

India's endangered lion numbers increase

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Endangered Asiatic Lions rest after a kill at the Gir Forest National Park and Wildlife Sanctuary in the western Indian state of Gujarat on December 25, 2010

Wildlife experts welcomed Monday census figures showing India's population of endangered Asiatic lions has increased in the last five years in the western state of Gujarat.

Gujarat Chief Minister Anandiben Patel said officials counted 523 lions, up 27 percent from the last census conducted in 2010 in Gir sanctuary, the last habitat for the big cats globally.

The census was conducted over five days earlier this month in the 20,000 square kilometre (7,700 square mile) sanctuary and surrounding forest lands.

"There are 109 male lions, 201 females and 213 cubs in the Gir sanctuary and nearby forest areas of Junagadh district," Patel said on Sunday.

Officials have said the experts conducting the census used a combination of direct sightings, photographs and GPS tracking technology to document each [lion](#) and avoid double counting.

Around 2,500 people, including [wildlife experts](#) from India's top universities, participated in the counting process.

The last census in 2010 showed 411 lions, up from 359 in 2005.

WWF India director Diwakar Sharma welcomed the numbers but said the larger population posed challenges for managing their habitat and conflict with humans.

"This is good news on the conservation front but bigger populations in bigger areas increases the challenge of managing land, human and animal conflict," he told AFP.



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"There (also) has to be some other place far away from Gir (for lions) so that in a time of catastrophe, we don't lose the population."

The Gujarat government is fighting a Supreme Court ruling in 2013 for some of the lions to be moved to a wildlife sanctuary in a neighbouring state to ensure their long-term survival in case of disease.

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.

India faces intense international scrutiny over its [conservation efforts](#) because it is home to many endangered species, including tigers.

Conservation efforts were hailed in January after 2,226 tigers were spotted in a country-wide [census](#), a 30 percent increase in the population from 2010.

Authorities across Asia are waging a major battle against poachers, who often sell tiger body parts to the lucrative traditional Chinese medicine market, as well as other man-made problems such as habitat loss.

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