

Environmentalists slam catfight over India's lions

July 2 2013, by Abhaya Sristava



Asiatic lions lounge in the shade of a tree near the village of Sasan on the edge of Gir National Park, some 480 kms southwest of Ahmedabad, India, on 10 December 2007. Environmentalists Tuesday slammed an Indian state's attempt to halt the relocation of some of the country's endangered lions, saying it was undermining efforts to boost their dwindling numbers.

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The country's top court ruled in April that some of the 411 Asiatic Lions found only in the Gir forests of the western state of Gujarat must be moved to a wildlife sanctuary in a neighbouring state.

The Supreme Court's decision was applauded by [wildlife experts](#), who said restricting the lions to just one area put them at risk of [inbreeding](#), disease and extinction.

But the Gujarat government on Monday petitioned the Supreme Court, seeking a review of its judgement, saying that moving the wild cats would prove "disastrous" for the species.

"Any external intervention in a (lion) group by removing some of them may result in social disturbance," the state said in its petition.

The petition also said that previous experience had showed that "top [carnivores](#) had never been successfully relocated".

Environmentalists rejected the arguments. They said the lions were being caught in a political tussle between Gujarat, where the cats are a source of pride, and neighbouring Madhya Pradesh state which says it has the expertise to manage them.

"It is important to have a second or third independent home for the long-time survival of the animals," said Belinda Wright, founder of the Wildlife Protection Society of India.



An Asiatic lion yawns in the shade of a tree near the village of Sasan on the edge of Gir National Park, some 480 kms southwest of Ahmedabad, India, on 10 December 2007. Environmentalists Tuesday slammed an Indian state's attempt to halt the relocation of some of the country's endangered lions, saying it was undermining efforts to boost their dwindling numbers.

"It should have nothing to do with politics. No animal belongs to any state," Wright told AFP.

The cats are a [subspecies](#) of [lion](#) which are slightly smaller than their African cousins and have a fold of skin along their bellies. They are a

major attraction for tourists to Gujarat.

Their numbers have slowly increased thanks to decades of [conservation work](#) in the state.

But the Wildlife Trust of India said their habitat was under threat in Gir from encroaching villages.

"The lions in Gir are in conflict with the local villagers. Lions are audacious creatures, they will hunt if they have to and they do go after livestock. If the cattle is killed, it is a severe loss to the locals," the Trust's Mayukh Chatterjee told AFP.

He rejected suggestions that the lions may not withstand the move to a new habitat.

"Lions are tough and ferocious creatures. They adapt very easily to the surroundings."

Wright said today's scientists were well equipped to successfully move the lions.

"For the sake of the future of the Asiatic lions, they must be relocated," she added.

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