

# [Commentary] Ambiguity on fund allocation shrouds Project Tiger and Project Elephant merger

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- *The merger of the centrally-sponsored schemes Project Tiger and Project Elephant was carried out without consultations and is not clear in its objective, write the authors of this commentary.*
- *The main changes are in the submission of the annual plan of operations by the state, auditing and reporting procedures.*

Read more about [Project Tiger](#) and [Project Elephant](#) here: [Project Tiger and Project Elephant: A new chapter in wildlife conservation](#)

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On June 23, 2023, the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) released an order announcing, retrospectively, the merger of the Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) of Project Tiger and Project Elephant from April 1, 2023, onwards. A new division, Project Tiger & Elephant (PT&E) was created out of the merger. Until then, the two schemes had been running as independent sub-schemes under the [umbrella](#) scheme of Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats.

[Project Tiger](#) and [Project Elephant](#) were launched in 1973 and 1992, respectively, to effectively streamline the conservation management and governance of both species and their habitats. Both [projects](#) began with an overall objective of providing administrative, financial, legal, technical and other support for the conservation of both species. The Centrally Sponsored Schemes provide the financial and technical support.

An amendment to the Wildlife Protection Act in 2006, provided statutory protection to tiger conservation, establishing the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), defining its [powers and functions](#) and declaring tiger reserves as an overlay protected area category for tiger conservation.

Project Elephant, however, continued to be under the administration of the Project Elephant Division of the MoEFCC.

Wildlife conservationist Purna Singh Bindra told the authors that hard recommendations towards the protection of the elephant provided by the Elephant Task Force Report 2010, such as graded legal protection for elephant habitats and corridors as well as the establishment of a statutory body, have not been taken up by the ministry. In response to an ongoing Supreme Court case filed by Bindra pertaining to the deaths of elephants due to electrocution and pending actions of the 2010 report, it was decided at the [74th meeting of the Standing Committee of the National Board of Wildlife \(SC NBWL\)](#) that the constitution of a National Elephant Conservation Authority was not needed.

According to Bindra, the reasons for merging the CSS of both projects and the failure to establish a statutory, focused body with experts for Project Elephant, was due to a lack of political will despite the cultural value elephants hold. Instead of creating a statutory body, the ministry proposes to protect the elephant reserves and corridors through Section 62B of the WLPA, where it can issue directions to the state government or other agencies for effective implementation of provisions to protect wildlife, after consultation with the NBWL.

## Stakeholder consultation was bypassed

The ambiguity around the merger leaves confusion about the possible implications on the administrative mechanisms for the conservation of both the species. As reported by [certain media](#), the merger was discussed by the Expenditure Finance Committee (EFC), which the Cabinet accepted. No such discussions took place within the forest and wildlife bureaucracy. Senior officials in the MOEFFC and NTCA, too, were caught off-guard by the decision.



Two projects, Project Tiger and Project Elephant, were launched in 1973 and 1992, respectively, to effectively streamline the conservation management and governance of both species and their habitats. [Photo by Davidvraju/Wikimedia Commons](#).

This notwithstanding, the issue of merging Project Elephant, Tiger, and Integrated Wildlife Habitat Development (IWHHD), had been discussed in the [24th meeting of the Standing Committee of the NBWL \(SC NBWL\)](#) on December 13, 2011, before it was shelved by the committee citing the challenges it would pose to the independent functioning of both projects. The ministry's decision to proceed without similar discussions raises the question of whether they anticipated opposition and chose to move forward without consultations.

## Funding as a reason for the merger

The merger is speculated to have been carried out to enhance the systematic allocation and regulation of funding for both projects and the administrative efficiency. Since elephants and tigers share similar habitats, merging the schemes meant better coordination of activities and decisions.

Experts, however, say they believe this fails to address more complex issues of conservation governance. Sayan Banerjee, a Ph.D. scholar from the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bengaluru, who has been working on elephant conservation in Assam, told the authors, "The elephant occupancy range is bigger than that of tigers and comprises more complex land-use patterns. The species behaviour is different and there are differences in nature and extent of human-elephant and human-tiger interface." The occupancy range of elephants in India, as per the [Elephant Corridors of India Report of 2023](#) is around 1,00,000 to 1,20,000 square kilometres while that of tigers is approximately [1,03,408 square kilometres](#).

Pointing out the range occupancy of the two species and the legal protection provided to such areas, Bindra said that while funds for Project Tiger will be allocated to tiger reserves and corridors, ensuring allocation of adequate funds to elephant ranges will remain a challenge due to the lack of legal protection for those areas. "The key concern remains the protection of elephants outside protected areas. While elephant reserves have been delineated, there are no special provisions for their protection," she said.

## Annual plan of operations to be submitted

The state government will now be submitting one consolidated Annual Plan of Operation (APO) under the Project Tiger and Elephant (PT&E) scheme with specific allocations provided within the APOs. As per existing procedures, state-wise APOs were being submitted for Project Elephant and individual APOs for tiger reserves.

Major changes as per the guidelines and conditions are regarding the accounting process, auditing, and performance reports to be submitted. The maintenance of accounts, accounting reports and audits will be done for the entire PT&E scheme for the respective states. States will also be submitting one performance-cum-achievement report from this year onwards, replacing the earlier process of submitting individual reports for each tiger reserve.

## No clarity on funds allocated and released

The major point of concern is the skewed funding patterns for both projects, especially for Project Elephant, which has received only around 1/9th – 1/10th of the amount that has been released for Project Tiger.



The table shows the amount released for both projects (blue for Project Elephant and red for Project Tiger) between 2018-19 and 2021-22. Sources: NTCA annual report and Project Elephant accessed through RTI from MoEFCC and NTCA.

