars helps protect vast ecosystems, all biodiversity within them, and the ecosystem services they provide for human well-being. However, despite their importance, jaguars have already lost over 50% of their historic range, and all but one of its subpopulations are considered Endangered or Critically Endangered. Jaguars are increasingly threatened by rapid habitat loss, direct killing and decline of their prey. With no time to spare, scaling up efforts to achieve their range-wide conservation is of paramount importance.

Jaguars have a robust, muscular build that allows them to take down large prey. Adult male jaguars can weigh up to 120kg, and females up to 100kg. They can reach lengths of up to 170cm, not including their tail, which can add another 60-80 cm. The size of jaguars varies extensively between regions—jaguars in Central America can be roughly half the size of jaguars in the Pantanal.

One of the most distinctive features of jaguars is their coat, which has a stunning rosette pattern. These markings provide excellent camouflage in the dappled light of the rainforest, allowing jaguars to blend into their surroundings. The base colour of their coat can range from pale yellow to light reddish-brown, with the rosettes varying in size and shape. Each jaguar has a distinct rosette pattern that enables one to identify one individual from another. Some jaguars exhibit a melanistic variation, appearing almost entirely black, but at a closer look, the typical rosette pattern is still visible under the dark coat.

## Territorial by nature

Jaguars active both in the day and at night and are excellent swimmers, often living near lakes, rivers and wetlands. As solitary animals, jaguars are territorial, with each individual maintaining a home range that can vary significantly from small areas to several hundred square km depending on prey availability and habitat quality. Males generally have larger territories than females, which often overlap with the territories of several females.

Jaguars communicate through a range of vocalisations, including roars and scent marking, to mark territory or signal reproductive readiness. These behaviours are crucial for maintaining social structure and intra-specific interactions. Being solitary does not preclude sociality. When there are plenty of females around, male jaguars sometimes form coalitions, patrolling and marking territory together, invading territories of other males, and sharing prey.

Males start breeding at 3-4 years old, and females at 2-3 years. When breeding, a pair may mate several times a day. The mating

season for jaguars is not strictly defined, as females can come into oestrus at any time of the year. After a gestation period of approximately 100 days, a female jaguar gives birth to a litter of one to four cubs. The cubs are born blind, relying entirely on their mother for nourishment and protection. They remain with her for up to two years, learning essential survival skills before venturing independently. Female jaguars have been documented to use 'hide and flirt' tactics to protect their cubs from males; they hide their cubs when a male approaches and then flirt with him to distract him, which stops him from killing the young. Females and cubs will also climb trees to gain protection from male jaguars or other dangerous species for the cubs.

Jaguars are opportunistic hunters, preying on over 85 species, from small rodents to large ungulates and caimans to even fish. They are ambush predators known for their powerful bite, which can pierce through the thick hides of crocodilians and the hard shells of turtles. By being adept swimmers, jaguars often hunt in and around water bodies, which sets them apart from many other big cat species. Jaguars can kill prey much larger than their weight, usually killing it with a bite to the back of the skull rather than biting the neck or throat like other big cats.

Jaguars are found primarily in the tropical and subtropical regions of the Americas, with their range extending from Mexico to northern Argentina. Historically, jaguars had a much broader range, including parts of the southwestern United States, but habitat loss and hunting have reduced their distribution by 50%. Overall, jaguars are Near Threatened by the IUCN with a global population estimate of 173,151 (95% CI: 138,148 - 208,137) and decreasing population trends. 76% of jaguars are found in the

Amazon rainforest, making it the jaguar's stronghold. All the other jaguar subpopulations outside of the Amazon and Pantanal are threatened with extinction, primarily because of their small size and isolation.

The optimal habitats of jaguars are rainforests, swamps, and wetlands, where their prey is abundant and their camouflage is most effective. However, they are also found in dry forests, savannahs, scrublands, and mountainous areas, demonstrating their remarkable adaptability. Jaguars require large, contiguous territories to thrive, as fragmented habitats can limit their hunting grounds and increase the likelihood of human-wildlife conflicts. Ecosystem services provided by habitats within the jaguar range benefit many people. For example, nearly 25 million people benefit from the non-timber forest products within the jaguar habitat, around 5 million people may benefit from nature-based tourism, and 46 million people benefit from the water provisions within the jaguar's range - plus many more living downstream.

### Human-jaguar interactions

The relationship between jaguars and humans has always been complex, marked by reverence and conflict. Many Indigenous cultures across the Americas have long revered jaguars, often depicting them in art, mythology, and spiritual practices. The jaguar's strength, agility, and elusive nature have made it a symbol of power and mystery. However, human activities have increasingly encroached upon jaguar habitats, leading to significant challenges for their survival. Deforestation, driven by agriculture, logging, and urban expansion, has fragmented jaguar territories and reduced their prey base. Deforestation rates are rampant in the Jaguar range, and we're currently losing an area of rainforest, with nearly 2.5 football pitches every minute in the Amazon. It's estimated that around 1,400 jaguars have been killed or displaced due to deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon alone between 2016 and 2019. Increasing deforestation and human presence/hunting in the natural ecosystem also cause declines in the jaguar prey population, further hindering jaguar survival.

As human populations grow and expand into previously uninhabited areas, encounters between jaguars and humans have become more frequent, often with negative outcomes for both. Livestock predation by jaguars and fear towards jaguars are significant sources of conflict, leading to retaliatory killings by farmers and local communities. In addition to conflict, jaguars are poached for their teeth, skin, claws, tails, paws and organs. Jaguars are listed on Appendix I of CITES, making any international trade in them or their parts illegal. However, their parts are still being trafficked internationally and used domestically. Their teeth symbolise bravery and status, their skins are used as decoration, and other parts are used in traditional medicines. Overall, the number of jaguars killed is unknown but highly concerning - for example, one group of jaguar poachers working out of Brazil's Acre state killed at least an estimated 1,000 jaguars over 30 years.

### Conservation efforts

Addressing these threats and conserving jaguars is a complex challenge that requires coordinated efforts. Various organisations and governments are working tirelessly to protect jaguar



populations and their habitats through a combination of research and applied conservation actions across multiple scales. Establishing and promoting an inclusive, effective and equitable management of protected areas is one of the most effective strategies for conserving jaguars and their habitats. National parks and other protected areas help to ensure that jaguars have access to the large, contiguous territories they need to survive. These protected areas also benefit other species that share the same ecosystems, safeguarding overall biodiversity. However, over half of jaguars live outside protected areas; hence, working in unprotected lands is also crucial. Promoting sustainable economic development and land use planning that provide financial benefits to local communities while supporting jaguar conservation goals is critical to maintaining habitat connectivity. This includes strengthening non-timber forest products' livelihoods, agroforestry, sustainable timber extraction, tourism, and best agricultural practices.

Furthermore, across both protected and unprotected areas, it is vital to avoid jaguar killing and prey overhunting through community engagement and behaviour change, improved coordination and enforcement, and anti-depredation measures to protect livestock. There are existing legal frameworks that protect jaguars from poaching and illegal trade. National and international laws, such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), provide a foundation for conservation efforts, but their success depends on robust enforcement and the cooperation of local communities. Engaging Indigenous people and local communities is vital for the success of jaguar conservation efforts and co-designing programmes and activities while fostering a sense of stewardship.

