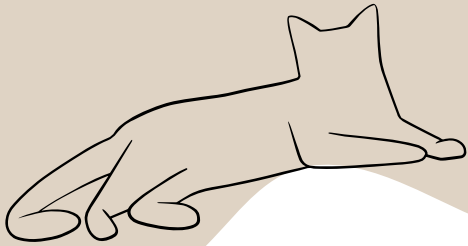


Towards a Future for Small Wild Cats in Assam: Species Management Planning



In a collaborative effort to safeguard the future of India's lesser-known but ecologically critical small wild cats, a six-day intensive Species Management Planning workshop was conducted, bringing together forest department officials, researchers, conservation practitioners, and students. The workshop focused on six elusive felids—the Marbled Cat *Pardofelis marmorata*, Leopard Cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, Clouded Leopard *Neofelis nebulosa*, Asiatic Golden Cat *Catopuma temminckii*, Jungle Cat *Felis chaus*, and Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus*. Utilizing tools and methodologies developed by the IUCN Conservation Planning Specialist Group (CPSG), the workshop aimed to catalyze science-based, participatory planning for the conservation of these fascinating lesser-known carnivores. The workshop was hosted by Aaranyak, supported by the Assam State Forest Department under the Assam Project on Forest & Biodiversity Conservation, funded by Agence Francaise de Development, and facilitated by Dr Sanjay Molur of Zoo Outreach Organisation / Conservation Planning Specialist Group South Asia.



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After an introduction to carnivores, wild cats and a detailed introduction to the six species of small wild cats (including distribution, possible abundance for some species and global scale threats based on IUCN Red List assessments) the workshop began with a visioning exercise designed to coalesce diverse perspectives into a unified conservation goal. This opening session emphasized the importance of aligning individual and institutional efforts with a long-term vision that is both aspirational and achievable. Participants collectively envisioned a future where viable populations of all six small wild cat species thrive across their natural habitats in India, supported by robust ecosystems, informed management, and active community stewardship. This shared vision served as the guiding framework for all subsequent discussions and planning exercises.

The visioning process also involved identifying key values associated with small wild cats, including their roles as indicators of forest health, contributors to ecological balance through rodent control, and their cultural significance in local traditions. By centering these values, the group was able to articulate a vision that acknowledged not only biological needs but also social and economic dimensions of conservation.

The first three days of the workshop focused on landscape-level threats affecting the habitats of all six species. Through a series of participatory mapping exercises and facilitated discussions, participants assessed habitat degradation across different biogeographic zones.

Forest loss due to infrastructure development, encroachment, monoculture plantations, and resource extraction emerged as common threats. Specific attention was paid to the fragmentation of wetland habitats affecting the fishing cat, and the degradation of dense evergreen forests impacting marbled cats and clouded leopards.

Forest department officials provided valuable insights into ongoing management interventions, such as burning of grasslands, afforestation programs, and human-wildlife conflict mitigation measures. However, many of these efforts focused on larger mammals and lacked small cat species-specific focus due to limited ecological data. The workshop highlighted the need for incorporating fine-scale species occurrence data into habitat restoration plans and management zoning.

Participants also reviewed policy-level challenges, such as lack of legal protection for key habitats outside protected areas, and limited integration of wild cat conservation



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in forest working plans. The need for cross-sectoral collaboration between researchers, forest department officials both higher-up and on-ground was emphasized.

The remaining three days of the workshop shifted focus to species-specific threats and conservation strategies. The participants were divided into working groups with each group focused on 1 or 2 species based on the habitat occupied by the species.

Each group identified critical gaps in knowledge, specific anthropogenic pressures, and potential conservation levers based on existing information and on-ground experience.

The forest-dependent species were recognized as facing high risk from habitat loss in the Eastern Himalaya and northeastern India. Their arboreal habits and elusive nature make them poorly studied. The group discussed initiating detailed studies, along with preserving contiguous forest tracts. Also, the need for ecological and behavioral research was recognized. Workshop participants emphasized the need for standardizing identification protocols and building regional databases to track sightings and genetic lineages. Some of the species are more widely distributed, yet suffer from road mortality, poisoning, and persecution due to poultry depredation. Suggested actions included community awareness programs, inclusion of all stakeholder

groups such as communities, managers, and researchers into their conservation actions. Species found in wetlands and mangrove ecosystems, such as the Fishing Cat & Marbled Cat were recognized as highly vulnerable to wetland drainage and encroachment. Conservation measures discussed included mainstreaming wetland protection, promoting wetland conservation, and exploring community-led wetland monitoring.

The workshop concluded with a reflection session in which participants expressed renewed commitment to small wild cat conservation and emphasized the importance of continued collaboration. A roadmap was proposed to formalize species-specific working groups, facilitate knowledge exchange, and develop a centralized database for wild cat research and conservation. By integrating scientific evidence, and strategic planning tools, the workshop successfully laid the groundwork for coordinated action toward safeguarding Assam's small wild cats. The developed species management plan will outline conservation targets, responsible agencies, timelines, and potential partnerships.



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