

GENERAL STUDIES III

Seven Big Cats, One Future: India's Conservation Push | UPSC 2026

Faculty/Author: Faculty Editorial Board

Date: 22 October 2026

Platform: Civil Service Gurukul Research Wing

Reading Time: 5 Mins

Explore seven big cats, IBCA, habitat threats, and India's conservation role for UPSC 2026 Prelims and Mains, with facts and practice questions.

Seven Big Cats, One Shared Future: UPSC 2026 Explained

Seven big cats, one shared future connects wildlife survival with international cooperation and community welfare. For UPSC, it covers **GS Paper 2** international institutions and **GS Paper 3** biodiversity, conservation and environmental governance. Studying seven big cats, one shared future also builds Prelims understanding of species distribution and the International Big Cat Alliance (IBCA).

Introduction: Different Landscapes, Connected Challenges

A tiger crossing a forest corridor, a snow leopard hunting above the treeline and a jaguar moving through wetlands occupy different worlds. Yet habitat fragmentation, prey depletion and conflict with people threaten them all. Their shared future depends on protecting functioning ecosystems and making conservation workable for neighbouring communities.

Background: What Is the International Big Cat Alliance?

India launched IBCA on **9 April 2023 at Mysuru**, during the commemoration of fifty years of Project Tiger. It brings conservation efforts for seven species into a common cooperative platform. Its Framework Agreement entered into force on **23 January 2025**, establishing a treaty-based intergovernmental organisation.

Membership is open to interested range and non-range countries. A range country lies within a species' geographical distribution; non-range countries can contribute finance, research or technical support. In October 2026, IBCA inaugurated its new headquarters office at **55 Lodhi Estate, New Delhi**, reinforcing its institutional presence in India.

Which Are the Seven Big Cats?

- **Tiger:** An Asian predator associated with diverse habitats, including forests, grasslands and mangroves.
- **Lion:** Found mainly in Africa, with the surviving wild Asiatic population in Gujarat's landscape.
- **Leopard:** A highly adaptable predator occurring across parts of Africa and Asia.
- **Snow leopard:** Associated with high mountain environments across Central and South Asia.
- **Cheetah:** Primarily associated with African open landscapes; a small Asiatic population survives in Iran, while India has undertaken reintroduction.
- **Jaguar:** A cat of the Americas, associated with forests, wetlands and other habitats.
- **Puma:** Also called cougar or mountain lion, it occupies varied environments in the Americas.

Prelims distinction: "Seven big cats" is IBCA's conservation grouping, not a single genus. Tiger, lion, leopard, snow leopard and jaguar belong to *Panthera*; cheetah belongs to *Acinonyx* and puma to *Puma*. India hosts five of these seven, including reintroduced cheetahs; jaguar and puma are not native Indian species.

Key Features of the Alliance

- **Knowledge exchange:** Share conservation methods, field experience and technical expertise across countries.
- **Capacity building:** Strengthen skills in monitoring, habitat management, wildlife protection and conflict response.
- **Partnerships:** Connect governments, scientific institutions, conservation organisations and supporting partners.
- **Resource mobilisation:** Support conservation cooperation through funding and technical assistance.
- **Complementarity:** Reinforce existing species-specific initiatives rather than replace national conservation responsibilities.

In February 2024, India's Cabinet approved IBCA's establishment with headquarters in India and budgetary support of **₹150 crore for 2023–24 to 2027–28**. This is an institutional support commitment, not the total global expenditure required to conserve all seven species.

Significance: Why Protect Big Cats?

Ecological and Landscape Benefits

Large predators influence food webs, although their effects vary across ecosystems. Protecting sufficient habitat and prey for them can also safeguard other species. This umbrella benefit depends on conservation design: protecting a charismatic animal does not automatically protect every grassland, wetland or lesser-known organism.

Cooperation Beyond Borders

Animals, trafficking networks and environmental pressures cross political boundaries. Countries can benefit from coordinated monitoring, enforcement cooperation and compatible habitat planning. IBCA also offers India an opportunity to share experience while learning from African, Asian and American conservation approaches.

Livelihoods and Ecosystem Services

Well-managed conservation can support local employment, responsible tourism and ecosystem services. These benefits require fair distribution. Communities bearing livestock losses or restrictions on resource access must receive practical support rather than being expected to absorb conservation costs alone.

