Dholes in Safe Hands

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Dholes in Safe Hands: Captive Breeding for a Vanishing Predator

Context :

The **Indira Gandhi Zoological Park (IGZP)** in Visakhapatnam has recently announced the **successful birth of 14 dhole puppies**, marking a significant achievement in the **conservation breeding programme** for this endangered species.

What is the Dhole Conservation Breeding Programme?

The **Dhole Conservation Breeding Programme** is a **captive breeding and release initiative** aimed at increasing the population of the **Asiatic Wild Dog (dhole)**. It addresses major threats such as **habitat loss**, **inbreeding**, and **lack of scientific data** on the species.

- **Started in**: 2014
- **Location**: Indira Gandhi Zoological Park (IGZP), Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh
- **Implemented by**: IGZP with support from the **Central Zoo Authority (CZA)**
- **Technical Support**: Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Dehradun, and **LACONES**, Hyderabad
- **Partner Zoos for Genetic Exchange**:
    - Nehru Zoological Park, Hyderabad
    - Arignar Anna Zoological Park, Vandalur
    - Sri Venkateswara Zoological Park, Tirupati

Objectives of the Programme

- Breed endangered dholes in captivity
- Maintain a healthy and diverse gene pool
- Understand dhole behaviour, social structure, and reproduction
- Generate scientific data for long-term conservation
- Enable future reintroduction into protected habitats

About the Dhole (Asiatic Wild Dog)

- **Scientific Name**: *Cuon alpinus*
- **Common Names**: Dhole, Asiatic Wild Dog, Indian Wild Dog
- **Physical Features**: Reddish-brown coat, bushy black-tipped tail, long legs, and agile build
- **Habitat**: Prefers **forests, scrublands, and grasslands** with dense cover and water availability
- **Geographical Distribution in India**: Found in the **Western Ghats, Eastern Ghats, Central India, Northeast, and Himalayas**

Conservation Status

- **IUCN Red List**: Endangered
- **Wildlife Protection Act (India)**: Schedule II
- **Major Threats**:

- Habitat loss from deforestation and human encroachment
- Decline in prey species
- Disease transmission from domestic dogs

Breeding Methodology

- **Careful Pair Selection**: Based on health, age, and compatibility
- **Gradual Introduction**: Pairs introduced in a shared space (day kraal) for 3–5 days
- **Simulated Wild Habitat**: Enclosures with trees, dens, and water pools to allow natural behaviour
- **Low-interference Monitoring**: Pregnant and nursing females are monitored from a distance
- **Studbook Documentation**: Each dhole is tagged, with detailed records maintained for health, genetics, and behaviour

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Positive Outcomes of the Programme

- **Over 40 dholes** bred successfully, including **16 pups**
- Recognised as **India's National Centre for Dhole Conservation**
- Acts as a **captive safety net** for the declining wild population
- Contributed crucial insights into **dhole reproduction, pack behaviour**, and **social structures**
- Aids in training zookeepers and researchers in managing lesser-known carnivores
- Boosts public awareness and scientific engagement with dhole conservation

Key Challenges Faced

- **Limited Founder Population**: Small initial gene pool increases the risk of inbreeding
- **Genetic Bottlenecks**: Low diversity affects health and reproductive success
- **Unpredictable Breeding Behaviour**: Social hierarchy influences successful mating
- **Handling Difficulties**: Dholes are sensitive to stress; require non-invasive care methods like remote monitoring
- **Research Gaps**: Limited data on dhole biology and disease management hinder progress

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Future Vision

- Build a **genetically diverse and behaviourally healthy** captive population
- Serve as a **national referral and research hub** for dhole conservation
- Expand collaboration with more zoos and wildlife centres
- Prepare for **eventual reintroduction** into suitable protected forest habitats