Given the wide-ranging habitats of jaguars, influencing policy

at the national level, sustainable finance options, and international cooperation are essential for their conservation. Transboundary conservation initiatives, such as the Jaguar 2030 Roadmap and the Jaguar Initiative adopted by the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS) parties earlier this year, aim to conserve jaguars across the range-wide Jaguar Corridor, connecting habitats across national borders, facilitating gene flow and ensuring the long-term survival of jaguar populations. Lastly, ongoing research is crucial for understanding jaguar behaviour, population dynamics, and threats. Technology advancements, such as camera traps and GPS collars, have transformed wildlife monitoring, providing valuable data on jaguar populations, habitat use, and human interactions. This information is essential for developing effective conservation strategies and policies.

In 2020, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) launched its Regional Jaguar Strategy (RJS). This transformational initiative aligns the priorities and vision for the organisation's work on jaguar conservation across the species' range. The RJS aims to increase or stabilise the jaguar's populations, distribution, prey base, suitable habitat, and connectivity by 2030. It intends to do so in 15 Jaguar Priority Landscapes by working on all afore-mentioned strategies, i.e. securing protected areas and Indigenous lands as jaguar strongholds, fostering connectivity and sustainable economic development, stopping jaguar killings, catalysing cooperation, and creating enabling conditions such as sustainable financing and political will.

Jaguars are more than just symbols of wilderness and beauty; they are keystone species that play a crucial role in maintaining the health and balance of their ecosystems. By safeguarding jaguars, we conserve healthy ecosystems (connected, diverse, and functional), all species within, and the ecological processes that sustain life. The challenges facing jaguars are daunting, but there is hope for their future through concerted conservation efforts, research, and

community engagement. Local communities who share their lands with jaguars are a fundamental ally and we must continue to find ways to strengthen co-existence with jaguars, reducing the costs and increasing the benefits of living alongside jaguars.

Given the scale of the jaguar range and their threats, it is imperative to support coordinated- transboundary conservation efforts, with governments leading these efforts. The IBCA can play a key role in supporting government-led cooperation and conservation of the species at scale, tackling current and emerging threats. It is crucial that we continue to prioritise the protection of these remarkable cats and the ecosystems they inhabit. The survival of jaguars is intrinsically linked to our own, reminding us that we are all part of the planet's complex web of life. 🐾

Dr Valeria Boron is a Senior Programme Advisor and Jaguar Lead, WWF UK.

76%  
of jaguars reside in  
the Amazon rainforest,  
establishing this  
region as their primary  
stronghold

**Know Your Jaguar**

- The jaguar range covers 18 countries
- Jaguars have lost 50% of their historic range
- >55% of jaguars are found in unprotected areas
- Over 75% of jaguars are in the Amazon biome, a key stronghold for the species survival
- Jaguars are considered Near Threatened by the IUCN with a decreasing population trend
- Estimated population is 173,1151
- Jaguar diet includes over 85 prey species
- Each individual jaguar can be identified by rosette patterns
- The main threats to jaguars are habitat loss, decline of prey, direct killing
- Jaguars have 1-4 cubs



# IBCA, a Sustainability Champion



BY KAUSIK BANERJEE

Big cats are majestic top predators that signal the health of the ecosystems they inhabit. There are seven major species of big cats globally: lion, leopard, and cheetah in Africa and Asia; jaguar and puma in the Americas; and tiger and snow leopard in Asia. Their presence or absence in an ecosystem can have far-reaching implications for sustainability.

Since time immemorial, big cats have caught the human psyche and have been revered as icons of power, courage and majesty across ancient and modern cultures and civilisations. But their significance goes beyond cultural symbolism. Big cats are crucial for maintaining the balance of ecosystems. Protecting big cats also safeguards the habitats they roam, which are repositories for rich biodiversity and home to many other species, including some that are critically endangered and endemic. Moreover, these species' habitats often ensure regional water security for humankind; for example, the rivers flowing from tiger territories are essential for over 800 million humans in Asia.

Big cats remain in the wild in 95 countries in of Africa, Asia and the Americas. Most of these countries confront the same pressing and increasing challenges that undercut the viability of big cats and the broader

biodiversity they symbolise—natural habitat loss and degradation from land conversion, landscape fragmentation from infrastructure, wildlife poaching and illegal trade and human-wildlife conflict.

## Biodiversity Leadership

Conserving natural heritage, such as wildlife, is a sovereign issue. However, international alliances are crucial for addressing global, transnational, regional, and local challenges. There is robust evidence from various country-led efforts over the recent years proving the efficacy of a species-driven approach (e.g., the Global Tiger Initiative - GTI and the Global Snow Leopard and Ecosystem Protection Program - GSLEP). These multi-country, multi-sectoral programmes also show how their shared goals and political commitments can help the participating national governments leverage limited public resources for better conservation and development outcomes.

Big cats possess a proven capacity to mobilise support and leverage the existing

**By bringing together big cat range countries, conservation partners, and scientific organisations, the alliance fosters a united front against the threats to big cats**

momentum surrounding their conservation through existing frameworks such as the Jaguar 2030 Roadmap, the GSLEP, the Africa Carnivores Initiative, the Global Tiger Recovery Programme, and most recently, the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA), provides an opportunity for governments to distinguish themselves as leaders in biodiversity conservation.

No international body is at present, exclusively addressing the conservation challenges of big cats across their range. India has a long-standing experience in wildlife conservation with exemplary conservation models for big cats like tiger, lion, snow leopard and leopard. India has made significant strides in tiger conservation, particularly through Project Tiger. This ambitious initiative, launched in 1973, has led to a remarkable increase in tiger numbers. By establishing tiger reserves and expanding their network to currently at 576 from an initial nine in 1973, deploying anti-poaching measures, and engaging local communities, India has successfully reversed the decline of tiger populations from 1,411 individuals in 2006 to 3,682 individuals in 2024.

India's Project Lion, a flagship conservation programme, has been instrumental in the remarkable recovery of the only free-ranging Asiatic lion population. Rigorous conservation efforts, including habitat protection, anti-poaching measures, veterinary care and community participation, have contributed to the steady growth of the lion population from less than 200 individuals to over 700 individuals in the past 40 years.

By focusing on protection, monitoring, transboundary collaborations and capacity building, India has also emerged as a global leader in snow leopard conservation, providing valuable insights and lessons for other countries. The Snow

Leopard Population Assessment in India (SPAII) programme has estimated the snow leopard population in India to be around 718 individuals. Recent first ever intercontinental wild-to-wild translocation and successful implementation of Project Cheetah in India reaffirms the country's leading role in the conservation of big cats.

Conserving big cats and their habitats helps preserve the ecosystems and the entire plethora of biodiversity, which supports life on Earth. The creation of the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) by the Government of India was a response to the urgent need for a global collaborative approach to big cat conservation. By bringing together big cats range countries, conservation partners, and scientific organisations, the alliance fosters a united front against the threats to big cats. It stands as a testament to the power of international cooperation in preserving our planet's natural heritage for future generations.