Major Conservation Challenges

- **Habitat fragmentation:** Roads, settlements and other land-use changes divide populations and obstruct movement.
- **Prey depletion:** Unsustainable hunting and habitat degradation reduce the food available to predators.
- **Illegal exploitation:** Poaching and illicit trade threaten wildlife and demand coordinated enforcement.
- **Human–wildlife conflict:** Livestock losses and threats to human safety can trigger retaliation.
- **Climate pressures:** Changes in temperature, water availability and vegetation affect habitats differently.
- **Unequal capacity:** Countries differ in funding, scientific infrastructure and field protection resources.

A further challenge is measuring success. Rising numbers in selected reserves may coexist with shrinking connectivity elsewhere. Conservation assessments must examine population distribution, breeding, prey availability, genetic exchange and community wellbeing alongside headline counts.

India's Experience: Evidence for UPSC Answers

The 2022 tiger estimation produced an average estimate of **3,682 tigers**. The "Status of Leopards in India, 2022" assessment estimated **13,874 leopards** within its surveyed forested habitats across eighteen tiger-bearing states. This leopard figure should not be presented as an exhaustive count covering every habitat in India.

India's first scientific snow leopard population assessment, released in January 2024, estimated **718 individuals** from work conducted during 2019–2023. These figures illustrate species-specific monitoring. They are dated assessment estimates, not live population totals or directly comparable measures of conservation performance.

Way Forward: Turn Cooperation into Field Outcomes

Protect connected landscapes: Integrate corridors, prey habitats and dispersal areas into land-use planning. Assess infrastructure impacts early and monitor whether mitigation measures actually work. Conservation must extend beyond the boundaries of protected areas.

Make coexistence financially credible: Provide timely compensation, locally appropriate livestock protection and trained response teams. Involve communities in decisions and employment. Conservation becomes more durable when benefits and responsibilities are shared fairly.

Improve science and accountability: Support transparent methods, long-term monitoring and independent evaluation. Exchange information securely because publishing precise locations can endanger vulnerable animals. Judge international cooperation by healthier habitats and reduced threats, not simply meetings or announcements.

Prelims Pointers

- **Launch:** IBCA was launched at Mysuru on 9 April 2023.
- **Legal milestone:** Its Framework Agreement entered into force on 23 January 2025.
- **Scope:** Seven species; participation is not restricted to range countries.
- **Taxonomy:** Cheetah and puma are outside the genus *Panthera*.
- **Geography:** Jaguar and puma are native to the Americas.

Mains Value Addition

Use the framework **species, space and society**: species need viable populations; space requires connected habitats; society requires legitimate, equitable governance. IBCA can facilitate cooperation, but national institutions and local communities determine implementation. International ambition must therefore translate into measurable landscape outcomes.

UPSC PYQs and Practice Questions

PYQ Connection

UPSC Mains 2018, GS Paper 3 — paraphrased theme: Biodiversity variation in India and the role of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. Connect this theme with habitat diversity and conservation governance. This is a thematic link, not

a previous question specifically on IBCA.

Prelims MCQ 1

Which pair comprises IBCA species outside the genus *Panthera*? (a) Tiger and lion (b) Jaguar and leopard (c) Cheetah and puma (d) Snow leopard and tiger.

Answer: (c). Cheetah belongs to *Acinonyx* and puma to *Puma*; the other listed species belong to *Panthera*.

Prelims MCQ 2

Consider two statements: 1. IBCA covers seven big cat species. 2. Only countries naturally hosting these species may join. Which is correct? (a) 1 only (b) 2 only (c) Both (d) Neither.

Answer: (a). IBCA covers seven species and welcomes interested non-range countries as well as range countries.

Mains Practice Question

“Big cat conservation requires international cooperation, connected landscapes and community legitimacy.”

Discuss with reference to the International Big Cat Alliance. (150 words)

Conclusion

Seven big cats present distinct ecological needs within a shared conservation challenge. Their future requires credible institutions, sustained finance and community partnership. Protecting predators succeeds when the landscapes supporting them remain healthy and people can coexist with wildlife safely.

Key Takeaways for Revision

- IBCA links conservation cooperation across seven big cat species.
- Its treaty entered into force in January 2025.
- Species counts must be read with assessment dates and coverage.
- Connected habitats and community participation determine lasting success.

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