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# India in 2023: strides in climate action, criticism of conservation

India spurred action to combat climate change but brooked criticism over its cheetah translocation plan and changes in forest and biodiversity laws

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PTI

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Bhupender Yadav, India's Minister of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change. | Photo Credit: AP

India spurred meaningful action to combat climate change and enhance wildlife conservation in 2023, but criticism arose regarding the cheetah translocation project and changes in forest and biodiversity laws.

The country put forth a proposal to host the U.N. climate conference in 2028, or COP33, and also launched a 'Green Credit Initiative' focused on creating carbon sinks to address the challenges posed by a rapidly warming world.

At the historic climate summit in Dubai in December, developing countries, including India, asked rich nations to vacate carbon space by achieving negative carbon emissions (removing more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than emitted), not merely reaching net zero by 2050.

A group of international scientists said in December India's per capita carbon dioxide emissions rose by around 5% in 2022 to reach two tonnes but these were still less than half of the global average (4.7 tonnes).

India submitted its third national communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change on December 9. According to it, the country reduced GDP emission intensity by 33% between 2005 and 2019, achieving the target 11 years in advance.

It also created an additional carbon sink of 1.97 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent during this period.

## **Wildlife conservation**

Data released in July showed the number of tigers in India have increased from 2,967 in 2018 to 3,682 in 2022, an annual rise of six percent.

With a 50% increase in the last four years, Madhya Pradesh has the maximum number (785) of tigers in the country, followed by Karnataka (563), Uttarakhand (560), and Maharashtra (444).

The estimation exercise showed that the tiger population has gone up in the Shivalik Hills-Gangetic Plains landscape, central India and the Sundarbans but their numbers have dwindled in the Western Ghats and the Northeast-Brahmaputra Plains due to habitat loss, fragmentation and poaching over the years.

The much vaunted cheetah conservation project drew sharp criticism over the deaths of six of the 20 adults imported from Namibia and South Africa.

According to officials, one of the biggest challenges faced in the first year of managing cheetahs in India was the unexpected development of winter coats by some cheetahs during the Indian summer and monsoon, in anticipation of the African winter (June to September).

The winter coat, combined with high humidity and temperatures, caused itching, prompting the animals to scratch their necks on tree trunks or the ground. This led to bruises and exposed skin, where flies laid their eggs, resulting in maggot infestations and, ultimately, bacterial infections and septicemia, leading to the death of three cheetahs, an official explained.

“The mortalities so far under Project Cheetah have been within the expected limits. As per Cheetah Action Plan, we anticipated approximately 50 percent mortality, but right now, 14 imported cheetahs are surviving, besides one cub born on Indian soil,” SP Yadav, Additional Director General of Forests at the Environment Ministry, said in an interview with PTI.

India also launched the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA) in April during the 50th anniversary of Project Tiger, aiming to conserve the world’s seven principal big cats, which include the tiger, lion, snow leopard, leopard, jaguar, puma, and cheetah. The IBCA will be open to 97 countries and organisations interested in protecting these animals.

**Forest law changes:** The government amended forest conservation and biodiversity laws, inviting sharp criticism from several state governments, policy experts, and conservationists.

Passed by Parliament in the Monsoon Session, the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act applies to lands recorded as forest in government records, exempting certain categories of land from its purview.

Conservationists argue that limiting the applicability of the FCA to land recorded as forest in government records would effectively invalidate the Supreme Court's 1996 judgment in the TN Godavarman case, which said the Act was applicable to land covered under the "dictionary meaning of forests" or "deemed forests" (forests not officially recorded as forests).

The amended Act exempts forest land up to 10 hectares for constructing security-related infrastructure and the area falling within 100 km of international borders, Line of Control (LoC) and Line of Actual Control (LAC) for "strategic and security-related projects of national importance".

States, including Himachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura, Mizoram and Assam, had said that such a step could potentially encompass large areas of their forest land and also affect the tribals and other traditional forest dwelling communities.

The government also introduced changes to the Biological Diversity Act to help protect plants and resources in India.

The goal was to encourage growing medicinal plants instead of taking them from the wild, support traditional Indian medicine, make it easier for research and patents, and involve more foreign investments without harming the country's interests.

However, there are worries because the new law says people using traditional knowledge or practising certain types of medicine do not have to share benefits with local communities who have that knowledge. Before, breaking these rules could mean going to jail, but now, it's mostly about paying fines ranging from Rs 1 lakh to Rs 50 lakh, and in serious cases, up to Rs 1 crore.

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