



## The 're-wilding' of wild animals

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**(Mains GS 2 & 3 : Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation & Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.)**

### Context:

The recent attempt of Periyar Tiger Reserve (PTR) to reintroduce into the wild an abandoned nine-month-old cub named Mangala after rearing it in 'captivity' for two years has once again brought the controversial concept of 're-wilding' of abandoned or injured animals under the lens.

### The intervention known as 're-wilding':

- As per the Standard Operating Procedures/Guidelines laid down by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) under Section 38(O) of The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, there are three ways to deal with orphaned or abandoned tiger cubs.
- The first is to make an effort to reunite the abandoned cubs with their mother.
- Second, if a reunion of the cub with its mother is not possible, then shift the cub to a suitable zoo.
- Third, reintroduction of the cub into the wild after a certain time when it appears that the cub is capable of surviving in the wild independently, known as 're-wilding'.

### Taken all safety measures:

- NTCA stresses that the tiger cub should be reared in an in situ enclosure for a minimum of two years, and during this time, each cub should have a successful record of at least 50 'kills'.
- Within the enclosure, the persons responsible for handling cubs must approach them by putting a tiger mask along with work day clothes of a tiger stripe pattern smeared with tiger urine and faeces.
- Various conditions must be complied with at the time of releasing the cub in the wild.
- The tiger cubs should be in prime health, and of dispersing age (three/four years) and there should be no abnormality/incapacitation.

## **Attempts at re-wilding of carnivores in India:**

- The tiger conservationist Billy Arjan Singh was credited with the re-introduction of three leopards — a male named Prince and two females, Harriet and Juliette — and a Siberian tigress cub named Tara in Dudhwa forest area in the 1970s.
- However, the re-wilding attempt ran into controversy after several incidents of killing of humans were reported in Dudhwa.
- These incidents of man-eating were blamed on the tigress Tara, who was reportedly shot dead in 1980.
- However, Billy disputed this, and maintained that Tara had died a natural death, and that the wrong animal had been killed in 1980.

## **The re-wilding in Tiger Reserves:**

- The re-wilding in Panna Tiger Reserve of two abandoned tigress cubs, named T4 and T5, that were brought up at Kanha Tiger Reserve, is considered to be a success in tiger conservation.
- Both T4 and T5 produced offspring before dying. T4 died reportedly due to illness, while T5 perished in a territorial fight.
- In March 2021, a three-year-old tigress, PTRF-84, the daughter of the 'man-eater' tigress T1, was released in the Pench Tiger Reserve after two years of a re-wilding programme.
- T1, famous by the name of Avni, was shot dead in the Pandharkawada forests of Yavatmal in Maharashtra and one of her two cubs, PTRF-84, was captured.
- The experiment of releasing PTRF-84 into the wild after the re-wilding programme, however, ended badly.
- Just eight days after being released, PTRF-84 died of injuries sustained during a territorial clash in the jungle.

## **Experts on re-wilding :**

- The Director of Periyar Tiger Reserve says that, "There are 50-50 chances of success and failure of re-wilding of hand reared carnivores in the wild."
- However, independent conservationists maintain that the chances of success are far less than that — less than even 1 per cent.
- Conservation scientist and tiger expert Dr K Ullas Karanth, Director of the Centre for Wildlife Studies, Bengaluru, told that "translocating hand-reared or even wild tigers is not necessary in India".
- This is because, "Where the prey and tigers are well protected, tigers are already occurring at naturally attainable densities."
- And "If tigers are dumped there without adequate research to assess if there is room for more of them, either they will die or the tigers already there will have to die."

## **Proper re-wilding should be ensured:**

- Almost all translocations of captive-raised tigers have failed so far, with only rare successes such as in Panna after a tiger extinction, and some re-introductions in Russia into empty habitats with plenty of prey.
- Such failures have led to deaths of many tigers as well as serious livestock depredations, and even man-eating problems.
- The real need is to protect more habitat strictly, so that the prey densities rise and more tigers can thrive.
- Dumping individual tigers cannot be called re-wilding rather re-wilding is systematic, scientifically planned re-establishment of viable populations of tigers in this historical range over the longer term.
- Humans cannot teach a tiger how to hunt. Hunting is its basic instinct.
- A man can only provide a suitable atmosphere to a cub to sharpen its instincts.

### **Challenges in the re-wilding process:**

- The process of re-wilding of a wild animal after rearing it in captivity is very complicated, and fraught with risks.
- There have been instances, for example, of captivity-reared animals, especially carnivores, attacking human beings after being introduced in the wild.
- Huge funds are needed for constructing large, well-fenced enclosures, for the equipment required for technical surveillance of the animal, for providing it with regular prey, and to maintain a well-documented progress report of the animal.
- Authorities have to keep tabs on the overall movement of a released animal till the end, which needs a lot of resources and manpower.

### **Areas of captive animal release:**

- Experts suggested that selection of the area for reintroducing hand-reared carnivores needs high consciousness.
- Reintroduction of captive animals in protected areas, which already have the presence of the same species, often ends badly due to territorial fights.
- If these animals are released in a protected area, which requires a particular species, then there are chances of survival.
- Thus, the success of the re-wilding concept is conditional.
- For instance, the introduction of T3, T4 in Panna Tiger Reserve (PTR) is called a 'success' because at the time of their introduction, the presence of tigers in PTR was very low."

### **Re-wilding limited not limited to big cats:**

- Re-wilding is not limited to cats and there have been efforts to reintroduce other endangered species, including scavengers, into the wild after rearing them in captivity.

- The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) in collaboration with the Haryana Forest and Wildlife Department has been running a vulture conservation centre named 'Jatayu' near Pinjore for the last 17 years.
- Several pairs of endangered gyps species, including the white-backed, the long-billed, and the slender-billed, have been successfully introduced into the wild.
- Again, an Elephant Rehabilitation Centre (ERC) has been running in Yamunanagar, Haryana, in collaboration with Wildlife SOS.
- The ERC aims to rehabilitate and provide high-quality veterinary care, treatment, and enrichment to facilitate recovery for elephants that are found astray, injured, abused, exploited, maimed, orphaned, trapped, sick, or treated in a cruel manner by owners or handlers/mahouts.

### **Conclusion:**

- Re-wilding is a complex and expensive process which needs very careful handling of wild animals and still most of the times it leads to failure.
- Thus a holistic approach is needed to protect habitats of the animals so that wild cats along with other animals will survive.