

India To Start World's First Black Tiger Safari In Odisha

Why In News

- The **Odisha government**, led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, has announced the establishment of a **melanistic tiger safari** – a groundbreaking initiative that will be the first of its kind globally.
- The safari is set to be located near Baripada in the **Mayurbhanj district** of the state, as per the official announcement made by Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik on X, previously known as Twitter.



All You Need To Know

- The **safari is set to be located** near Baripada in the **Mayurbhanj district** of the state, as per the official announcement made by Odisha CM Naveen Patnaik on X, previously known as Twitter.
- Covering an expansive **200-hectare area adjacent** to National Highway 18, the chosen site is approximately 15 km away from the **Similipal Tiger Reserve**, featuring a similar landscape.
- Notably, **Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR)** stands as the sole habitat for melanistic tigers worldwide, as per the **last All India Tiger Estimation Report** released by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) in 2018.

- The 2022 **All India Tiger Estimation** revealed that out of the 16 tigers recorded in Similipal, 10 displayed melanistic characteristics. This reserve initially reported the presence of melanistic tigers in 2007.



- This move aims to **provide tourists and visitors** with a unique opportunity to witness the rare and majestic species found exclusively in Odisha.
- **“Surplus tigers from the Nandankanan Zoo** and rescued or orphaned tigers which are not fit for wild but fit for display will be housed in the safari in an open enclosure,” said Mr. Nanda.
- Around a couple of years ago, researchers, including scientists from the **National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS)** in Bengaluru, identified a single gene mutation responsible for black stripes and a distinctive pattern in these tigers.



- The **mutation in the gene Transmembrane Aminopeptidase Q (Taqppep)** led to the broadening and spreading of black stripes against a tawny background, creating a pattern known as pseudo-melanism.
- **Pseudo-melanism differs** from true melanism, characterised by an unusually high deposition of melanin, a dark pigment.
- The study also highlighted that the **melanistic tigers in Similipal** may have originated from a small founding population, leading to inbreeding.



- **The upcoming melanistic tiger safari** is expected to house surplus tigers from Nandankanan Zoo and rescued/orphaned tigers unfit for the wild but suitable for display.
- The **open enclosure will cover about 100 hectares** for display purposes, while the remaining area will be utilised for veterinary care facilities, a rescue center, staff infrastructure, and visitor amenities, according to Principal Chief Conservator of Forests Susanta Nanda.

SAFARI OF SPECIAL CATS

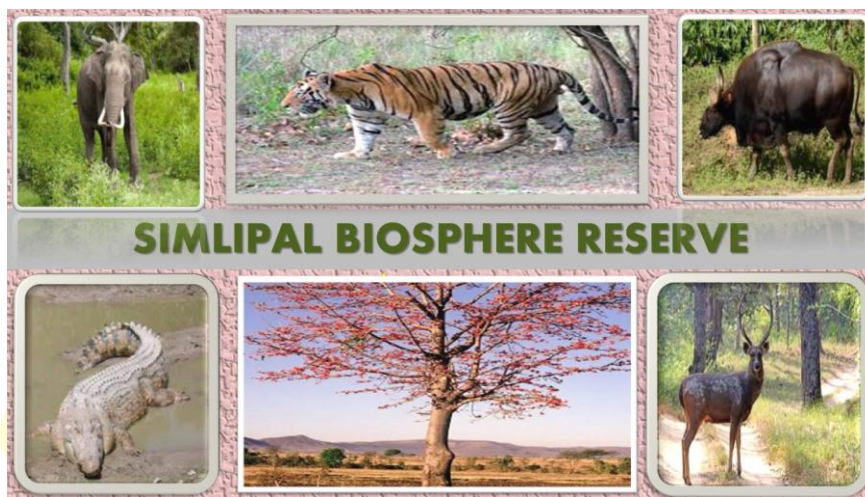
Mayurbhanj

- > National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has approved the **melanistic** (black stripes) tiger safari at **Baripada** in Mayurbhanj district
- > **Similipal Tiger Reserve** in Mayurbhanj is the only habitat in the world to have **melanistic big cats**
- > The **melanistic tiger safari** is expected to boost tourism
- > Growth of **melanin** (pigmentation) on body increases width of black stripes thus making the animal look different from other Royal Bengal Tigers (RBT)
- > In 1975, **melanistic tigers** were discovered in Similipal but it was confirmed in 1993, when a **black skin of a tiger** was found. In 2007, the tigers were captured on camera for the first time

- The **Forest Department emphasised** that the safari is poised to elevate wildlife tourism in Odisha, anticipating a significant influx of visitors and establishing itself as an added attraction for those exploring the Similipal Tiger Reserve.

Similipal Biosphere Reserve

- Similipal derives its name from '**Simul**' (**silk cotton**) tree.
- It was formally designated a **tiger reserve in 1956** and brought under Project Tiger in the year 1973.



- It was **declared a biosphere reserve** by the Government of India in June, 1994.
- It has been part of the **UNESCO World Network** of Biosphere Reserve since 2009.
- It is part of the **Similipal-Kuldiha-Hadgarh Elephant Reserve** popularly known as Mayurbhanj Elephant Reserve, which includes 3 protected areas i.e. Similipal Tiger Reserve, Hadagarh Wildlife sanctuary and Kuldiha wildlife sanctuary.

Experts Views

- There have been **mixed reactions from wildlife experts** and activists after the Odisha government decided to set up a black tiger safari, the first of its kind in the world, near the **Similipal Tiger Reserve (STR)** in Mayurbhanj district.
- **Lala A K Singh**, an expert on the black tigers of Similipal, said the creation of a safari meant putting the big cats in an enclosed space. "This will be an attraction for visitors," he said.
- **Biswajit Mohanty**, former member of the National Board for Wildlife, however disliked the idea of putting such rare felids in enclosures by creating a safari. "They are free-roaming wildlife."



- **Visitors to STR can already** witness and enjoy seeing melanistic tigers, wild and free,” he said. Black tigers are not a separate subspecies. They are Bengal tigers with a gene mutation, which gives them their distinctive dark stripe patterns.