There is also a significant difference in the funds sanctioned and released over the financial year, which also raises questions on the fund allocation for both projects over the years. Many tiger reserves do not end up receiving the total funds that were initially sanctioned, thereby leaving certain activities laid down in the APO unfulfilled.

For Kamlang Tiger Reserve, in the financial year 2021-22, a total amount of Rs. 201.22 lakhs (around Rs. 20 million) was sanctioned of which the Centre's share was Rs. 181.10 lakhs (around Rs. 18 million). Of the Centre's share, [only Rs. 135.82 lakhs \(around Rs. 13.5 million\) was released](#) for the financial year. Similarly, as per the APO, for the five tiger reserves in Tamil Nadu, in 2022-23, of the Centre's share of 2175.1 lakhs (Rs. 217 million), only 25% of the total amount was released. This anomaly is visible in the funding patterns of many tiger reserves in the past few years.

The delay in distributing funds to tiger reserves is another major issue. In 2022-23 particularly, the funds were released towards the end of the financial year. For the five tiger reserves in Tamil Nadu, [the first installment of funds](#) was released on January 17, 2023. It was the same for five of the six tiger reserves in Maharashtra (excluding Sahyadri Tiger Reserve), where the [first installment](#) was released on January 18, 2023. For a few of the tiger reserves, the subsequent installments were released only a few days before the end of the financial year. Corbett and Rajaji Tiger Reserves in Uttarakhand received their [second installment](#) only on March 29, 2023, two days before the end of the financial year. The reserves in Madhya Pradesh, had their [third and fourth installments](#) released on March 23, 2023.

The delay in the release of the first and second installments leaves little to no time for the dispersal of remaining funds, which are then either transferred to the next financial year or end up not being disbursed, as we've seen in most cases.

The pattern of funds sanctioned and released for Project Elephant paints a similar picture. The funding patterns for Project Elephant show a gradual decrease in funds sanctioned over the years, with only a marginal increase in 2020-21. However, the point of concern has been the amount that has been released which has seen a steep decline. While the funding in 2021-22 did see an increase by Rs. 400 lakhs (Rs. 40 million) over its previous year, in 2022-23, the amount released was reduced by more than half of the former, to only Rs. 1307 lakhs (Rs. 130 million).



Funds sanctioned (blue) and funds released (green) for Project Elephant. Source: RTI

The recently released [Report on Elephant Corridors in India](#) provides the official updated list of the status of elephant corridors in India. The [Gajah report of 2010](#) identified 88 corridors, which has now increased to 150. Of the 15 states in which the documentation was conducted, West Bengal has 22 corridors, which is the highest in the country. However, the funding provided to the state for elephant conservation has been minimal. In 2021-22, Rs. 150.16 lakhs (Rs. 15 million) had been sanctioned, but only Rs. 87.871 (Rs. 8.7 million) was released, and in 2022-23, Rs. 110.38 lakhs (Rs. 11 million) was sanctioned but only Rs 30.053 lakhs (Rs. 3 million) was released.

The southern states of Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu harbour the largest population of elephants in the country. The report identified 32 corridors between the four states. However, funding for these four states has not been adequate, with reductions in the budget sanctioned in three of the four states in the current year compared to the previous year. In the last three years, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh have been seeing recurring budget reductions, while for Tamil Nadu, the budget sanctioned has been increasing, albeit with minor differences in the amount.



Patterns of funding based on Elephant Corridor Report 2023.

Alongside the erratic funding to both projects, Project Lion, another project under the Wildlife Wing of MoEFCC, has also seen a consistent decrease in funds. According to an RTI, since 2018-19, the funding has gradually reduced from Rs. 1702.62 lakhs (Rs. 170 million) to Rs. 1641.41 lakhs (Rs. 164 million) in 2019-20; Rs. 997.46 lakhs (Rs. 99 million) in 2020-21 to no funding in 2021-22 and Rs. 200.01 lakhs in 2022-23.

It is also imperative to mention that presently, the NTCA is part of the team managing [Project Cheetah](#), Project Leopard, Project Lion, and now Project Tiger & Elephant. The body established under Chapter IV B of the WLPA, specifically to oversee tiger conservation efforts in the country, is also involved in the administration of the conservation efforts of other large species. This raises a question of whether NTCA is stretching its administrative capacity which might potentially affect the tiger conservation efforts.

## Inconsistent disbursement of funds

As of December 2023, the pattern of fund distribution hasn't been much different from the previous years. As per the APOs on the NTCA website, 15 states have received their first installment, [while Odisha](#) is the only state to have received its second installment. Assam, West Bengal, and Jharkhand are among the few states that have not yet received their first installment of funds.

There has also been a substantial budget reduction for the current year from the time it was sanctioned. The initial budget estimate for the Project Tiger and Elephant scheme was Rs. 336.80 crores (Rs. 3.3 billion), but, as per the response of the Minister of State in the MoEFCC in the Lok Sabha on December 6, 2023, the revised budget estimate showed Rs. 245 crores (Rs. 2.4 billion), a reduction of Rs. 91.8 crores. Moreover, as per the available information, the total expenditure has only been Rs. 75.70 crores (Rs. 750 million). The initial stages of the merger do not show a positive difference in the funding patterns of the projects.

Without a substantial increase in funding for the projects, the merger would only lead to additional pressure on the frontline workers. According to Sayan Banerjee, "If the overall fund and its distribution does not increase significantly under a single administration, then the merger will hardly make any difference and might further increase the burden on the frontline forest staff."

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*The authors are members of Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group, Pune.*

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**Banner image:** A herd of elephants in Dhikala Chaur in Corbett tiger reserve. Project Elephant, a central government project to protect elephants has no statutory powers. [Photo](#) by A. J. T. Johnsingh, WWF-India and NCF/ Wikimedia Commons.

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