



When compassion for tigers means letting go

- The recent capture of Chhota Matka, a famous tiger in Tadoba, reignites the debate over whether unwell wild tigers should receive medical treatment or be allowed a natural death.
- Conservationists warn that repeated interventions risk disrupting ecological succession, strain overcrowded rescue centres and turn reserves into curated zoos.
- Public sentiment, tourism interests and political pressures often drive such decisions, even when national guidelines advise restraint in cases of natural injury, argue the authors of this commentary.
- The views in the commentary are that of the authors.

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Across India's forests, ageing tigers sometimes limp into public imagination: injured, gaunt, their authority over territories slipping away. In Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, one such case is now raising difficult questions. A male tiger popularly known as Chhota Matka, once a dominant force in his landscape, was spotted with a severe leg injury infested with maggots. The administration captured the tiger on August 27 and shifted it to the Treatment Transit Centre in Chandrapur for specialised care, after the Nagpur bench of the Bombay High Court took a suo motu cognisance of the situation.

The situation reopens a larger debate that conservationists have long grappled with: should humans intervene to treat an injured wild tiger, or allow nature to take its course? At first glance, the compassionate answer seems obvious. If an animal is suffering, surely we must help it. Just as a farmer would treat a cow with a festering wound, or a family would rush a dog to a veterinarian, many feel it is only humane to extend the same care to wildlife. Yet, wild tigers are not cattle or pets. Their very survival depends on being untamed, free, and independent of human crutches. Every decision to intervene carries ecological, ethical, and philosophical consequences that ripple far beyond the individual animal.

In 2024, India recorded 126 tiger deaths against an estimated adult tiger population of 3,700. Given the natural life expectancy of around 12 years, over 300 adults would be expected to die annually, not including high cub mortality (~45%) or unreported deaths due to poaching and remote forest locations. However, only a fraction of natural deaths is being observed.

The risks of intervention

Capturing and treating a large carnivore is not a routine veterinary act. Sedation carries serious risks, especially for older animals. Underlying health conditions may surface under anaesthesia, leading to sudden decline or death. Even when treatment succeeds, release back into the wild is not guaranteed. The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) protocols often err on the side of caution: if a tiger is judged too weak to hunt, it may spend the rest of its life in captivity, effectively removing a wild being from the landscape it once ruled.

Resources required to monitor a wild tiger are substantial, yet far lower than those needed to maintain an animal in captivity, including food, medical care, and long-term staff. Conservation managers must weigh these trade-offs carefully. Existing rescue and rehabilitation centres, such as Gorewada, are already overflowing with tigers, making long-term captivity for ageing animals, a strain on resources.

Human safety is often cited as justification for capture, but this too can be addressed through less drastic measures: intensive monitoring, awareness campaigns, and deployment of the Tiger Protection Force. Once an ageing animal is captured, the solution is often temporary: wounds rarely heal fully, and re-release is difficult given their diminished ability to survive independently.

The irony is sharp. In trying to save one animal, we may confine it to a cage, denying it the very essence of what makes a tiger wild. Intervention may look compassionate, but it can easily turn into a permanent exile from the forest.

Ecology has its own rules

Beyond the welfare of the individual lies the larger logic of ecology. Tigers, like all wild creatures, are part of a cycle of succession. Older males lose battles, cede ground, and are replaced by younger, stronger rivals. This turnover maintains the delicate balance between predator and prey, regulates territories, and prevents overcrowding.

Beyond individual animals, tigers face threats from habitat loss, particularly in corridors and areas outside protected reserves. Infrastructure development projects without mitigation, road and railway accidents, electrocution, and organized poaching pose genuine ecosystem-level



threats that require intervention at the landscape scale, not merely at the level of a single tiger.

An article in BioScience (2025) emphasises that “allowing nature to take its course for these animals is enabling an essential ecological process” and that “there is not a strong ethical justification for interfering with predation.” Interventions must be tempered by considerations of biodiversity, wildness, and human interests, echoing NTCA guidelines that intervention should be minimal and only justified when human safety is at stake.

Prolonging the life of a dominant but weakened male carries unintended consequences. Younger dispersing tigers may be suppressed for longer periods, slowing genetic exchange. Continued human intervention can increase dependency on artificial care, dilute wildness, and create logistical, financial, and social burdens around rescues, long-term captivity, and failed re-releases.

