



▲ *Colombia's hippos have run amok and face extermination by officials*

Indian tycoon offers lifeline to Escobar's wild hippos

Hannah Ellis-Petersen

Delhi

It remains one of the strangest conundrums in modern zoology - what to do with the descendants of Pablo Escobar's hippos?

The animals - herbivores native to sub-Saharan Africa - were brought to Colombia by the drug lord for his own entertainment. But they were left to roam free after his death in 1993 and have become such an environmental blight that they face extermination by the authorities.

Yet they may now have found an unlikely stay of execution, with the prospect of shelter in India.

Anant Ambani, the businessman son of the Indian tycoon Mukesh Ambani, has revived an offer to bring the hippos to his Vantara animal sanctuary in the state of Gujarat.

Ambani said that as the hippos were "living, sentient beings ... if we have the ability to save them through a safe and humane solution, we have a responsibility to try".

But Vantara is shrouded in controversy. Home to more than 150,000 animals, including many endangered species, it has faced allegations of illegal and unethical sourcing of its inhabitants. The international watchdog Cites (convention on international trade in endangered species) has flagged alleged noncompliance with wildlife trade rules.

The sanctuary has been accused of indirect complicity in wildlife trafficking and dismissed as an Ambani "vanity zoo" with no public access. The Ambanis and Vantara deny the allegations and an investigation by the supreme court of India found no evidence of wrongdoing.

A plan to bring 60 of the hippos to the sanctuary was first proposed in 2023. However, the logistical problems of capturing and moving the hippos, which live in the wild and weigh roughly two tonnes, as well as dealing with permits and inter-governmental cooperation, appear to have prevented their relocation.

According to recent estimates, there are more than 200 hippos roaming free in Colombia, the largest population outside Africa.

One of the South American country's greatest environmental menaces, they have destroyed vegetation and terrorised and killed domestic animals and livestock.