There is a gap at present in the availability of resources and optimum utilisation of available practices and processes, which are based on robust science and converged with field craft in many big cat range countries. This gap stems primarily from the need to strengthen systematic and institutionalized delivery of capacity building and implementation measures and a shortage of suitable financing arrangements to apply fundamental tenets of big cat conservation on the ground besides the execution of innovative and novel technologies. These entail advocacy, engagement of international species experts and subject matter specialists, on-ground management interventions, extensive outreach and dissemination of knowledge products which would support and further strengthen the framework envisaged under IBCA at a global scale. The IBCA's action portfolios would benefit cumulatively approximately 54 million km<sup>2</sup> of Big Cat landscapes across the globe which represents around 10% of the world's land area inhabited by approximately six billion people. These activities associated with the conservation of big cats and their habitats would lead to consolidation of ecological conservation, amelioration of climate change and global warming issues with far-reaching environmental and socio-economic impacts.



Tangible and intangible flow benefits that result from investment in big cat conservation include employment generation, securing fodder and fuelwood, carbon sequestration, water provisioning and purification, sediment retention/soil conservation, nutrient retention, climate regulation, gene pool protection, moderation of extreme events, cultural heritage, recreation, ecotourism and many more. Making a case for the conservation of Tiger Reserves in India, a study revealed that for every rupee invested in management, the returns amount to an average of ₹2,500 (USD 30) per Tiger Reserve in terms of ecosystem services. With this, Big Cats habitats can emerge as potential "Investment Multiplier", representing the contribution of investments in these habitats to economic systems.

Looking at the triggered effect of

investment in big cat habitats leading to multiple benefits, these areas are often designated as 'the engines of economic growth'. Moreover, ecosystem-based disaster risk reduction (Eco-DRR) approaches through integrated watershed management, which includes big cats habitat protection and restoration, can also mitigate large-scale disasters.

## Aligning with SDGs

As governments have committed to meeting the targets of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) targets, the conservation of big cats can be a catalyst for a new model of sustainable development. Big cats constitute an integral component of the natural heritage across the Americas, Africa and Asia. Big Cats conservation helps achieve at least 15 out of



BY RAJESH GOPAL

## Global Support for Big Cat Conservation

The Big Cats magazine appears to be a valuable tool for communicating with big cat range countries, like-minded organisations, and concerned individuals involved in wildlife conservation. As apex predators, big cats are extremely relevant in an ecosystem owing to their surrogate indicator value of habitat well-being and sustainability.

This is an innovative venture and will serve many purposes. At the outset, it will establish an ongoing communication with all 95 big cat range countries, with an updation of recent happenings in the context. Active inputs of such countries would provide valuable insights on their challenges, good practices, and strategy

towards sustainability vis-à-vis the Convention on Biological Diversity CBD and the SDGs targets. The magazine would also serve as tool to provide updates on site level, national, bilateral, regional, and global collaborations on conservation at large, and big cats in particular.

In the present Anthropocene era, going is not all that smooth for in-situ efforts. However, big cat range countries have put up a brave front, and this has fostered a sanguine ambience for evolving good practices, suited to meet emerging challenges - both anthropogenic as well as environmental stochastic ones. Besides fostering the desired communication, the publication will also be valuable for motivating field frontline, wildlife enthusiasts, conservation practitioners, policy makers, which will go a long way in strengthening the cause.

As a cost-effective visual medium, it will share expert opinions, thoughts, leadership case studies with valuable insights for others to emulate. There is immense scope to include ecological status, innovative case studies and best practices across a plethora of conservation themes, including species and habitat status, special conservation programs, education and awareness, community livelihood, human wildlife interface issues, smart green infrastructures, innovative financing instruments, ecotourism, and strategic partnerships on saving wild big cats.

In addition to landscape transfor-

mations owing to varied stressors, wildlife crime and demand for big cat body parts in some parts of the globe continues to be a cause of concern. The magazine would serve as a vital tool in reaching out to all stakeholders, and potentially providing an effective communication medium on species threatened by wildlife trafficking.

The magazine also has the potential of publishing knowledge material and case studies that directly links big cat conservation to climate change adaptation. The role of big cat conservation in addressing climate related challenges is often ignored, despite being an invaluable strategy for mitigation and adaptation, securing the last remnants of wilderness.

Undoubtedly, IBCA will gain more relevance through this communication tool, while growing and engaging with one and all for strengthening the conservation of wild big cats across their global range. I congratulate the IBCA and Sankala Foundation for jointly starting this excellent venture to spark a much-needed discourse on big cats, which serve as multi-dimensional indicators for ecological and economic well-being of our planet, and its denizens.

I am sure that the magazine will be akin to a ship, which will build itself while sailing the turbulent waters of global in-situ big cat conservation. 🐾

**Dr Rajesh Gopal** is Secretary General, Global Tiger Forum New Delhi, India

the 23 GBF targets. IBCA also plays a pivotal role in advancing the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through its comprehensive conservation efforts. By focusing on the protection of big cats and their habitats, IBCA directly contributes to SDG 15, which aims to protect, restore, and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems and halt biodiversity loss. Additionally, IBCA's initiatives support SDG 13 by addressing climate change impacts through habitat conservation and restoration, which enhance carbon sequestration and ecosystem resilience. The alliance also fosters community

engagement and sustainable livelihoods, aligning with SDG 1 (No Poverty) and SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), by promoting eco-tourism and community-based conservation programs. Through its collaborative approach, IBCA strengthens partnerships (SDG 17) and ensures that conservation efforts are inclusive, sustainable, and beneficial to both wildlife and human communities.

Through active engagement within key global policy fora and frameworks, advocating for the explicit protection of big cats and promoting the recovery of their populations and habitats can provide

governments with a clear, straightforward way to champion ambitious conservation initiatives. Moreover, the conservation of landscapes under a 'Big Cats' prism, provides the scale needed to design impactful interventions to maintain key ecosystem services for people and nature, such as climate mitigation and adaptation, key elements in absolute harmony with the UN Biodiversity concept of 'Peace with Nature'. 🐾

**Dr Kausik Banerjee** is Lead Specialist at the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) in New Delhi, India.

## Bhutan Shows the Way in Protection

BY TASHI DHENDUP



Aum Pema Lhamo, a local leader, poses in front of an eco-trail in her area, Bhutan

Photo: Tashi Dhendup

Imagine a land where majestic tigers roam ancient forests, snow leopards stalk the high peaks, and even elusive common leopards call remote valleys home. This isn't a scene from a wildlife documentary; it's the reality of Bhutan, a small Himalayan nation with a roaring conservation success story.

Bhutan's approach to conservation is as unique as its landscape. Unlike many places here, environmental protection isn't just a policy; it's a deeply woven thread in the nation's fabric. Buddhist teachings of compassion for all living beings are seamlessly integrated with modern conservation practices. School children learn about the wonders of their natural heritage, while community outreach programs foster a sense of ownership and responsibility. Sustainable livelihood initiatives, like eco-

tourism, empower locals to become active partners in protecting their wild neighbours.

