

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
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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
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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**
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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
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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

