

Man-Animal Conflict in UP - Pilibhit Tiger Reserve

What is the issue?

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- An adult, male tiger was beaten to death by villagers living next to Uttar Pradesh's Pilibhit Tiger Reserve.

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- The continuing man-animal conflict near the reserve area calls for understanding the reasons and for concerted actions.

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What is the concern?

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- Dudhwa and Pilibhit tiger reserves are the last remaining protected habitats for tigers and leopards in UP.

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- The contest for space and retaliation between humans and animals has been a case for long.

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- Pilibhit, in particular, is known for the higher rate of human fatalities due to animal attacks.

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- Around 21 were killed in Pilibhit in 2017.

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- One tiger was declared a man-eater and subsequently captured.

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- It is mistakenly believed that bloodthirsty tigers in Pilibhit are actively seeking out humans and venturing far out of the forest.

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- However, a closer look into the nature of attacks proves this wrong.

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What do the attacks suggest?

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- Over half of the tiger attacks took place inside the forest or in the fringe areas.

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- This is followed by attacks in farmlands, particularly sugarcane fields.

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- Sugarcane fields occupy about a third of the district's sown area.

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- A closer look reveals that around 80% of the victims are males.

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- Victims generally include those who enter forest to collect firewood.

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- Those who work in fields and defecate near the forest are victims too.

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- Most attacks took place during the day, when the forest-dependent communities are most active.

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- All these suggest that tigers are not actively seeking out human beings as prey.

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- Most encounters are caused by humans accidentally disturbing tigers that are resting during the day.

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What are the reasons?

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- Human beings are not a part of the tigers' food chain.

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- The attacks clearly take place due to shortfalls in management.

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- The forest and fields are not separated by a buffer zone.

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- Herbivores, the natural prey of big cats, enter the crop fields in search of food.

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- This is when tigers enter the farmland too.

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- The situation is further complicated by sugar cane fields.

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- The crop provides ample cover for big cats.

- It allows them to inhabit the space undisturbed for months.

What is the case with leopard attacks?

- Victims of tiger attacks are mostly adult males venturing into forests to a greater degree.

- However, leopards are more prone to attacking children below 10 years of age.
- Most of these attacks are concentrated in the adjacent villages.
- They take place inside or near homes, in the peripheral areas and fields.
- Notably, leopard attacks are relatively lesser in the fields.
- **Reason** - Tigers cohabit with leopards.
- Naturally, leopards compete with its larger and more powerful tigers.
- As they have to survive with limited prey that is available.
- Notably, leopards are known to avoid large prey, which could injure it.
- So vulnerable children become easy targets.
- Being opportunistic predators, leopards often prey on livestock and dogs.
- But most of these incidents remain undetected.

What should be done?

- Changes in human behaviour could help reduce the number of attacks.

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- Not entering forests alone, not leaving children unattended, and building toilets at home, etc have to be ensured.
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- A more long-term measure is the introduction of mechanical harvesters for sugar cane.
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- This can greatly reduce attacks on humans during harvesting.
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- Introduction of harvesters is likely to lead to people losing their jobs.
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- But in such a scenario, there is a need to find a middle ground.
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- Successful conservation efforts have led to a spike in big cats population.
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- It has also led to an increase in the number of conflict cases.
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- The state has to be prepared for any eventualities.
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- The most important aspect is to involve the community.
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- They have to be better equipped to live alongside these large carnivores.
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- This could be the most important long-term initiative.
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Source: Indian Express

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