

India buoyed by jump in rare Asiatic lion numbers

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A young Asiatic lion rests after a kill at the Gir Sanctuary in Gujarat, only place they are found in the wild

The population of rare Asiatic lions in India has jumped by nearly a third in the past five years to almost 700, an official survey said, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi hailing the increase as an "excellent feat".

Asiatic lions—slightly smaller than their African cousins and with a fold of skin along their bellies—are only found in the wild in the Gir sanctuary in western Gujarat, Modi's home state.

"Population of the majestic Asiatic Lion, living in Gujarat's Gir Forest, is up by almost 29 percent," the Indian leader tweeted Wednesday.

"Geographically, distribution area is up by 36 percent. Kudos to the people of Gujarat and all those whose efforts have led to this excellent feat."

The survey of the lion population, which is conducted every five years, was due to be held in early June.

But restrictions imposed by India's ongoing coronavirus lockdown meant the full survey could not be carried out.

Instead, an observation survey was conducted during the full moon last week that involved about 1,400 people, just under half of the usual number of participants, with a smaller group of experts.

"The population of Asiatic Lions has thus shown a steady increase with a population of 674 individuals with an increase rate of 28.8 percent," Gujarat's chief wildlife warden Shyamal Tikadar said in a report.

The Asiatic [lion](#) population was estimated to be 523 in 2015 and 411 in 2010.

The big cat was listed as critically endangered in 2000, with its [population](#) under threat due to hunting and human encroachment on its habitat.

Priyavrat Ghadvi, who is on Gujarat's wildlife board, said the estimate

appeared to be fairly accurate and was encouraging.

"It is a scientific process and the figures are encouraging," Ghadvi told AFP, crediting local efforts for the [population increase](#).

"This shows that the conservation programme has been successful."

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