Despite its size, Bhutan is a haven for biodiversity. Nine felid species call these mountains home, including three globally threatened big cats – the powerful tiger, the elusive snow leopard, and the stealthy common leopard. Bhutan's commitment to their survival is unwavering. These magnificent creatures are protected by strict legislation, and recent surveys reveal a remarkable story. Tiger and snow leopard populations have skyrocketed by 27% and 39%, respectively, a testament to Bhutan's dedication. However, the fight for their survival isn't without challenges.

Recognising the issue of human-wildlife conflict, Bhutan has implemented innovative solutions. The Hunter to Hermit Program initiated by the Royal Manas National Park helps former



The tiger conservation programme has been a big success in Bhutan

Photo: DoFPS

Tiger and snow leopard populations have skyrocketed by **27%** and **39%**, respectively, since **2015** and **2016**, a testament to Bhutan's dedication towards conserving the Big Cats.

hunters transition into conservation roles. Providing alternative livelihoods and integrating them into the conservation framework transforms former poachers into valuable assets. They become guardians, not adversaries, utilising their expertise to protect the cats they once hunted.

Financial safety nets, like the Gewog Tiger Conservation Tshogpa (GTCT), compensate communities for livestock predation. These programs also encourage responsible practices and foster local governance. The GTCT's Tiger Quick Response Teams react swiftly to conflict situations, minimising risks for humans and tigers.

Eco-tourism is another pillar of Bhutan's strategy. Tourists explore nature trails, stay in community-owned lodges, and even experience homestays in pristine landscapes. These ventures

generate income for local communities and cultivate a sense of pride and responsibility for conservation.

In snow leopard landscapes, predator-proof corrals provide safe havens for livestock at night, reducing vulnerability to predation. Regular health checks for livestock in remote highland areas help maintain herd health and minimise unrelated losses. In the Soe region of Jigme Dorji National Park, the "School Among the Mountains" initiative tackles education challenges like limited educational resources and harsh conditions while nurturing conservation values in young minds. Also, equity and inclusivity go beyond just making decisions. To truly engage communities in conservation efforts, they need to see real, tangible benefits. This may involve job opportunities within protected areas, sharing of tourism revenue, and support for sustainable small businesses.

### A Ripple Effect of Conservation

The success of tiger and snow leopard conservation in Bhutan has had a remarkable ripple effect. Recognising the interconnectedness of human and wildlife needs, the nation has implemented a web of ingenious initiatives. Electric fencing, a modern-day shield, protects crops from herbivores, fostering a sense of peaceful coexistence. Like miniature ecosystems, biogas digesters hum with life, converting waste into clean energy, reducing reliance on firewood and protecting precious forests. With solar lights to herders in remote areas, nights are brighter

and safer, mitigating conflicts with nocturnal predators.

Pasturelands near the villages are undergoing a revival. Implemented on a cost-sharing basis, these projects ensure sustainable grazing practices, fostering community participation and a sense of ownership. When cattle aren't grazing deep inside the forests, in huge numbers and unattended, depredation incidents go down, and vegetation also gets a chance to rejuvenate. Forests, the lungs of the mountains, are no longer taken for granted. Community forest management plans empower local communities to become stewards of these vital resources. Surplus timber and non-wood products can generate additional income, further incentivising sustainable practices. Finally, community-based fire management groups stand vigilant, acting as a rapid response force against wildfires, protecting the land and the wildlife that calls it home. By addressing environmental and livelihood needs, Bhutan is weaving a web of sustainability that benefits both people and wildlife, a testament to the powerful ripple effect of successful big cat conservation.

Despite these incredible strides, the fight for all three big cats isn't over. Currently, common leopards lack dedicated conservation programs due to limited funding. However,



Electric fencing helps farmers keep away wild animals from their crops

Photo: Tashi Dhendup

Bhutan's adaptability inspires hope. Bhutan can ensure a future where all three big cats thrive by replicating the successful model established for tigers and snow leopards with tailor-made solutions for common leopards.

### Hope for the World

Bhutan's story is more than just numbers; it's a testament to the power of collaboration. By prioritising the needs of wildlife and local communities, Bhutan has roared to the forefront of extensive cat conservation. Innovative conservation financing models

championed by Bhutan, such as the Bhutan for Life and Bhutan Trust Fund, have served as sustainable models for securing long-term conservation support. Bhutan is also currently the Chair of the inter-governmental platform of the Global Tiger Forum (GTF) and has been convening global partners and tiger range countries to enhance cooperation towards the conservation of big cats, with a special focus on accelerating community-based conservation programs. The country hosted the Sustainable Finance for Tiger Landscapes Conference in Bhutan on April 22-23, 2024, under the patronage of Her Majesty The Queen, Jetsun Pema Wangchuck, and co-organized by the Tiger Conservation Coalition leading to the "billion dollar" fund-raising pledge for tiger conservation. As the nation refines its strategies and expands its focus, it sets a remarkable example for the world, proving that conservation success is most achievable when communities become active partners, not bystanders. Let Bhutan's roar inspire us to work together for a harmonious future where wildlife and humanity coexist. 🐾



Handing over of seed money and list of by-laws to the community for the Gewog Tiger Conservation Tashoga

Photo: DoFPS

Dr Tashi Dhendup is Head at Bhutan Tiger Centre, Department of Forests and Park Services, Bhutan

## Cheetahs in Maasai Mara

# Speed & Stealth

TEXT & PHOTOS KALYAN VARMA

**HAVING THE TAG OF BEING THE FASTEST** land animal on earth has not meant that cheetahs have the head start in their conservation success. The cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus*) unlike the other big cats is smaller in size and have sacrificed their strength for speed and agility. They usually hunt smaller prey compared to their cousins and have to be watchful about larger predators like lions and hyenas. Their name comes from the Hindi word 'chita' which means spotted one.

The Asian subspecies (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*) once ranged from north western India to the Gangetic plain in the east, extending to the Deccan Plateau in the south. Once common across large tracts of Africa and Asia, their populations have shrunk to less than 7000 in recent times and their range has largely reduced. 🐾



There has been no history of cheetah attacks on humans. They often come in close contact with humans

Unlike other big cats, cheetahs sometimes form clans and hunt together to bring down larger prey which is not possible otherwise. Here are the 3 siblings who were famous for three hunts in Maasai Mara



The African savanna grasslands are the most suitable habitats for the cheetah. These grasslands support high ungulate densities, ideal for many predators



**Above:** The Maasai community shares the landscapes with the cheetah. An example of animal-human harmony

**Right:** Cheetahs can deliver upto 8 cubs at a time but usually only 3 or 4 reach adulthood. The cubs are most vulnerable and the mother cheetah has to ensure they are safe from other predators





'Bagh' and tiger boy Chendru connect in the forest. Artist Gujaral Singh Baghel, Chhattisgarh

