

Yet another serious threat to the largest surviving Elephant Population in India- The imminent severance of the Muthanga Elephant Corridor in Kerala Wayanad

An Appeal

The world's largest remaining Asiatic elephant population is now found in India and their prime habitat of swampy, lower elevation forest has almost totally disappeared.

The elephant is the most sacred animal in the Indian ethos but the current official protection measures are grossly inadequate to safeguard the remaining wild population. There are now more enslaved elephants in most parts of its original range in India than wild ones.

There are three prime elephant habitats in the Indian sub-continent. The northern most is along the base of the Himalayas spanning both the Ganga and the Brahmaputra basins. The western part of this tract is called the Terais - the swampy foothills of the Himalayas extending from Uttaranchal in the west to Assam in the east including a large tract in southern Nepal and a smaller extent in Bhutan. The elephant population in this tract used to have links with the Burmese elephant population as well as the elephant population in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. After the partition of India, during the 1950s, 60s and 70s, the Terai tract was cleared and settled to accommodate the huge influx of Hindu and Sikh population which moved into India from Pakistan and Bangladesh. By the 1970s the Himalayan foothill elephant habitat had been nearly totally wiped out excepting a few small scattered pockets. The largest extent of the remaining northern habitat is in the Assam valley, in the foothills of Arunachal Pradesh and in the hills bordering Burma. This population once must have had connectivity with the elephant habitat as far east as that in Thailand and southern China. The Indian part of this habitat is a tract of military conflicts with grossly inadequate wildlife protection measures. Although there are a few Protected Areas in the eastern part of this elephant habitat in India, the status of elephants here is unknown.

The second population of elephants in India occupies an even more attenuated and fragmented habitat starting from the eastern border of West Bengal extending through the hills of Orissa, southern Jharkhand, Chattisgarh and eastern Andhra Pradesh. These are essentially the forests of the Eastern Ghats with heavy concentration of mining industry, large tribal population and many industrial development projects. Most of these forests have now been cleared and only a small population of wild elephants remain here. There is no large Protected Area essentially to cater to the needs of wild elephants in this tract.

The third, and potentially the most viable population of Asiatic elephants is found in the junction of the Western and Eastern Ghats and further west into the Western Ghats. This is a large diverse habitat including dry Deccan Plateau areas, moist as well as xerophytic forests on the western edge of the Eastern Ghats, the Cauvery upper reaches extending all the way west girdling the Nilgiris with a range of forests including sub-temperate montane sholas to dry sandal forests and the rainforests on the western slope of the Western Ghats draining to the Arabian Sea.

The extensive southern Peninsular elephant habitat has a complex configuration with three arms. The southern arm stretches from the Palakkad Gap north to the south-western slopes of the Nilgiris. The northern arm extends from north of Nilgiris to the Coorg Hills. The eastern arm stretches from the eastern edge of the Nilgiris across the Moyar River to the Biligirirangan part of the Eastern Ghats. These three arms link up in the Kerala Wayanad. This 6000sq km of forests with its range of habitats around the Nilgiri mountains fall within the southern Indian States of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The western part of this tract is steeper with denser forests and heavier rainfall and is not really prime habitat, while the eastern part is drier and more suitable. Hence there is a constant movement of elephants between these two parts crossing various State boundaries. But there is inadequate inter-State co-ordinated effort in protecting the elephant and its habitat.

Elephants need lots water and forage in the summer, so they migrate from the eastern to the western parts of this area according to the rhythm of the climate. The uninhabited lower mountain valleys in the past were their traditional refugia in the peak of summer. But a very large number of dams have been built all along

these valleys since Independence with river water virtually disappearing into irrigation canals in the summer and so water is now a limiting factor within this entire elephant habitat. These river valley development projects with the associated roads, human settlements and other constructions have severely fragmented the habitat and restricted elephant movement.

This area used to contain the best teak forests in India. Teak was favoured by the British for railway construction and was therefore over-exploited. Natural moist mixed forests were cleared and replaced with vast monoculture teak plantations. The deciduous teak plantations desiccated the landscape so that even the under-storey fodder that was available for elephants disappeared.

Bamboo is an ideal elephant food and there are extensive bamboo dominated forest patches in this area. But bamboo is also an industrial raw material for pulp and rayon and 'three huge pulp mills have been built to exploit this 'cheap' forest resource drastically curtailing their availability for the elephants. The manual bamboo extraction operations necessitating large labour force creates severe disturbance for elephants and prevents them from using that part of their range. Bamboo rebuilds soils and creates an ideal microclimate necessary for forest regeneration. But continuous bamboo over-extraction has stopped forest regeneration and intense forests fires have destroyed the under-storey and large areas are reverting to an extremely desiccated weed infested landscape.

