# Blackbucks - Story of the Indian Antelope

## What is the issue?

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- Actor Salman Khan has been convicted for his involvement in a case of hunting the blackbucks in 1998.
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- This brings the spotlight on the status of the animal, its conservation efforts and the challenges ahead.
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## How has the population of Blackbucks changed over time?

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- About 300 years ago, it is estimated that about 4 million blackbucks roamed the whole of the Indian landmass that lies south of the Himalayas.
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- The love of the colonial masters and the royalty for hunting had reduced their numbers considerably, and had completely disappeared from the areas that constitute modern day Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal.
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- At the time of independence, the number of blackbucks were estimated to be
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80,000 and this further dwindled to 30,000 by the 1970s.

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- The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 give the blackbuck (also called the Indian antelope) as much protection as the tiger, which helped boost their numbers.

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- By the turn of the millennium, their numbers had reached 50,000 and the IUCN altered the status of blackbucks from “Vulnerable to Near

Threatened".
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- A decade after that, antelopes had become so numerous in several pockets of north and central India which saw IUCN changing its status again from "Vulnerable to Least Concerned" in 2017.
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## What helped the species recover?

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- The ban on hunting and the absence of tow of its most efficient predators (Cheetah and Wolf) had caused the blackbuck population to burgeon.
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- Notably, Cheetah is now extinct and the wolf is scarce.
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- **Community Support -** For the Bishnoi sect of western Rajasthan, killing of wild animals or the felling of green trees is against their religious beliefs.
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- In the 1730s, Bishnois are said to have sacrificed many lives to save the khejri trees from being felled by the Jodhpur royalty.
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- Also, the Chipko Movement of the 1970s and the case that they are fighting against Salman Khan are a continuation of this legacy.
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- Hence, it is little surprise that wildlife (particularly blackbuck) has flourished in the safe haven that the Bishnois had created near their settlements.
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- **Agricultural expansion –** The antelopes survive on grassy plains and thinly forested areas, a large part of which was lost to developmental activities.
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- But massive conversion of woodland to farmland largely compensated the inevitable loss of the blackbuck's natural habitat to some extent.
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- In fact, a section of farmers in Odisha value blackbucks for its role in enhancing agri-productivity, which has given the animal a new sanctuary.
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- They believe plants grow thicker and produce higher yields after blackbuck have cropped their tops.
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## What is the cultural significance of blackbucks?

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- The strong cultural connect with the species dates back to the Harappan era.
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- In mythology, the blackbuck is variously described as the vehicle (vahana) of Vayu (the wind god) and Chandrama (the Moon god).
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- Antelopes apparently also pulled the chariot of Krishna, and Rajasthani stories consider goddess “Karni Mata” as the protector of the blackbuck.
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## Is the increasing numbers becoming a menace?

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- Despite some voices that think blackbucks aid agri-productivity, there is evidence to note that they are a major pest when they become over-abundant.
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- As early as in 1989, a study estimated that 300 blackbuck had caused a loss of Rs 29,000 to the sorghum crop in Gujarat’s Surendranagar district.
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- In 1990, the Wildlife Institute of India looked into conflict mitigation measures to limit the damage caused by nilgai and blackbuck in Haryana.
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- But unlike nilgai (blue bull), blackbucks are yet to be officially identified as pests or vermin anywhere in India - probably due to its cultural significance.
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- Hence, unless the damage to crops and farmland reaches a tipping point, the elegant blackbucks will continue to thrive.
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## What is the way ahead?

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- Poaching or hunting currently accounts for only a fraction of unnatural blackbuck deaths in the country and road accidents actually kill more.
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- Predation is also causing the bulk of the unnatural deaths as feral dogs seem to be progressing to occupy the space once help by the Cheetah and the

Wolf.
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- Notably, the dogs too are protected strongly by powerful animal welfare NGOs, which currently account for 93% of all unnatural blackbuck deaths.
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**Source: Indian Express**

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