

Insights into the Ecology of Asiatic Lions by Dr. Meena Venkataraman

We had the privilege of attending an insightful two-day session (9–10 December 2024) led by Dr. Meena Venkataraman, a renowned wildlife biologist with over 15 years of experience researching Asiatic Lions.

Day 1: Stakeholder Role-Playing and Action

Planning

The first day we had an interactive activity where participants enacted the roles of various stakeholders to address a real-life conservation issue. The scenario involved wolf attacks on humans in the village of Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh, from March to September 2024. The stakeholders represented included villagers, the forest department, an NGO, media personnel, and the police.

Each stakeholder group presented an action plan, explaining their role in mitigating the conflict and contributing to a solution. This thought-provoking exercise provided us with a deeper understanding of how different stakeholders are impacted by and contribute to solving conservation challenges. It highlighted the complexity of real-world issues and the importance of collaboration and communication between diverse societal roles.

Day 2: Insights into the Asiatic Lions of Gir National Park

The second day was dedicated to an in-depth session on the Asiatic Lions of Gir National Park, Gujarat. Meena provided fascinating insights into their behavior, biology, and conservation challenges. We learned that lions now inhabit only 8% of their historical range, primarily in Gir National Park. As the only social cats, lions live in structured groups: female lions form a pride, while male lions form a coalition.

- **Male lions:** At 3–4 years of age, male cubs leave or are forced out of their groups, forming coalitions with other males, often brothers or unrelated males. By 4–5 years, they establish territories, find a pride, and mate. However, 2–3

years after this, they may become nomadic.

- **Female lions:** Female cubs tend to stay closer to their home ranges. At 3–11 years of age, they breed and collectively care for cubs. Female lions live longer (up to 18 years) compared to males.

An intriguing aspect of lion behavior discussed was infanticide. Male lions may kill cubs from other males to make the females receptive to mating, leading to intense territorial and mating competition.

Research Methods and Conservation

Meena also explained methods used to identify individual lions, such as analysing the unique whisker spot patterns on the second row (referred to as the "B row").

For translocations, it is recommended to release a higher number of lions into the core zone rather than the buffer zone to minimize stress and improve survival rates.

Community Perspectives and Translocation

Discussions

The session also explored community perspectives on conserving lions and leopards. Interestingly, communities coexisting with both species showed more acceptance toward lions than leopards.

We concluded with discussions on the translocation of cheetahs to Kuno National Park and the potential for translocating lions to the same area.

Gratitude

This session was an incredible opportunity to learn from Dr. Meena Venkataraman's vast expertise. We are immensely grateful to the Zoo Outreach Organisation and to the Ram Hattikudur Advanced Training in Conservation for facilitating this enriching experience, and to Dr. Meena for sharing her invaluable knowledge.

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