'Natural' Wildlife Conservation - Gir Asiatic Lions

What is the issue?

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- Twenty-three lions have died in around 20 days in the eastern part of Gujarat’s Gir sanctuary.
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- It draws attention to the larger issue of shortfalls in the wildlife conservation approach.
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What is the threat?

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- The big cat population in Gujarat is the last of the Asiatic lions in the wild.
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- The recent mass mortality is a grave signal that the magnificent Asiatic lion is under threat.
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- Reportedly, the cats have been killed by disease, most likely to be infectious.
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- Some others have died due to poisoning and infighting.
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What was the court's order?

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- In 2013, the Supreme Court had issued an order in this regard.
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- Under this, lions from Gujarat are to be relocated to the Kuno sanctuary in Madhya Pradesh.
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- This was ordered as a check against the threat of epidemic.
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- **Rationale** - A smaller population with limited genetic strength are more vulnerable to diseases and calamities than a large and widespread population.
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- The court noted how 30% of the lion population in Tanzania's Serengeti was killed due to an outbreak of a viral disease.
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- Asiatic lion has been restricted to only one single habitat i.e. the Gir National Forest and its surrounding areas.
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- So an outbreak of possible epidemic or natural calamity might wipe off the entire species.
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- Very recently, after the series of deaths, the Supreme Court has asked the Central government to look into it.
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What is Gujarat's response?

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- Gujarat has been unwilling to relocate its lions, calling them "its pride".
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- Gujarat has responded that lions are now spread over the Greater Gir region and this reduces the threat.
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- When ill, lions are routinely picked up, medically treated, and then released.
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- It thus said that good conservation practices and intensive wildlife healthcare had lead to epidemic free regime.
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- It has also said that the lions there are metapopulations in the State, which may be geographically separate but have interactions and an exchange of individuals.
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- So the current Asiatic lion population is not a single population confined to one place.

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- It consists of “metapopulation spread over several locations within the Greater Gir Region”.
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What are the ecological concerns?

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- When wild animals go extinct locally, they are reintroduced as in the case of tigers in Sariska, Rajasthan.
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- When hungry, they are fed artificially, and even provided salts as supplements.
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- In other parts of India, wild animals are funnelled through artificial trenches, barriers and fences.
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- But this is wildlife conservation in the age of man, where protected areas sometimes resemble zoos.
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- In nature, wildlife conservation concerns itself with maintaining ecological processes and reducing threats to endangered species.
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- This does not entail treating wild animals for disease as done for domestic animals.
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- As it is not conducive to the ‘natural’ process of life and death, goes against the natural selection processes, and ultimately compromises immunity.
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- So intensive artificial medical treatment of wild animals does not augur well for long-term sustainability.
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What should be done?

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- The role of wildlife managers should be to reduce unnatural threats, and not unnaturally prolong life.
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- E.g. Gujarat should turn its attention to reducing the drivers of disease,

which includes controlling feral dog populations.
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- A geographically separate population of Asiatic lions needs to be created.
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- Gujarat should work towards colonising new habitats outside the Gir landscape within the State.
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- This is not for creating isolated populations but increasing suitable lion range from its present, much smaller area.
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Source: The Hindu

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