Photos: Sankala Foundation

# Silent and Strong Conservation Ethos of Tribals

BY RAVINA YADAV

In India, the tiger is much more than an apex predator; it holds a revered place within the diverse tribal communities. For centuries, tribal communities have coexisted harmoniously with nature, fostering a deep respect for the wildlife that shares their environment. The tiger, in particular, is often regarded as a divine symbol, intricately woven into the cultural and spiritual fabric of these tribes. In eastern state of Odisha, the Santhal tribal community honours the tiger by performing Jahir Pooja, a ritual that celebrates the tiger and the jungle it inhabits. In northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh, the Mishmi community refers to the tiger

as their elder brother, observing communal mourning when one passes, a powerful demonstration of their emotional connect. In the eastern Indian wetlands of Sundarbans, the forest goddess Bonbibi is called upon by the local tribes before entering into the depths of the forest, seeking protection from tigers and other dangers. In Central India, the Gond tribes revere the tiger as 'Baghdev,' or tiger god, offering prayers for coexistence and protection. The Baiga tribe believes themselves to be descendants of tigers, while the Warli people of Maharashtra honour Waghoba, their tiger deity, through rituals and offerings. In the state of Goa, the Velip community celebrates

the tiger's spirit by oiling ancient statues and making food offerings, preserving a heritage that values wildlife. These practices highlight the deep cultural connections between tribal communities and tigers, emphasising their role as custodians of the natural world and champions of coexistence. The tribal communities live in and around 57 Indian tiger reserves that account for approximately 70% of the world's wild tiger population, making their role in conservation efforts crucial. As one of the 17 megadiverse countries, India is home to about 8% of the world's biodiversity, housing iconic species like tigers, elephants, rhinos, and leopards.



Left: President of India Smt. Droupadi Murmu receives art work from tribal artists in New Delhi in November 2023

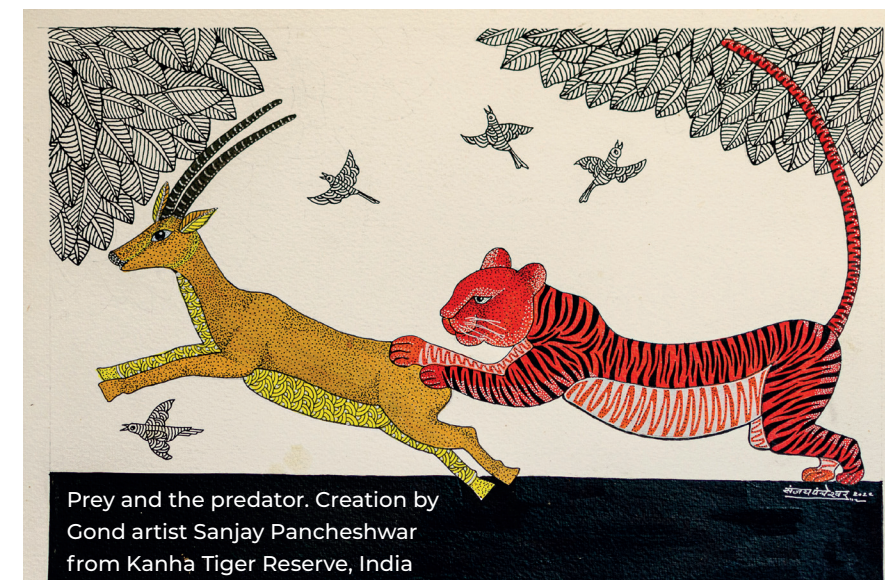
Top: External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar interacting with the tribal artists at the exhibition Silent Conversation in New Delhi, October 2024

The country's commitment to biodiversity conservation is evident through initiatives like Project Tiger and Project Elephant, eco-development programmes engaging local communities, and the protection of habitats through biosphere reserves, wildlife sanctuaries, and laws like the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. India also has the Forest Rights Act, formally known as the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, which represents a significant legislative achievement. This

act acknowledges and safeguards the rights of communities that reside in forest areas, particularly those belonging to Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. India recognises over 104 million tribal people, comprising about 730 Scheduled Tribes, with 75 classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs). The Indian Constitution protects their rights and unique cultural heritage, emphasising their vital role as custodians of forests and wildlife. For generations, these communities have lived harmoniously with nature, reinforcing

their commitment to conservation by giving more to the forest than they take. Connecting through Art: An Exhibition Showcases the Eternal Bond between Tigers and Tribes Delhi based non-profit organisation Sankala Foundation endeavoured to promote this conservation ethos of the tribal communities by showcasing their art and artifacts to a wider and diverse audience, including city students, diplomats, senior government officials, etc. They invited tribal artists living in and around tiger reserves that have been home for the communities for many years.

In November 2023, Sankala launched the first edition of the art exhibition called 'Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre' raising awareness about tribal conservation ethos and explore alternative livelihoods for the communities that face several challenges. The inaugural exhibition was launched by the India's President Smt. Draupadi Murmu on 22 November 2023. This exhibition presented often-unheard voices and stories from unique artworks by tribal communities, depicting their bond with wildlife, including the tiger. Sankala's exhibition was supported by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), the National Human Rights Commission of India (NHRC) and the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA).



Prey and the predator. Creation by Gond artist Sanjay Pancheshwar from Kanha Tiger Reserve, India

## SPECIAL FEATURE

In its second edition, the exhibition (17-20 October 2024) was inaugurated by India's External Affairs Minister Dr S. Jaishankar. Close to 150 works were on display. Seventeen artists were also selected for the prestigious eight-day Artists-in-Residence programme in the president's house. Throughout their residency, they created artwork inspired by their deep bond with nature and wildlife. Their paintings celebrate this enduring relationship with nature.

The exhibition has grown as a flagship programme of the Sankala Foundation that delves into the symbiotic relationship that tribal communities have nurtured over centuries with nature and its various elements, including forests, flora, fauna, and water bodies. The exhibition showcases the artwork of tribal communities living in and around India's tiger reserves, capturing their enduring bonds with tigers and highlighting the deep connection between these communities and wildlife.

Indian tribal art has the potential to contribute significantly to big cat conservation worldwide by fostering awareness, cultural appreciation

This effort involved reaching out to tiger reserves across India to identify and support tribal artists in displaying and selling their paintings. All proceeds from the sale of these artworks go directly to the artists' bank accounts.

Indian tribal art has the potential to contribute significantly to big cat conservation worldwide by fostering awareness, cultural appreciation, and support for conservation efforts. Therefore, the Sankala Foundation has a vision to take "Silent Conversation: From Margins to the Centre" to the international stage to create awareness and livelihood support and foster a cultural connection to wildlife through art. By promoting tribal art in national and international markets, artists from tiger-inhabited areas can gain sustainable livelihoods, promoting human-wildlife co-existence in wildlife habitats. Also, sharing tribal art globally can foster an appreciation of India's deep cultural ties to big cats, encouraging a sense of shared responsibility for their survival. By using the universal language of art, Indian tribal art can act as a bridge between cultures and countries, inspiring a global commitment to protect big cats and their ecosystems. 🐾



**Above:** Sohrai painting depicting everyday tribal life by artist Manikchand of Jharkhand



**Right:** Aipan art by artist Deepa Negi from Uttarakhand, India



## What COP16 Achieved for Big Cats & Communities

By Pramod K Yadav

The 16th Conference of the Parties (CoP16) to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was held in Cali, Colombia, from October 21 to November 1, 2024. The world's largest conference, CoP16 for the CBD, marked a significant step forward in global biodiversity conservation. It

focused on advancing the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) to arrest and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. The outcomes of COP16 have several implications that could, directly and indirectly, benefit big cat conservation, particularly in addressing the challenges faced by cheetahs, jaguars, leopards, lions,

snow leopards and tigers in the wild. Here's how CoP 16 outcomes align with big cat conservation efforts:

### 1. Recognition of Indigenous and Local Communities

Establishing a permanent subsidiary body to involve indigenous peoples and local communities in biodiversity governance critically boosts big cat conservation. Big cats often inhabit biodiversity-rich regions like tropical forests and grasslands that overlap with lands managed by indigenous and tribal communities. Recognising their communities's stewardship can enhance the protection of big cat habitats by incorporating traditional ecological knowledge. For instance, strengthened community-based conservation initiatives have succeeded in tiger conservation in Bhutan, India, and Nepal.

