

SAVING ASIATIC LION

Newspapers have reported five incidents of fire in the Indian bastion of Asiatic lions in last fourteen months. Gir is well-known as the last refuge with a core area of 258 sq.kms in Junagadh district of Gujarat.. The recent fire raged across tall grasslands of Mitiala range on 17th and 18th February'09 and was spread across 300 hectares of sanctuary area. Though loss of animal life has not been notified so far, such recurrent fires are liable to disorient the lions who are known to be fiercely territorial in living habits.

From time to time, experts have drawn attention to inbreeding making them susceptible to epidemics. One had heard that in 1994, one third of lion population of Serengeti in Africa had been wiped out by "morbillivirus" which closely resembles canine distemper. Since about 350 lions are located in 1800 sq.km.area, inbreeding is confirmed by genetic studies, experts have been pointing to the need for relocating some of them to another site to ensure their survival.

Accordingly, beginning in 1995 preparations are afoot to locate about ten lions in Kuno Palpur sanctuary in district Sheopurkalan of Madhya Pradesh. A twenty year Plan has entered its third phase. All the 24 revenue villages have been relocated outside the sanctuary area and the administration is waiting for introduction of lions for over five years. The area was selected after a survey by the Indian Wildlife Institute, Dehradun. An assessment of prey base in 2007 has established that five to eight adult lion can easily be sustained in this sanctuary.

Unfortunately, lack of coordination between the forest authorities in Gujarat and M.P. and the pendency of a case in Supreme Court are holding up the exercise. Will the National Board for Wildlife expedite action in the matter.