

RED EARTH



The animals on my farm

Villages around Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary are caught between crop-raiding wildlife and bureaucratic red tape

BY MOHIT M. RAO

The hills of Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary (CWS) loom over Duntoor village, a few hours' drive from Bengaluru. Banana, coconut, and mango plantations and vegetable farms separate the sleepy hamlet from the 1,028 sq. km. sanctuary, the largest in the State, and habitat to elephants, leopards, wild dogs and two endangered species of vulture. Duntoor also happens to be the site of a fast-escalating man-animal conflict.

A few weeks ago, around 5.30 p.m., anxious villagers spotted a herd of elephants standing on a rock face, seemingly eyeing the farmland. As they descended, the undulating valley hid them from view for a few moments.

Experience had taught the villagers to scatter, and by the time the sun sank into the horizon, they were safely back in their homes. An unspoken curfew was imposed. The residents knew better

than to venture out: last year a villager was trampled to death by elephants.

By morning, the elephants had retreated into the forest, leaving behind a staggering trail of destruction. Mango branches were broken, banana plantations uprooted, and crops trampled.

"This has become routine in the past four months," says D.M. Mare Gowda, a 69-year-old farmer. "Every three days or so, a herd of around 10 elephants makes its way to our village. On other days, they raid neighbouring villages." Today, just six of his 70 coconut saplings survive.

Powerless to fight back

Raje Gowda, 42, has built a wooden perch on a tree to spot lone tuskers that routinely wander in. He hopes to chase them away with firecrackers and brass gongs. But that night all he could do was watch as the herd ravaged his coconut plantation.

Nearby, a ₹1.5 lakh solar fence erected

by farmer Satish to ward off elephants was breached, and his fields raided too.

As the patchwork of fields and plantations push against the forest, where the population of herbivores is rising due to better conservation and a lack of large predators, the man-animal conflict has taken new forms.



The conflict also extends to monkeys that feast on mangos, wild boars that demolish vegetables

It extends beyond elephants to monkeys who feast on mangoes, and wild boars that demolish roots and tubers. And, as the rains cease and streams dry up, more animals venture towards villages where a veritable buffet awaits.

Deep grey monsoon clouds hang heavily over a small hillock behind Achalu village some 15 km north of Duntoor. Here, 85-year-old Chennagowda, who tills four acres of land, knows the

paradox of his prayers for rains. "For our crops to survive, we need rain. But the day it rains, hundreds of wild boars will descend on our fields. They come in a herd. We cannot chase each one away. And in a few minutes, almost everything is gone," he says.

The rule of the boar over the past decade has gradually changed what

There is growing clamour for an extreme solution, with protests ringing through the towns close to the sanctuary.

With mounting political pressure, the forest department issued an order in November 2016 permitting the shooting of wild boars in agricultural land. However, the order, meant to placate protesters, remained just that. Not one wild boar has been shot so far (officially).

Forest officials say this is because of the plethora of conditions imposed on shooting a wild boar: a licensed gun must be used (according to statistics, there is only one legal license in the district); the carcass must be handed over within 24 hours, and a post-mortem conducted by the forest department.

Shooting a wild boar without legal repercussions is nearly impossible, one official says. However, this has not stopped demands for culling from being voiced.

The department has been petitioned

Field work For farmers, wild animals raiding and damaging their fields has become a regular affair. RITU RAJ KONWAR

to permit the shooting of langurs and other primates to "maintain an ecological balance," as well as the relocation of elephants frequenting the corridors.

Sustained conflict

If three species have become the focal points of conflict around the sanctuary, a recent study by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) shows there are no less than 32 species involved in sustained man-animal conflict across the country.

This seems to tally with the numbers released by the Ministry of Environment as a response to a parliamentary question in July. The Ministry said 1,144 people were killed in man-animal conflict between April 2014 and May 2017, including 27 by tigers. Elephants have caused more than 1,020 deaths in the three year span.

The WCS team studied 5,196 households across 11 sites between 2011 and 2014. CWS is not in the list, but households in nearby sanctuaries of Biligirirangana Hills, Bandipur, Nagarhole, and Bhadra in Karnataka seem to echo the experiences of Duntoor and Achalu.

Of the surveyed households, nearly three-fourths experienced some sort of wildlife conflict; 17% saw livestock loss and 2% suffered injury from wildlife.

The wild boar was found to be the top crop-raiding species in 10 protected areas, with the nilgai and elephant coming second and third, respectively. And the economic cost of conflict? ₹12,559, from crop loss alone, per household every year.

Krithi Karanth from WCS, who co-authored the report along with Sahila Kudalkar from Centre for Wildlife Studies, says: "People may be better served by deploying early warnings, and compensation and insurance programmes rather than by focusing heavily on mitigation."

Compensation, however, is far from adequate. In Duntoor, for instance, villagers say they receive barely ₹500 as compensation after spending weeks navigating the rigmarole of bureaucracy (documentation includes photographs of the damage taken in the presence of forest officers).

"Agriculture is very difficult here. We can manage drought years as we know there will be good years. But, the animals have now become a constant," says Shivaji Rao, who claims to have lost ₹40,000 this year due to marauding elephants.

Many villagers have abandoned their farms and migrated to the city. "If this continues, no one will be left," says Rao.