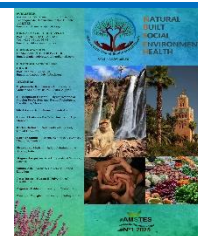




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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Relocating Nepal's Problematic Tigers to Suitable Habitats: A Lens of Management.

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Sir,

Relocating wild species is a practical and conservationist approach which addresses the growing problem of declining animal populations by moving them from captivity or the wild to areas where their populations are at risk or have gone extinct [1]. Relocation has aided some populations in the wild, but the benefits in conservation sustainability have been accompanied by significant challenges including inter and intra species disease transfer between the relocated and native one. Further, these schemes have been criticized for lack of success and substantial concerns on husbandry practices that produce genetically or behaviourally marginalized individuals [1,2]. Despite these limitations, Nepal may face challenges with individual tigers (*Panthera tigris*) that often enter human settlements and attack people and livestock because their habitat has become degraded or intra-species competition, where weaker tigers are pushed out of their habitats. One potential solution could be animal diplomacy with other countries.

Nepal's proposal to offer surplus tigers (tigers which have become problematic in their normal territory) to countries with suitable habitats represents a significant contribution to global wildlife conservation. Owing to successful conservation efforts, the tiger population has grown substantially, nearly tripling the target of doubling between 2010 and 2022. In 2022, the wild tiger population in Nepal reached 355, up from 121 in 2010 [3], dispersing across five protected areas covering 5,200 km² [4] and adjoining forests. Tigers are territorial animals requiring large territory areas to thrive with each requiring about 50 km² of territory & prey density of 150 animals/km² [5]. Over the past six years, tiger attacks have claimed 68 lives, with fatalities nearly doubling from 2018 to 2024 [6]. This underscores the challenges of coexisting with tigers in areas with high populations. With limited habitat [7] and rising human-wildlife conflict, a strategic solution is essential to balance conservation process with ecological and

social stability. Relocation with proper plans can reduce pressure on existing reserves and ensure tigers thrive in suitable areas, addressing both wildlife and human needs [8].

The selection of tiger relocation sites requires thorough assessments to ensure ecological suitability, with sufficient prey and habitat to support tiger populations, offering ample space and food [9]. The area must also have strong anti-poaching laws and a robust conservation infrastructure to protect the relocated tigers. Additionally, enhancing genetic diversity is crucial to strengthening the species' gene pool and preventing inbreeding, ensuring long-term sustainability. The relocation sites must comply with both national and international wildlife laws, and include local commitments to ensure the success and sustainability of the relocation efforts.

Tiger relocation from Nepal opens doors for global conservation partnerships [10]. Countries with similar climatic conditions and strong ecological infrastructures, facing declining tiger populations, could benefit from Nepal's surplus. Organizations such as Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Global Tiger Forum can facilitate translocations, ensuring adherence to best practices. Relocation poses challenges such as transport stress, adaptation issues, and wildlife conflicts, requiring careful planning and proper monitoring to mitigate risks [9,11]. Countries like China (China's Panda diplomat – giant pandas loaned on careful terms) and India (an example of successful conservation with the Indian Lion and also the tiger) offer valuable lessons on habitat preparation and community involvement in wildlife translocation [12].

Moreover, local community support is crucial for successful translocations, and eco-tourism incentives can help foster cooperation [13]. In addition to tiger relocation, Nepal should continue expanding suitable habitats outside protected areas, strengthen anti-poaching laws, and promote community involvement in tiger-human coexistence. This can be achieved through dedicated conflict mitigation programs to increase community tolerance towards tigers. Local and global cooperation should be strengthened to ensure the long-term success of conservation efforts, creating a more sustainable future for both wildlife and local communities.

Nepal's proposed plan to relocate surplus tigers for various purposes including tiger diplomacy can support wildlife conservation and sustainable ecosystem management. By addressing the

ecological needs of tigers and the challenges of human-wildlife coexistence, this initiative seeks to balance biodiversity conservation with local community welfare. With careful planning, scientific rigor, local and international collaboration, this approach can serve as a model for other nations facing similar conservation issues. Furthermore, strengthening collaboration from the local level to global partnerships will be crucial to ensuring long-term success, as demonstrated by Nepal's achievement of more than doubling its tiger population within a decade. This initiative not only benefits tigers but also contributes to broader efforts to safeguard endangered species rather than resorting to population control measures like hunting, thereby ensuring the conservation of habitat and thus its suitable residents worldwide.

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