Concerns with Conservation Efforts in Gir Forest

What is the issue?

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- Gujarat government has taken conservation efforts taken to protect the endangered Asiatic lion population in Gir forest.
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- In recent times, various policy stands of government in Gir forest has risen concern among wildlife conservationists.
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What is the significance of Gir forest area?

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- The Government notified the large geographical extent of Sasan Gir as wildlife sanctuary in 1965, to conserve the Asiatic Lion.
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- It covers total area of 1412 square kilometres of which 258 Km forms the core area of the National Park.
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- Besides Africa, Gir National Park in Gujarat is the only place in the world where one can spot lions roaming free in the wild.
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- The remarkable growth in the lion population in this landscape from about 300 in 1995 to over 500 in 2015 points to the success of conservation management over decades.
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What are the recent policies being carried out in Gir forest?

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- **Religious Tourism** - The state government in 2017 permitted night stays at a temple located in the core area of Gir National Park.
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- This is severely affecting the landscape and altering the land-use pattern and profile of the forest region.
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- **Reducing eco-sensitive zone** – According to the environment ministry guidelines, eco-sensitive zone can extend to min 10km around a Protected Area (PA), where certain development activities are prohibited.
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- But for the Gir National Park, the government is taking measures to reduce the eco-sensitive zones to less than 1 km for mining and tourism.
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- **Interpretation zone** – A safari park 15 km away from the PA has captive lions in enclosed natural environments.
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- Government is planning to clear this zone which will result in habitat loss, change in landscape, and degradation through roads, resorts, traffic and pollution.
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What are the concerns of wildlife conservationists?

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- Asiatic lions are venturing out of the Protected Area (PA) and are living in wide range of habitats such as hilly tracts, coasts, pastures and farmlands.
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- This is resulting in incidents of livestock depredation and of attacks on people by lions.
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- There are also various reports of lions dying due to unnatural causes like railway and road accidents, electrocution, drowning in open wells.
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- There is also an increasing distress due to the unregulated wildlife **tourism** around the Protected Area.
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- Tourists are ready to pay huge amounts to watch lions and videos of bikes and cars chasing lions at night are being widely shared on social media.

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What measures are needed to conserve the Gir forest better?

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- Decisions taken in the recent times relating to decreasing eco-sensitive zones, promoting tourism, etc. has to be rolled back.
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- Agro-pastoral landscape around the sanctuary is as important as dedicated management government should take measures in this regard.
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- Political will, people’s tolerance and the lion’s resilience is also required for the future of healthy lion population.
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Source: The Hindu

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