The NTCA's standard operating procedures (SOPs) note that the protected areas, having a residential wild carnivore population, should be managed with minimal human intervention to maintain a natural prey-predator balance and intra- and inter-species interactions, where the survival of the fittest governs. Artificial feeding of old, injured, or incapacitated tigers disrupts social land tenure dynamics, causes conflict, and violates in-situ conservation; only in extreme human-tiger interface cases may such tigers be

rehabilitated in a recognised zoo.

If ageing tigers are kept alive through repeated human intervention, pressure on limited habitats can intensify. Younger dispersing tigers may find fewer opportunities to establish territories, pushing them towards human settlements. The outcome is familiar: increased livestock depredation, rising resentment among communities, and ultimately more human-wildlife conflict. Saving one weakened tiger could inadvertently endanger several others and strain the fragile truce between people and predators.

Tourism, social pressure, and vested interests

Intervention is often driven not by ecological logic, but by public sentiment. Tourists, photographers, and local communities sometimes form strong attachments to frequently sighted tigers, triggering emotional appeals for treatment. Social media amplifies these demands, portraying the animal as a patient in need of human care rather than as a wild predator in the final chapter of its life.

Chhota Matka provides a key example. He has never conflicted with humans, and his current injury must be understood in the context of natural behaviour.

Older males typically retreat after territorial defeat, surviving on wild prey or occasional livestock, and rarely attacking people. Intervening could force younger tigers into conflict or increase risky human interactions.

This dynamic is especially pronounced in tourism-heavy, open-forest reserves such as Tadoba, Ranthambore, and Bandhavgarh, where iconic tigers attract visitors. Naming tigers in the past reinforced public attachment, which is why NTCA now discourages it. Resorts, photographers, and filmmakers frequently run social media campaigns demanding treatment for famous tigers. By contrast, parks such as Corbett, Kaziranga, and South Indian reserves, where tourists rarely see the same tiger repeatedly, experience far fewer welfare campaigns.

Other vested interests complicate matters. Capture numbers are sometimes viewed as markers of success by veterinarians and rescue teams. This emphasis can inadvertently drive unnecessary interventions, burden rescue centres, and shift focus away from population-level conservation.

Past examples illustrate the stakes. In August 2025, an 11-year-old tigress in Bandipur was captured after tourists filmed her struggle rather than retreating; she now lives in captivity and is unlikely to return to the wild. Similarly, earlier interventions for Chhota Matka were influenced by directions from the higher echelons of power, which overrode ecological reasoning. These examples underscore the need for firm conservation ethics that can resist both public sentiment and political pressures.

Ethics of intervention

Non-intervention, however, does not mean indifference. Between doing nothing and resorting to capture, middle paths exist. One approach is intensive monitoring: keeping a close watch on an injured animal's movements, ensuring human safety, and recording its progress without directly interfering. Compensation schemes for livestock depredation can help offset community losses during this period, reducing pressure to act hastily.

Such approaches have worked before. Hirdi Nala, a tigress in Tadoba, once severely injured, was monitored closely without being captured and she survived, regaining strength in the wild. In other cases, round-the-clock tracking to avoid attacks on humans and swift compensation for cattle kills have allowed nature to take its course without escalating conflict. These experiences suggest that compassion can take the form of patience and vigilance, rather than immediate physical intervention.

Yet even with such alternatives, the fundamental question remains: when does intervention uphold the wild, and when does it undermine it? Intervening in naturally caused injuries risks undermining natural selection and “survival of the fittest.” Treating injured tigers often results in permanent captivity, denying them an “honourable death” in the wild.

Managers must balance in-situ conservation, which maintains wildness, against ex-situ approaches that risk turning parks into curated zoos, where veterinary actions and capture counts overshadow ecological priorities.

A clear ethical framework should consider: the cause of injury, likelihood of recovery, ecological consequences, and situational factors such as dependent cubs, local tiger density or landscape pressures. These principles echo NTCA SOPs, which advise intervention only for human-induced injuries or when human safety is threatened.

This debate is not about Chhota Matka alone. It is about the philosophy of conservation: Do we see wild animals as patients to be managed, or as beings entitled to live and die by the rules of their ecosystems? True compassion may sometimes mean stepping back, allowing nature's harshness to play out, and respecting the dignity of the wild.

Habitat restoration, prey recovery, and corridor protection strengthen populations and ecosystems, not individuals. Treating an injured tiger is a welfare act with little impact on long-term ecological health.

Conservation's mandate is to secure the wildness of the species, which sometimes requires the courage to accept that not every life can or should be extended by human hands. In the end, the most humane gesture we can offer to an ageing or injured tiger is not a cage, not a syringe, not even a cattle carcass, but the freedom to live and die as a wild being./MONGABAY