### 2. The 30x30 Goal and Habitat Protection

The commitment to protecting 30% of the planet's land and marine areas by 2030 supports efforts to expand big cat habitats. Currently, only about 17% of the terrestrial regions are protected, and the 30x30 goal could increase the number and

connectivity of protected areas, reducing habitat fragmentation and combating wildlife poaching. It will also ensure that critical big cat landscapes, such as the Sundarbans or Southeast Asian forests, are prioritised for protection. Prioritise conservation in megadiverse regions, such as the Amazon Basin, Central America, and the Gran Chaco, which are critical for jaguar survival.

### 3. Cali Fund and Financial Support

Creating the Cali Fund to share benefits from digital sequence information (DSI) introduces potential funding avenues for conservation projects. These funds could support anti-poaching measures and technology in big cat habitats. It will also finance community-led programmes that mitigate human-big cat conflicts and develop sustainable livelihood programmes.

### 4. Strengthened Focus on Megadiverse Regions

COP16 emphasised the importance of conserving biodiversity in megadiverse areas, many of which are tiger habitats. This focus could direct global resources

and attention to regions where tigers are at risk, such as the Sundarbans, the Terai Arc, and Southeast Asian forests. It could also encourage international collaboration to tackle cross-border threats to tiger populations, such as poaching and illegal wildlife trade.

### 5. Equity and Inclusion

The recognition of the contributions of Indigenous, including tribal and African-descended communities, ensures that big cat conservation strategies are inclusive and equitable. Integrating their traditional practices and perspectives can foster sustainable coexistence between humans and big cats in shared landscapes. It also supports equitable benefit-sharing from ecotourism and conservation funding.

### Reflections and the Road Ahead

While the outcomes of COP16 provide a robust framework for biodiversity protection, challenges like securing adequate financing and finalising monitoring mechanisms remain unresolved. Addressing these gaps is crucial for effectively implementing big cat conservation strategies within the global

biodiversity agenda.

The principles and commitments outlined at COP16 align with the goals of big cat conservation by promoting habitat protection, community engagement, and financial mechanisms. Effective implementation of these outcomes could significantly enhance efforts to safeguard big cat populations and their ecosystems.

The conference revealed a growing urgency in addressing biodiversity loss, particularly in megadiverse regions like the Amazon and Congo Basin. These are also critical habitats of big cats, including cheetahs, jaguars and lions. Yet, only 22% of participating nations submitted comprehensive biodiversity action plans, a crucial shortfall in meeting global targets.

The COP16 reminded us of the challenges and opportunities in biodiversity conservation. It emphasised the need for innovative financial solutions, more substantial commitments, and a collaborative approach that includes indigenous and local voices. As the world marches towards the 2030 SDGs interim meetings are expected to address the unresolved issues, ensuring continued momentum. 🐾



Photos Courtesy: IBCA

**Right to Left:** Dr Kausik Banerjee, Lead Specialist, IBCA, Mr. Soumitra Dasgupta, Director (Programme), IBCA, Mr Stewart Maginnis from IUCN and Dr Koustubh Sharma from GSLEP in Baku

## IBCA Hosts Session on Wildlife Corridors at COP29 in Baku

IBCA made a significant mark at the UNFCCC COP 29 in Baku, Azerbaijan, represented by Mr. Soumitra Dasgupta, Director (Programme), and Dr Kausik Banerjee, Lead Specialist, IBCA. The alliance hosted a side event on ‘The Intersection of Conservation and Development: The Role of the International Big Cat Alliance in Safeguarding Wildlife Corridors’ on 14 November 2024 at the Coalition of Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI) pavilion in the Blue Zone. Key speakers included Mr Stewart Maginnis from IUCN and Dr Koustubh Sharma from the Global Snow Leopard Ecosystems Protection Programme (GSLEP). Together, they spotlighted the need to protect wildlife corridors, emphasising their role in preserving genetic diversity and ensuring the survival of big cat populations.

### Central themes included:

- Integrated Landscape Management: Connecting fragmented habitats to enable safe movement for big cats.
- Policy and Legal Frameworks: The necessity for robust measures to safeguard wildlife corridors.
- Collaborative Action: A call for stronger partnerships between governments, NGOs, and international organisations to

implement effective conservation policies.

- Innovative Financing Mechanisms: Exploring carbon credits and public-private partnerships to bridge funding gaps and address biodiversity conservation in the context of climate change. The event showcased IBCA’s commitment to driving collective action among member nations. By fostering capacity building and sharing best practices, particularly with developing economies, IBCA aims to mitigate the adverse impacts of linear infrastructure on wildlife corridors. Advocating for conservation to be a priority in development agendas, IBCA strives to maintain a delicate balance between conservation and development, with the majestic big cats as the central focus. The session highlighted the imperativeness of maintaining delicate balance between conservation and development through the prism of the majestic big cats.

### Potential Impact of the IBCA Side Event:

- Visibility and Outreach: Enhanced IBCA’s presence and influence on global platforms.
- Knowledge Exchange: Insights gained from experts on innovative solutions for addressing challenges posed by linear infrastructure.
- Networking Opportunities: Strengthened connections with organisations, policy-makers, and professionals, paving the way for collaborations aligned with IBCA’s objectives.

## Stakeholder Workshop on



## Linear Infrastructure

A Stakeholder Workshop for Mitigation Planning on Linear Infrastructure in Transboundary Terai Arc Landscape was organised at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun in between 23 and 25 October, 2024. With IBCA as a co-organiser, the workshop was attended by over 70 delegates (conservation practitioners and experts from Government agencies and Conservation Partners and stakeholders from Transportation Agencies) from India and Nepal. The workshop was focused on aligning infrastructure development with ecological needs to ensure both optimal economic progress and conservation benefits. The Workshop was attended by Dr. S.P. Yadav, Interim Director General, IBCA and Dr. Kausik Banerjee, Lead Specialist, IBCA. In his keynote address at the inaugural

session, Dr. Yadav explained how IBCA’s action portfolios can potentially encourage member nations to work together to minimize the negative effects of linear infrastructure on wildlife corridors by focusing on capacity building and sharing best practices, particularly in developing economies. The workshop provided IBCA with an opportunity to collaborate with key stakeholders to develop effective mitigation strategies for big cat conservation globally. By participating in this workshop, IBCA can strengthen its position as a leading voice in big cat conservation and contribute to the long-term sustainability of the transboundary Terai Arc Landscape.

