

Indian authorities admit to flaws in tiger counts after criticism

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This male tiger has just come out of the water. Indian authorities may have exaggerated the growth in tiger numbers, scientists say. Credit: Ullas Karanth

The National Tiger Conservation of India (NTCA) has proposed a revamp of their tiger monitoring program, after strong criticism from both independent scientists and media.

The Indian government has claimed that the national [tiger](#) population has more than doubled since 2006, but independent scientists have raised serious doubts about this claim.

"It is extremely unlikely that the number of tigers in India has increased in the way the government claims," said researcher Arjun Gopaldaswamy in [an interview](#) with the Norwegian science news portal Titan.uio.no in late November. He is the Science Advisor, Global Programs, Wildlife Conservation Society and is based in India.

Professor Nils Chr. Stenseth from the University of Oslo (Norway) agreed. "Whenever empirical observations go against known ecological patterns, it calls for immediate scrutiny of the methodological validity of the analysis," Stenseth said. Stenseth and Gopaldaswamy were authors of a scientific paper containing serious criticisms about India's claims of rising tiger numbers.

Data transparency and counting "paper tigers"

The newspaper Indian Express carried out their own investigation on the official 2014 tiger status report and found serious errors in the way tigers were individually identified from their photographs. The newspaper found that 1 in 7 tigers were regarded as "paper tigers" (the same tiger counted more than once).

The prestigious journal Nature featured a story and an editorial about India's tiger counts and reported concerns over data transparency. The journal also stressed that Indian authorities should make India's tiger data available, at least to independent Indian scientists, for verification.

India is home to the world's largest number of wild tigers. In 2006, the authorities stated that there were only 1,411 tigers in India. Based on this, the [prime minister](#) had every reason to feel proud to announce—on the International Tiger Day, 29 July 2019—that the population of tigers in India had reached 2,967 animals. This was one third more than the reported number in 2014—2,226 tigers—and more than a doubling of the 1,411 animals reported in 2006. However, there has been a considerable delay in the dissemination of the full report following this announcement, casting further doubts on these claims.

Calls for more accountability

The National Tiger Conservation Authority, a statutory body under the Environment Ministry of India, has now reacted to the criticisms and proposed to overhaul its population monitoring setup. The Indian Express writes that the NTCA has written to the Wildlife Institute of India (WII), also under the Environment Ministry and the implementing partner of India's tiger surveys, conveying its proposal to revamp its Tiger Cell to "bring more accountability, transparency and scientific robustness" and "fill the gaps in scientific monitoring and research observed since 2006, when All India Tiger Estimation started in country."

India's claims of having doubled its tiger numbers were widely publicized in international media, and consequently, most people around the world may believe these claims to be real.

"Scientific findings so far have indicated that the variability associated with India's claims of tiger population size increases are perhaps much larger than currently reported. A re-analysis of India's tiger survey data since 2006 will help understand the extent of these uncertainties," says Gopaldaswamy.

More information: Arjun M. Gopaldaswamy, K. Ullas Karanth, Mohan Delampady, Nils Chr. Stenseth: How sampling-based overdispersion reveals India's tiger monitoring orthodoxy. *Conservation Science and Practice*. 2019; e128

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