Apart from river valley projects, increasing population in the plains and modern development moving up the hills necessitating roads, rail tracks, powerlines also resulted in the fragmentation of the once extensive forests so that today only 4500sq km of habitat remains accessible for elephants in this area extending around the junction of these three States. This part of the Asiatic elephant habitat possibly has now the largest number of Protected Areas still supporting wild elephants. Within this tract a narrow strand of forests linking the Eastern and Western Ghats is about to be severed by a railway track linking up Karnataka with Tamil Nadu passing through the Sathyamangalam slopes. Incidentally, apart from poaching, a single recorded factor resulting in the death of the largest number of elephants in all parts of its range in India has been collision with railway locomotives.

The core of this 4500sq km Peninsular Indian elephant habitat is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. It falls within five Protected Areas namely the Bandipur Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu, the Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka and the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala. But even within this Protected Area network actual protection for the elephants is inadequate. Gradual erosion of habitat quality continues and because there is a large tribal population within the tract, man-elephant conflict is also constantly increasing. There is uncontrolled tourism far exceeding the capability of the habitat to absorb it. Adding to all these pressures acting on the elephant is the consequences of global warming further threatening the long-term viability of the largest concentration of Asiatic elephants.

Of a total population of about 2000 elephants surviving in Peninsular India in the various fragmented habitat islands, the largest single population which could be more than 1000 elephants must be surviving in a near contiguous habitat extending over this 4500sq km tract.

Historically the most famous elephant habitat used to extend from the present day Mudumalai Tiger Reserve along the north-western foot of the Nilgiri Mountains towards north and west along the Kabini River valleys till the famous elephant capture (khedda) area around Karapur in Karnataka. The western end of this tract has been partly submerged by an irrigation reservoir and around the reservoir extensive areas have been cleared for rehabilitating dam displaced farmers. The eastern end of the tract in Tamil Nadu has become drier over the years and the population of elephants have to move west in summer. This migration used to be through the forests in the present day Bandipur Tiger Reserve and the Nagarhole National Park in Karnataka. But direct movement from Tamil Nadu in this direction is no longer possible along the entire stretch because of ' habitat discontinuity. Mudumalai has an extensive border shared with the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary in Kerala, a 344sq km Protected Area with a number of perennial streams and, in spite of past destruction, good summer elephant forage because of heavier rainfall. This is now the only way for the elephants to migrate from the east to the west in the dry time and return during the wet season.

But due to habitat fragmentation, elephants moving from Mudumalai to Wayand have to pass through a corridor which is only about 2.5 km wide extending from Mulehole in Karnataka west to Muthanga in Kerala. Within this corridor there is an enclosure around Ponkuzhi which is fast developing into a temple pilgrimage as well as wayside halting point as the inter-State highway (NH 212) cuts through this forest. There is a perennial river, the Noolpuzha running through this corridor and for 3 or 4 months of the year this river is the sole water source for a large population of elephants moving through. The major inter-state highway linking Bangalore with Calicut passing through this corridor is used by hundreds of vehicles round the clock. Night-time is preferred by trucks carrying goods in order to avoid traffic congestion and being an inter-State road, there are four different government departmental check-posts located close to Muthanga in the Kerala side. There are similar check-posts on the Karnataka side also. But the Kerala check-posts are all currently located on the western edge of the narrow corridor. Recently a decision has been made to relocate all these check-posts within one campus and the location selected is exactly within the centre of the corridor. This development would include all manner of infrastructure - building complexes, housing, offices, toilets and dormitories for drivers, a fuel filling station and so on. The checkpoint clearance takes hours, so there would be hundreds of lorries parked along the road throughout the night on either side of the checkpoints within the forests preventing elephants from using the corridor.

Work has already started in cutting a trench to prevent elephants from crossing the road cutting them off from the river and whatever little fodder is available on the river margin. There are better locations for the check-post that would protect the elephant habitat. The best solution would be the relocation of the checking stations to outside the forest on the Kerala side of the corridor where suitable land for this is available. It is also necessary to prohibit vehicle movement during certain night-time hours for example, between 11 p.m. and 4 a.m.

The Wayanad Nature Protection Group (Wayanad Prakruthi Samrakshana Samati) has appealed to the world community to help prevent the severance of this critical corridor. They are asking all those concerned with the survival of the wild Asian Elephant to send letters to the Government of Kerala requesting the relocation of

the checking stations to outside the forest corridor and to take additional measures to ensure the continued flourishing of these magnificent animals.

Please send letter, emails or faxed to the Chief Minister of Kerala with copies to the Minister for Forests and Wildlife, Minister for Finance, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests as well as to the Inspector General in charge of Project Elephant, Ministry of Environment and Forests .Government of India. Copies of the letters to local newspapers would be most welcome.

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