

Forest Dept. plans conservation of swamps used by elephants in Gudalur

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A 'vayal' in Pandalur in the Nilgiris used by wild Asian elephants.

Many of these face the threat of encroachment

A comprehensive “vayal” management plan is being formulated by the Forest Department to help preserve crucial elephant habitats in Gudalur and Pandalur taluks.

“Vayals,” essentially grassy swamps, are used by a variety of wildlife, and most importantly by Asian elephants. B. Ramakrishnan, assistant professor at the Department of Zoology and Wildlife Biology at the Government Arts College in Udhagamandalam, who is also a principal investigator assisting the Forest Department in studying the “vayals” in the Gudalur landscape, said that a three-month study showed 84 of the 86

“vayals” studied were being used by elephants, while leopards were seen in 79, and the presence of tigers was noticed in 13.

“These results show the importance of ‘vayals’ not just for elephants, but for the wildlife in general,” said Mr. Ramakrishnan, who is a member of the Asian Elephants Specialist Group of the IUCN. The studies also pointed to a correlation between the number of “vayals” in a forest range and the prevalence of problematic human-elephant interactions. Between 2007 and 2019, 79 human deaths were recorded in the Gudalur division, out of which 22 were recorded in Cherambadi range, which has the most “vayals” in the landscape. Casualties were also higher in Pandalur and Gudalur forest ranges.

“Elephants from Karnataka and Mudumalai Tiger Reserve pass through the region, and use the ‘vayals’ as stopping points where they browse for food and water. The problematic interactions result from people who also share the ‘vayals’ with the elephants and accidentally encounter them while going to work or while returning home,” said Mr. Ramakrishnan. As many of the “vayals” in the five forest ranges in Gudalur used by elephants are outside notified reserve forests, they are under serious threat of being encroached upon by people looking to set up farms. I. Anwardeen, Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, Coimbatore Circle, said the Forest Department was in the process of formulating a comprehensive strategy for managing and protecting the swamps. “We are assessing the number of vayals and are going to safeguard these ecologically-important areas through the ambit of the Tamil Nadu Preservation of Private Forests Act, as many of the ‘vayals’ are not inside declared reserve forests,” said Mr. Anwardeen. “The plan will involve all relevant stakeholders. The protections will ensure that there is no further erosion of the ‘vayals’ due to cultivation and narrowing of elephant pathways through fencing” added Mr. Anwardeen.

Both the Forest Department and local conservationists hope that the move to protect the swamps will reduce problematic human-elephant interactions in the region.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Coimbatore/forest-dept-plans-conservation-of-swamps-used-by-elephants-in-gudalur/article35948583.ece>