

## SURVEY OF POTENTIAL SITES FOR THE RE-INTRODUCTION OF THE ASIATIC LION

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The Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*) once ranged all across the middle east from Syria to India. They occurred throughout the central regions of India, from Pakistan to as far east Bihar and north of the river Narmada. Due to indiscriminate hunting and habitat conversion by man their distribution and numbers decreased drastically. By the end of the 19th century only a small population of about 15 individuals survived in India in the Gir forests, Gujarat. Now, Gir has about 280 lions.

A small population which is present in only one site is like having all your eggs in one basket and hence in danger of being wiped out due to disease, fire or other catastrophes. A need for another home for the Asiatic lion was perceived in 1957 and three lions (1 male and 2 females) were introduced into the Chandraprabha forests in Uttar Pradesh, India. They increased in number to 11 individuals after which they were not seen and it is believed that they were either shot or poisoned. Lack of ecological information and monitoring of the introduced population combined with insufficient reserve size (We know that only now!) probably were the reasons for the failure of that attempt to establish a second free ranging population of Asiatic lions more than three decades ago.

A WII study on the ecology of the Asiatic lions was initiated in 1986 with the objective of collecting data which would be necessary for a second reintroduction attempt to succeed (data on the lion's predation ecology, habitat use and home range size). In 1990 armed with the baseline ecological information of the lions from the above study the possibility of reintroducing the lion to another site in its former range was considered. The areas to qualify as a potential reintroduction sites should be large (approx.

800 sq.km) and require minimal relocation of people living in and around the park. After detailed discussions with experienced wildlifers, Forest Department personnel, researchers and in the deliberations at the Population and Habitat Viability Analysis for the Asiatic lion in Baroda (October 1993), three areas; two in Rajasthan and one in Madhya Pradesh were recommended and are in the process of being surveyed as potential sites for re-introducing the Asiatic lion.

The three sites are characterised by dry deciduous vegetation and water is available throughout the year. The sanctuaries and the adjoining reserve forests are being surveyed by foot and vehicle in the winter and will be surveyed again in the summer. The habitat types, relative abundances of prey animals and human disturbance in each of the above sites are being evaluated.

**Sitamata wildlife sanctuary** in the state of Rajasthan is approximately 180 km from the city of Udaipur. A survey was carried out from November 20 - December 6, 1993. It is around 423 sq.km in area with about 1000 sq.km in the surrounding reserve forests. Three rivers (Sitamata, Jakham and Karmoi) run through the sanctuary. There is great potential for this sanctuary to become the best test ride circuit for rough terrain vehicles like jeeps in India. That should have given the readers a fair idea of the road conditions here. Signs of four horned antelope, nilgai and sambar and leopard were obtained. The animals seen were common langur, jungle cat, jackal, Indian fox and 150 species of birds. This site has good bamboo and teak forests but these are highly disturbed due to people cutting wood and bamboo. Encroachment and cattle grazing are a major problem in this sanctuary and the surrounding forest.



**Kuno wildlife sanctuary** is about 110 km from Gwalior city in Madhya Pradesh. The sanctuary is around 450 sq.km in area with about 1000 sq.km of reserved forest surrounding it. We assessed it from January 4 - 26, 1994. We stayed at a quaint forest resthouse in the heart of the Sanctuary overlooking the river Kuno. Before we reached the resthouse all of us were convinced that the organisers of the Paris to Darkar car rally would definitely include this place in their route if they ever got a chance to see it ( So, please keep this under your hats. We don't want speeding cars to disturb our lions ). Seven species of ungulates, the nilgai, chinkara, blackbuck, sambar, cheetal, barking deer and wild boar were recorded. The area has a wide range of predators; hyena, jackals, Indian fox, jungle cat and rusty spotted cat were sighted during our survey. Pugmarks of a tiger were seen. Other animals that were recorded are the common langur, leopard, sloth bear, palm civet and about 110 species of birds. There are many villages within the sanctuary and the

surrounding forests. A large number of cattle graze within the forest. In spite of the rear axle breaking down, our work was carried out without much trouble. Lalbhai's (our driver) charming voice and also disconcerting at the same time (He always spoke with a tone which assumed that you were deaf) was still ringing in our ears when we caught the train to Delhi from Gwalior. The level of disturbance in this sanctuary is way below that of Sitamata sanctuary.

**Darrah wildlife sanctuary** near Kota in Rajasthan will be surveyed during the months of February '94 - March '94.

We hope that this survey will generate enough data to enable us to objectively evaluate these three sites for the possibility of reintroducing lions. We also hope to come up with a realistic action plan for site preparation, reintroduction and subsequent management of the second population of Asiatic lion in the wild before the end of this year.

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*Sweet is the lore which Nature brings;  
Our meddling intellect  
Misshapes the beautiful forms of  
things;  
We murder to dissect.*

— Wordsworth