## IBCA’s New Members

### MoUs with WII and GTF

As on 9 December 2024, five countries, namely Eswatini, India, Liberia, Nicaragua and Somalia have signed the framework agreement and joined IBCA. An MoU was signed with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) to build the capacity of frontline staff in Range Countries for Big Cat conservation. Another MoU was signed with the Global Tiger Forum (GTF) to strengthen the global partnership for tiger and other Big Cat conservation. The partnership will facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration between the two organisations.



Dr S.P. Yadav, Interim Director General of IBCA addressing COP16 participants in Colombia

## IBCA-IUCN Tie-up for Big Cat Conservation

IBCA and IUCN are joining forces to enhance Big Cat conservation efforts in alignment with global goals. This collaboration will focus on capacity building, sharing best practices, and promoting regional cooperation for effective other effective area-based conservation measures (OECA) implementation. Additionally, IBCA will establish a Centre of Excellence for Big Cat Conservation Standards in partnership with IUCN-ARO to bolster global conservation efforts. 🐾





BY RAVINA YADAV

## Earthshot Prize 2024: Altyn Dala Model wins for protecting Saiga Antelope

The Earthshot Prize was launched by Britain's Prince William in 2020 to search for and scale the most innovative solutions to the world's greatest environmental challenges. Each year, five prizes are awarded to projects that tackle urgent ecological challenges. The prize focuses on five key goals: protecting nature, cleaning the air, revitalising oceans, tackling climate change, and reducing waste.

This year, the 'Protect and Restore Nature' category was awarded to the Altyn Dala Conservation Initiative in Kazakhstan. This project played a

critical role in the recovery of the Saiga Antelope, which has moved from 'critically endangered' to 'near threatened' on the IUCN Red List. In 2003, the Saiga population was just 20,000. Today, the vast open grasslands known as the steppe are home to over 2.86 million Saiga. This success story is the result of efforts to restore the Golden Steppes, one of the world's most vulnerable ecosystems, which has been severely impacted by climate change, intensive agriculture, and industrial development.

The Altyn Dala initiative uses a combination of species reintroduction, wildlife monitoring, and local community engagement to protect the ecosystem. Its success offers valuable insights for big cat conservation, particularly in areas facing similar threats. For instance, the grasslands of Mongolia are also under threat from overgrazing and climate change, while the savannas of Africa are rapidly losing habitat to agricultural expansion, posing risks to species like cheetahs and lions. The approach of combining research, technology, and community collaboration can be applied to preserving big cats and their habitats around the world.

## Bangladesh's Tiger Population Grows 18% in the Sundarbans

Bangladesh's tiger population has seen significant growth, reaching an estimated 125 adult tigers in the Sundarbans, an 18% increase since 2015. This positive trend, revealed through the latest tiger estimation survey, showcases the success of conservation efforts in the Sundarbans, the country's only tiger habitat. Located in the southwestern part of Bangladesh, the Sundarbans is a vast mangrove forest, known for its unique biodiversity and intricate network of waterways. It serves as a critical sanctuary for Bengal tigers and other endangered species.

The survey, conducted from January to April 2023 and November to March 2024, used camera traps and pugmark analysis over 2,240 sq. km, revealing a tiger density of about 2.64 per 100 sq. km. This growth is attributed to targeted conservation measures, including anti-poaching patrols, fencing, and community awareness programs. A healthy prey base, particularly spotted deer, also supports the thriving tiger population.

Despite the positive trend, challenges remain. Tiger density varies across different regions of the Sundarbans, with the Satkhira area seeing declines. Satkhira, located in the southwestern part of the Sundarbans, has been impacted by unauthorised resource harvesting and poaching, which threaten both the tigers and their habitat. Conservationists are calling for enhanced monitoring and smart patrolling to address these challenges and maintain the tiger population's growth. Community involvement is crucial to ensuring the long-term protection of the Sundarbans and its wildlife.

The rise in Bangladesh's tiger population positions the country as a hopeful example in global conservation efforts, demonstrating that dedicated protective measures can foster resilience in one of the world's most vital ecosystems.

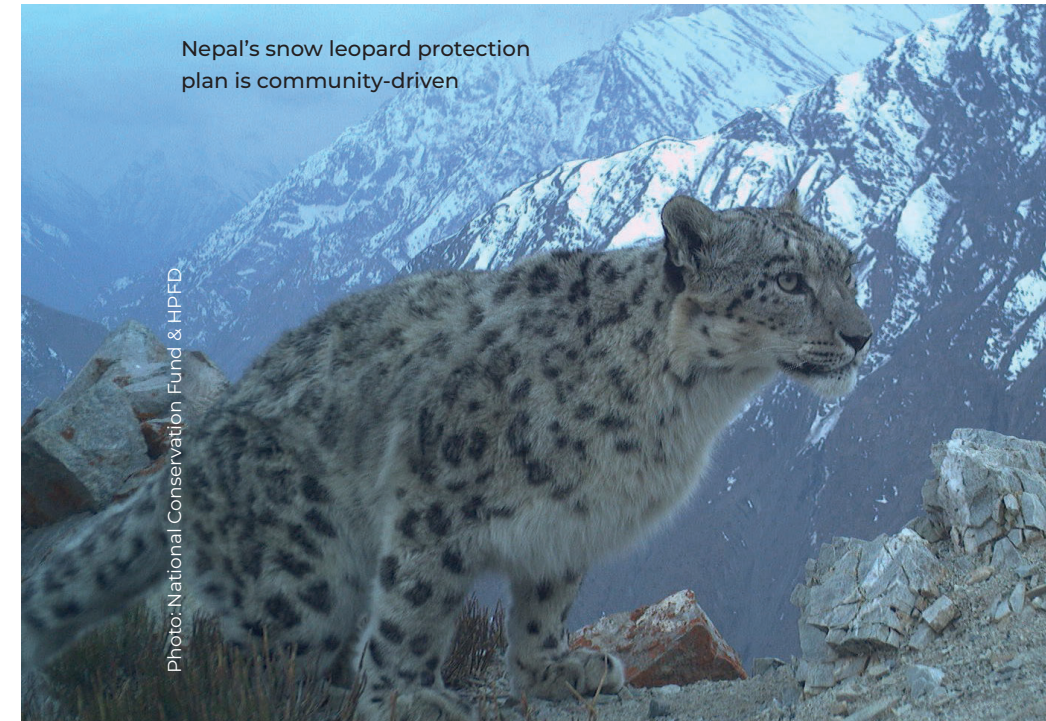


Photo: National Conservation Fund & HPFD

Read more at: <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/10/tiger-population-census-in-bangladesh-shows-a-hopeful-upward-trend-in-the-sundarbans/>

## Nepal's Snow Leopard Conservation Plan

Nepal has revamped its conservation plan to tackle the increasing problem of snow leopard attacks on livestock. These attacks often result in "surplus killing," where many animals are killed in single event. Retaliatory killings, often driven by economic losses, contribute to the illegal trade in snow leopard parts, posing a significant threat to the species.

The updated plan aims to address the root causes of these conflicts at the community level, focusing on building trust with local people and reducing economic losses. This approach seeks to protect snow leopards while supporting local communities that share their habitat. This new strategy shifts the focus from research to community-led conflict mitigation. A significant 35% of the plan's budget is now dedicated to reducing human-wildlife conflict.

