

Pre-summit Meeting of Tiger Range Countries

Text of the speech of Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change

Dignitaries,

Representatives of Tiger Range Countries,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Namaste

I must begin by offering my greetings to you all on the occasion of World Lion Day because I am sure all of us gathered here hold a lot of love for this member of the cat family too and are deeply concerned about lion's conservation and protection as well. After all lion is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and fearsome creatures of the animal kingdom.

There are nearly 40 species of cats that fill the human imagination with wonder and awe. The emotion of awe is more pronounced when it comes to the big cats which include the jaguar and leopard. But one looms in our imagination more than others. This is the tiger, a symbol of strength and power not only in its native region of Asia, but all around the world.

I am, therefore, both excited and thrilled to have you all here for the Pre-Summit Meeting of Tiger Range Countries. During the 4th Asia Ministerial Conference hosted virtually by Malaysia, on behalf of Government of India, I had proposed to host this pre-summit meeting to finalise the draft declaration on tiger conservation. I am happy to see it materialise today and so I take this opportunity to warmly welcome you all for this event. Your enthusiasm that I am seeing here today makes us very hopeful about the future of tiger conservation.

Coming back to the tiger, we all know the tiger isn't simply a charismatic species or just another wild animal living in the deep jungles. The tiger is a distinctive animal that plays an important role within the health and diversity of an ecosystem.

In the Indian epic of Mahabharat, the tiger finds a place of prominence. Mahabharat was written 5000 years ago. It is written in Sanskrit and I quote:

मा वनं छिन्धि सव्याघ्रं मा व्याघ्राः नीनशन्वनात्

वनं हि रक्ष्यते व्याघ्रैर्व्याघ्रान् रक्षति काननम्॥

Meaning “Do not destroy the forest which is the abode of tigers. Do not hunt and kill the tigers because they protect the forests. Both cannot exist without the other.”

Let me add here that we humans cannot exist without either.

India’s association with the tiger is deep and is seen with the Bengal tiger being carved on the Pashupati seal of the Indus Valley Civilization dating back to 25th century BCE. Our revered Goddess Durga is often seen riding the tiger and therefore tiger isn’t just an animal for us Indians but one we worship and hold in high esteem. It is because of this that many indigenous tribes in India such as the Soliga tribe in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and Baiga tribe in Madhya Pradesh are deeply involved in tiger conservation efforts.

Under the leadership of Hon’ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi ji, India has taken giant strides in tiger conservation. The one thing that Hon’ble PM Modi has stressed upon repeatedly is that our conservation efforts are not a drag on development, a fact the Hon’ble PM had mentioned during the 3rd Asia Ministerial Conference as well. It is under Prime Minister, Shri Modi ji that India is reorienting conservation strategies to focus on protection and propagation of wildlife without compromising on development. We are as a result one of the fastest growing economies of the world which is showing great results in conservation efforts.

Recently, the Indian Parliament passed the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2021 which seeks to increase the species protected under law and regulate international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants in a way that it does not threaten the survival of the species.

Today, I take pride in sharing with this august gathering the fact that India has 52 Tiger Reserves, covering approximately 75,000 Sq Km area across 18 states. As a Tiger Range Country, the tiger population of India accounts for approximately 70% population of the wild tiger at global level.

We are also committed to bringing all potential tiger habitats within the country under tiger reserve network. Over the years, India has increased its funding for Project Tiger. We are also working towards a more inclusive conservation effort by involving local communities who live in close proximity to tiger reserves. Our efforts to involve local communities proactively in conservation efforts stem from our Hon’ble PM’s call for *janbhagidari* or public participation.

I am proud to share with you all that the bond that people visiting the tiger reserves have developed with the animal and the spirit with which they work for tiger conservation in their own small ways is both encouraging and assuring. This love Indians have for tigers shows in numbers.

The last tiger census of 2018 showed a rise in the tiger population. Remarkably, India achieved the target of doubling her tiger population 4 years ahead of schedule of the St. Petersburg Declaration on tiger Conservation. As many as 17 of our Tiger Reserves have got international accreditation and two Tiger Reserves have got International Tx2 Award. So, we are not just declaring areas as tiger reserves but are also working to take them to internationally agreed upon standards for wildlife protection.

For effective management of tiger populations, it is imperative to have reliable estimates of tiger numbers. India has been at the forefront of implementing a science based, peer reviewed tiger monitoring methodology approved by the Tiger Task Force. So far, 4 cycles of country wide estimation have taken place and the 5th cycle of All India Tiger Estimation is currently underway.

On July 1, 2022, use of single use plastic was banned across the country. Special campaigns particularly focusing on making the tiger reserves plastic free are operational under the Total plastic free campaign which is part of Hon'ble Prime Minister's wider Swaccha Bharat campaign.

Wild tiger conservation in India has codified several practices, and this is proving useful for reintroducing locally extinct species like the Cheetah. I am happy to say this will happen very soon in one of our promising habitats identified by the Wildlife Institute of India

It has been 12 years since the St. Petersburg Declaration was adopted. So much has happened globally, including the Covid pandemic, leaving impact on several walks of life, and tiger conservation is no exception.

Despite all odds and ever transforming world order, Tiger Range Countries have stayed the course and done a commendable job on the wild tiger front, I compliment all Tiger Range Countries for their hard work in the area. But the fact the we cannot put our guard down is not lost on anyone here.

As senior officials responsible for implementing tiger actions, your updated inputs are invaluable for shaping the tiger declaration to be adopted in the forthcoming summit at Vladivostok, Russia.

While what we have achieved so far in the field of tiger conservation is significant we now need to focus on consolidating the significant gains and currently we are in the process of formulating the vision plan for tiger conservation in India by involving all the stakeholders.

Friends, as the Founding Member of the Global Tiger Forum, inter-governmental platform, we intend to further our partnerships and collaboration with all the Tiger Range Countries to secure the future of wild tigers both in India and at global level.

I once gain extend a warm welcome to our friends from Tiger Range Countries who are participating in this pre-summit meeting and wish you all have a pleasant and meaningful stay here. I am confident that the deliberations of this important pre-summit meet will pave the way for securing the future of wild tigers and their habitat globally.

In the jungles and tall grasses

May the tiger's roars be heard,

May his thunder

Be known in the land.

May there always be tigers.

With these lines from Ruskin Bond, I wish this gathering all the best in what it is setting out to achieve for tiger conservation.

Thank you

Jai Hind.