Human Animal Conflict – Neighbourhood Leopards

Why in news?

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The leopard was captured on camera at the Yamuna Biodiversity Park (YBP) in Delhi and officials say it may have become a 'resident' as its pugmarks have been regularly seen for two weeks.

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What is the general perception?

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- Within 72 hours, officials decided to trap and shift the big cat in YBP to Uttarakhand’s Rajaji national park or Delhi zoo. This was aimed at the safety of the animal as there was a lynching of another leopard in Haryana recently.
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- While worrying for the Yamuna leopard’s safety, officials wondered if the animal strayed from ‘its group’ and ‘natural habitat’ and if it would keep wandering far and wide, causing trouble.
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- The perception that leopards belong to faraway forests is indeed common.
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- If a leopard is found amidst people, most believe that it must have lost its way. Or there must be a forest famine that made the animal to move out looking for food.
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- The only remedy, they believe, is to catch it and put it back in some remote forest or the nearest zoo. And if the authorities fail to do that, it’s natural that lynch mobs take over in self-defence.
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What is the actual reason?

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- This perception is the problem. Animals don’t stray. e.g If one tries to get rid of his house cat by abandoning it many miles from home it will invariably find its way back, if it survives the traffic. So grant the big cat its superior awareness of its coordinates and purpose. It always knows where it is and why.
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- A leopard spotted in a village cropland or city outskirts is indeed looking for food. But not necessarily because there is nothing to hunt in forests.
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- In fact, leopards make strict rules in choosing their prey. Some may go exclusively on non-wild diet. That is how they evolved to live around people.
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- They use **secondary forests or suitable cropland as cover** during the day and walking the human neighbourhoods after sunset.
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- With people around, there is always food. Livestock, dogs, garbage dumps.
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- So given a patch in the vicinity to lie low during day hours, leopards will always be there among us. They are the most adaptable of all cats, big or small, and great survivors.
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- When we rarely create fresh cover — sugarcane fields or urban biodiversity parks, for example — leopards may get to extend their range. But with even the last few forest patches fast disappearing around towns and villages, they are actually on the run with their presence shrinking.
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- So if you spot a leopard where you did not expect any, chances are that the animal is not a new arrival, that it has always been using that space without ever blowing their cover. And without ever harming people.
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What is the situation in India?

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- Each of India’s at least 12,000 leopards must make a kill every week and most of them live among people, by far the easiest prey. Yet, human victims do not account for even 0.001 % of over six lakh kills leopards make annually.
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- But the lynching of leopards have become routine across India. They are often hung from trees, even burned alive.

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- Those tranquillised or trapped are no luckier. Many die of injuries soon after. In any case, whether dead or held captive for life, it’s one leopard less in the wild.
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- If anything, their proximity to people has made leopards relatively easy meat for poachers. Estimates based on body part seizures show that on an average **four leopards are poached every week**.
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What has to be done?

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- Just because a leopard is sighted does not mean that the animal means harm.
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- Of course, both sides will panic in such a situation. Panic triggers two responses: flee or fight. If the leopard gets surrounded by a crowd before it can slip away, which is the case most often, it will attack.
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- So is catching and releasing the animal ‘back’ to a forest the solution? Unfortunately, that is a recipe of disaster.
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- Cats are territorial. If removed, they try to trace their way back to where they belong. Imagine a leopard — traumatised by and possibly injured during capture, captivity and transportation — trying to walk hundreds of miles through unfamiliar territories and running into people it has learnt to despise. That is why the zones of most acute conflict are around the leopard release sites.
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- By contrast, a leopard in its own traditional family territory is a safe bet. As a cub, it learnt the area-specific dos and don’ts from its mother. It is familiar with the people around and their habits. If routine precautions, such as **not defecating outdoors or not leaving children unattended in the open**, are followed, living with a neighbourhood leopard is a lot safer than crossing the road or driving that kills around one and a half lakh every year in India.
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- When a leopard is spotted, it should be given the cat space and let to slip away.
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- **Crowd management** is the most crucial primary response that help avoid injuries and save lives. Never surround the animal blocking its escape routes.

A cute house cat can become a handful if cornered and it is unreasonable to blame a large wild cat.
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