An additional 26% of the budget is

directed toward combating the illegal wildlife trade. This includes funding for intelligence gathering, enhancing law enforcement, and creating partnerships with international organisations to reduce demand for snow leopard parts and dismantle trafficking networks.

Community engagement is a core component of the plan. New programmes, including livestock insurance and initiatives promoting alternative livelihoods such as eco-tourism and sustainable harvesting of medicinal plants, aim to help communities cope with livestock losses. These efforts are designed to reduce dependency on livestock and encourage long-term coexistence with snow leopards.

The plan also adopts a 'One Health' approach, linking snow leopard conservation with human health. However, funding for this aspect remains limited. Conservationists have also raised concerns about the lack of support for genetic studies, which are crucial for understanding snow leopard population connectivity, particularly in remote regions like Sagarmatha, where habitat fragmentation threatens genetic diversity.

Nepal's updated conservation strategy represents a shift toward community-centred solutions, with an emphasis on addressing human-wildlife conflict and

supporting local livelihoods. By targeting both conflict mitigation and illegal wildlife trade, the plan aims to secure a sustainable future for snow leopards.

## Mexico's Rewilding Plan for Jaguars

In Oaxaca, southern Mexico, young jaguars are being trained to re-enter the wild. This programme is run by the foundation *Jaguars en la Selva* (Jaguars in the Wild) at the Jaguar Xoo sanctuary. Biologists, veterinarians, and ethnologists have developed a unique reintroduction program designed to teach captive jaguars the necessary survival skills they lost after being taken from their natural habitats. One such jaguar, Balam, was rescued after spending a year and a half in a small cage. To prepare him for life in the wild, he participates in exercises that mimic natural hunting behaviour. The prey isn't real but a jute sack stuffed with chicken meat, challenging Balam to use his claws, muscles, and instincts to retrieve it. These activities not only help reduce the stress of captivity but also improve the jaguar's health and agility.

The sanctuary employs wildlife simulators, large fenced areas designed to replicate natural habitats. Inside, jaguars are exposed to live prey such as peccaries and deer, learning predator-prey dynamics. This gradual process can take up to four years, depending on the jaguar's condition and learning pace. Scientists monitor their progress from hidden locations, ensuring the animals' safety while they re-learn hunting techniques.

Once numbering nearly 40,000 at the start of the 20th century, jaguar populations have plummeted by 88%, leaving only around 4,800 today. The sanctuary's efforts are vital for restoring jaguar populations in northern Mexico, where numbers have sharply declined due to poaching and habitat loss. Through careful and strategic training, the sanctuary has successfully released jaguars back into the wild, marking significant milestones in the ongoing conservation efforts to protect this iconic species. 🐾

Ms Ravina Yadav is Junior Fellow at Sankala Foundation New Delhi.

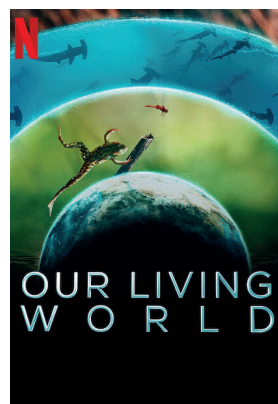


Photo: Bangladesh Forest Department

# Our Living World

BY SHIKHAR MOHAN

In the world of nature documentaries which seem like didactic revelation of countless issues facing us and our fellow beings, *Our Living World* is a refreshing switch of conversation from 'saving' the planet to 'admiring' it. While the idea that all living beings (and even non-living entities) interact with and are interdependent upon each other is not something novel and new—it's one of the first things we learn in our 7th grade environmental studies period as we learn the most basic definition of an 'ecosystem' - but to see



it the most all play out in real life through some breathtaking visuals and engaging graphics makes it so much realer and fascinating. Narrated by Academy Award-winner Cate Blanchett and produced by the team behind Emmy-winning docuseries *Our Great National Parks*, *Our Living World* is spread over 4 episodes of around 50 minutes each, making it a perfect family watch over the weekend. This docuseries a high-budget and incredibly well-produced docuseries nature documentary. From the

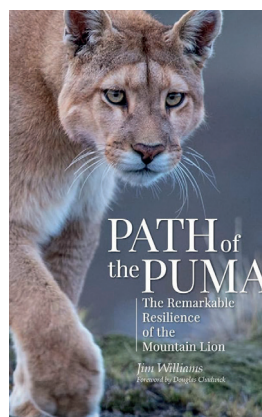
greater one-horned rhinoceros trodding through a Nepalese town in rush hour, to the reindeers of the Arctic being stalked by wolves; from the mayhem caused by bushfires, to the saving of wetland ecosystem by reintroduction of a predator—each episode of this beautiful series makes us delve deep into the mystifying natural world and the unsaid, untold and unseen connections between the creatures living therein. The visuals are a treat, the wilderness covered is diverse, Cate Blanchett's narration is gripping, and the stories of connections and networking in the natural world are as interesting as it gets. 🐾

Our Living World is now streaming on Netflix.

## Path Of The Puma: The Remarkable Resilience Of The Mountain Lion

Of all the big mammals of the Western Hemisphere, the rare and elusive cougar (*Puma concolor*) is the most widespread, second only to the not-so-rare and not-so-elusive *Homo sapiens*. Spanning an astounding 110 degrees of latitude from Canada's Yukon Territory to Tierra del Fuego in Argentina and Chile, this handsome feline has withstood the test of human encroachment into its habitat like no other. After quite a few dodgy and half-baked books on this elusive cat in the last couple of decades, Williams' work stands out as a surprisingly exhaustive and complete piece of literature on this "ghost cat."

The book starts off with a foreword by Douglas H. Chadwick—a veteran



wildlife biologist, author, and photographer—that chronicles Williams' journey from his early work at a Florida marine park to his conversion into "a lifelong devotee of the species." Being an adaptable generalist species that occurs in most American habitat types, researching the puma (also referred to as a cougar, catamount, and mountain lion) is no mean feat. From mountainous deserts to deciduous forests, and from evergreen forests to palm oil plantations, this big cat seems to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Through his writing, Williams digs deep into controversial topics, such as the wrongful targeting of predators like mountain lions as the cause of declining

caribou (*Rangifer tarandus*) numbers, and the role that sport hunting plays in conservation as a wildlife management tool. Over the 300-odd pages, *Path of the Puma* delivers a grounded overview of politics, livestock, loss of connectivity, climate change, industry, habitat loss, poaching, overhunting of prey species and predators by humans, and general cultural attitudes towards the species.

Coming from someone who has spent a considerable chunk of his life gaining hands-on experience in both the Rocky Mountains and the wilds of Patagonia in South America, wildlife manager Jim Williams tracks the path of the puma and, in doing so, challenges readers to consider humanity's role in this journey, as well as what commitment to nature and conservation means in this day and age. 🐾

*Path of the Puma* is published by outdoor company Patagonia

A lion walks close to the jeep tracks in Maasai Mara National Reserve, Kenya



Photo: Awanish Kumar



# PERFECT VIEW



Leopard behind a tree. Art work on display at the Silent Conversation exhibition.  
Artist Gajanand Singh Tungriya, India

## Big Cats

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