

The big cats of Sasan Gir

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They are the majestic embodiments of pure animal power, sharing a genetic connection with their African cousins. The Asiatic lions thrive in their thousand and a half or so sq. kms of territory, rulers of a shared kingdom.



The distinctive calmness of a moonless night in Sasan Gir National Park in the Junagadh district of Gujarat is sometimes broken by the primeval call of an Asiatic lion which never fails to chill even the bravest of hearts. This fierce and reverberating roar is spellbinding in its majesty, reflecting the spirit of the king himself. Unfortunately, this is the only place left on the planet where you can actually hear the *Panthera leo persica*. There was a time, when this graceful creature once roamed the lands of Yemen, Macedonia in Greece, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, sometimes even living on the borders of Bangladesh. Of course, now it is confined to a mere 1412 sq.kms.

Human encroachments and the invention of gun powder not only made sure that the lion's habitat got transformed into farmlands and urban areas, but also that the animal was reduced to becoming merely a poacher's trophy. Thankfully, one person, namely the late Nawab of Junagadh, gave this creature the respect it deserved and issued a complete ban on the hunting of game, in and around the district in 1910. This move has clearly prevented the king of the jungle's disappearance.

The Indian lion does have a distant cousin in the land of Africa. Asiatic and African lions separated as recently as 1,00,000 years ago, and are thus very close in genetic make-up. In fact, the differences between the two are less than those found between different human racial groups. However, the differences are significant enough for one to be able to distinguish between an Asiatic and an African lion if one knows what to look for.

Asiatic lions tend to be smaller than their African cousins. Compared to the African lion, the male Asiatic lion has a relatively short, sparse mane. As a result, the male Asiatic lion's ears tend to remain visible at all times. In addition to this, the mane is generally darker than that of African lions. The former have thicker elbow tufts and a longer tail tuft than the latter. The most distinguishing characteristic of all Asiatic lions is a fold of skin that runs along their bellies.

Another marked difference between the two subspecies is the way their group is composed. Lions are, in general, very social creatures. It is really amazing to see how a group of lions, known as a pride, live,

eat and sleep together. The African lions have a much bigger pride than the Asiatic lions composed of 5-6 lionesses, a lion and cubs. The lioness, being more agile, is appointed for the killing whereas the lion is the protector. Some suggest that it may be due to the fact that Asiatic lions hunt small animals like deer as compared to its cousin that lives in the great African land of wild beasts and zebras that the pride composition is such. While the lions of Africa need more numbers to charge and kill their prey, in India the restricted area and the size of the prey allows the lioness to do her job alone or sometimes with a companion.

As can be seen, unlike the dominant Indian male in human society, it is the female of the species that has a more important role to play in the life of the pride. While the male lion is off patrolling the

pride's territory, the lionesses are the ones that do most of the daredevilry for the group. From hunting, looking after the cubs, giving them important survival lessons, to protecting the entire pride from enemies, the lioness is the best example of female empowerment. Usually there are two to three lionesses in an Asiatic lion pride and when a cub is orphaned, the other females of the pride quite naturally take up the job of caring for the little one. The male Asiatic lions have been found to be solitary creatures


that love their sleep, and join the pride only during the mating period or to share a large kill. As a male cub reaches its youth, it is sternly directed to look for other territories while the female cubs usually continue to live with the same pride.

Sasan Gir National Park may be a small region for a king to reside in, but its dry deciduous forests and the thorny shrubs do prove to be a paradise for the lions that can go easily undetected in the brownish surroundings and thus hide from their prey. The most important aspect of the Gir forest has been its metamorphosis into a very stable, self-sustaining and regenerating ecosystem with a rich and diverse flora and fauna. Gir forms the catchment area of seven perennial rivers, namely Hiran, Saraswati, Datardi, Shingoda, Machhundri, Godavari and Raval. There have been more than 400 species of plants recorded in this area, the teak tree being the most prominent. Apart from this, 38 species of mammals, around 300 species of birds, 37 species of reptiles and more than 2000 species

Indian mythology and historical facts reveal how the Asiatic Lion captivated the imagination of artisans, royalties and commoners alike. The most famous example is the present national emblem of India and the original pillar of victory of the great emperor Ashoka. This pillar was erected around 250 BCE at Sarnath and had four lion masts looking in four different directions. It stood for peace, with a message against war and in favour of peace written on the pillar.







The lion also found its place as ornate decorations in palaces and temples.

Goddess Durga, the symbol of power or shakti is represented and worshipped in the form of a lady riding an Asiatic lion killing the evil Mahishasura with her trishul (trident). Even one of the 10 avatars of Lord Vishnu, the creator, is depicted as half human and half lion called the Narsimha.



of insects have been recorded. From the leopards, jungle cats, hyenas, jackals, marsh crocodiles to the chital, nilgai, sambhar and wild boars, the carnivores and the herbivores have all thrived in this area of rich biodiversity. So, in more ways than one, the Gir forest has provided a home and last refuge to not just Asiatic Lions but a vast number of other living beings.

The best acknowledgement of this fact has been the ever-increasing population of the Asiatic lions in Sasan Gir. From an estimated 12 (or less) in 1901 to 200 in 1965 to as many as 359 in 2005, the big cats have come a long way.

However, the Gir Protected Area is not without its own problems. This area has been home to lions and also to the human population of Maldharis – livestock grazing tribal and pastoral villagers who have been living here for centuries even before the area was declared protected. Between them they add up to 7500 villagers and around 14000 cattle. In such situations, where the lion has to live in close proximity with humans, conflict is inevitable. In spite of around 45000

deer living in the jungle the lions have found cattle to be easier prey. Because of this, locals have been so angered by the killing of their livestock that they have started killing lions.

The Gir area has three major roads passing through the sanctuary. It also has a railway track with six steam engines passing through the jungle every day. In addition to this, there are important temple and pilgrim centres including the Kankai temple, which attract thousands of worshippers to the region every year. Although the roads and the railway track are closed for use in the evening, all the noise, daily traffic and human passage adds to the commotion and the urban pollution in the sanctuary.

The increasing population of the lions is a feat hailed by environmentalists across the world, but it has also thrown up the need to either extend the boundaries of the Gir National Park or look for another forest within India where the lions can feel as safe. There have been ongoing efforts in this direction with the forest officials considering the Kuno

area in Madhya Pradesh as a possible relocation site. But much has to be done to make that progression. Human resettlement, development of the ecosystem, ample herbivore population, and finally the shifting of the lions themselves is a mammoth task. Also adding to the problem has been the ever-increasing voices of environmentalists, politicians, and locals of Gujarat who are against the idea of lions leaving their land.

On the other hand, the lions have already started expanding their territories with a pride turning up near Diu, with the sea just a stone's throw away. Most lions avoid water as their body temperature drops drastically when wet and oils in their fur that help keep insects away can be washed off. Yet, pressure to avoid territorial fights has led the lions to live in such a habitat.

Asiatic lions are regal creatures and in the shades of the Gir National Park, they do allow humans to come near them and witness their daily routine. But as they expand their kingdom one wonders whether the human-animal relationship will ultimately hit a reef. Until then, of course, these graceful creatures will continue to be at the ecological centre of the region.

In ancient times, people's reverence for the lion's strength was such that it was considered an act of supreme bravery to fight a lion. Later, this tradition was replaced by a less dangerous symbolic representation of a leader wearing a cape made of lion skin or resting his feet on a lion skin while seated. In Indian epics the throne on which sat the kings and emperors was always referred to as the singhasan or the seat of the lion. The lion also found its place as ornate decorations in palaces and temples.

