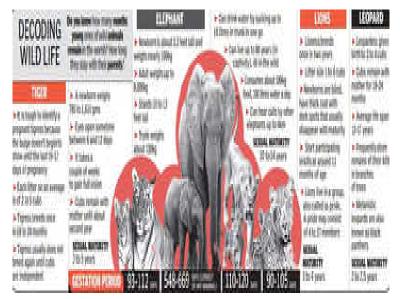
## Fast-growing linear infrastructure shrinking India's forests into islands

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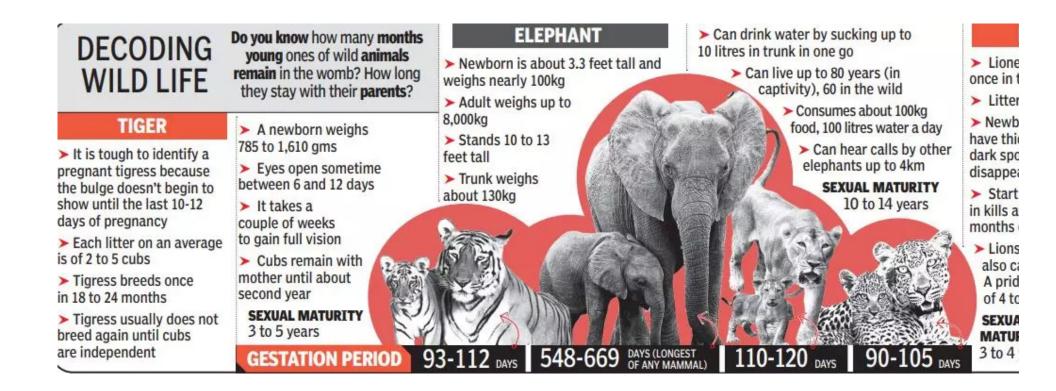


The 3,000km marathon walk of the famous Indian tiger Walker came to a halt at Dnyanganga Wildlife Sanctuary (DWS) with a billion-dollar question — what next for him? How will Walker's progeny connect with the rest of the world? Walker had entered an island-like forest after walking for nine months.

Walker's presence in a disconnected forest triggered a question about forests converting into islands due to increasing linear infrastructures. Walker had reached the DWS in February 2020, after starting the journey from Yavatmal in Maharashtra and traversing through the forests of Telangana, before re-entering Maharashtra that has 351 big cats.

Conservationists say connectivity between forests is essential for

maintaining the 'genetic plurality' of wildlife. But the age-old migration paths of wildlife are being challenged. Any infrastructure work in forests leads to wildlife-vehicle collisions, habitat loss and fragmentation, human-wildlife conflict, reduced genetic connectivity and increased poaching. According to a global study by scientists from different countries, including the UK and France, tiger is among the apex predator species that is endangered by roads and their impact.



The study titled 'Severe conservation risks of roads on apex predators', published in Nature journal (in 2022), found out that 'all' the 36 apex predator species are at risk. "The sloth bear suffers the highest risk of all apex predators, followed by tiger and dhole," it read. India alone has a 5.2 million km of road network while 30 million passengers travel on at least 12,000 trains everyday. India is now home to 3,167 tigers in 53 reserves and despite an increasing infrastructure push, success stories in tiger conservation are being weaved constantly.

Central India Landscape (CIL) also includes Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh that boasts of having the largest population of tigers in the world, with almost 1,100 big cats, according to India's latest 'Status of Tiger Report'.

The mitigation measures implemented in CIL have given a ray of hope to wildlife biologists, scientists, engineers and architects. Dr Bilal Habib from Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, who played key role in its planning, says, "Nine animal underpasses ranging from 50 metre to 1,500 metre on Pench-Kanha (NH44) corridor, which passes through the National Highway 44 in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh, saw wildlife habituating itself to using them. In 2019, nearly 5,675 animals used underpasses and the number rose to 19,309 in 2021."

In Madhya Pradesh, which has 526 big cats, initiatives like having sound barriers, underpasses and overpasses on all major road and rail projects are bearing positive results. One of the major problems for tigers and leopards in MP is Budni-Midghat track. Passing through Ratapani sanctuary, it has witnessed several animal deaths, earning it the infamous moniker of the 'suicide point of the majestic'.

Asia's longest wildlife corridor is under-construction Delhi-Dehradun Greenfield Expressway which will conclude in Uttarakhand, having 442 tigers. The corridor would help tigers in Rajaji Tiger Reserve to spread across Himachal Pradesh, UP and Haryana. The 12km road from Ganeshpur to Dehradun would have six animal underpasses, two elephant underpasses, two big bridges and 13 small bridges.

"We are working to restore the population on the western side of Rajaji. The Chilla-Motichur corridor has partly improved. One of our tigers is roaming in HP and beyond," says Samir Sinha, chiefwildlife warden of Uttarakhand forest department.

BK Singh, former head of forest force of Karnataka, which has the highest number of tigers (524) in India, and member of the NTCA evaluation committee, says, "If the corridors are degraded, there will be inbreeding of tigers. If tiger reserves are without adequate buffer and corridor connectivity, source populations will be left on islands of tiger reserves and there will be no interaction between them; wild animals and tigers will suffer from diseases, eventually jeopardizing the conservation efforts."

Green infrastructure is the way to reduce mishaps, provided the pace of executing orders that are dispensed by NTCA, NGT and Supreme Court is increased. Former member of Maharashtra State Wildlife Board, Bandu Dhotre, says, "While the expansion of tiger habitats is a positive development, there is a need to pay attention and act quickly in conflict zones to reverse the trend of extinction of small populations and avoid negative humantiger interactions."

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