

When the forests are made unsafe for wildlife: The Mudumalai quandary

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In January 2021, a 40-year-old elephant was found badly injured in Masinagudi. The animal had deep wounds on its back and ears, and though it was transported to Theppakadu elephant camp for treatment, it succumbed before long. At the time, officials could only speculate on the cause of the injuries, but the truth emerged two days later — visuals showed a flaming stick being tossed onto the animal's head in an attempt to frighten it. The elephant had wandered into a residential area in Nilgiris from the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve Zone and a group of people who were allegedly running an illegal resort in the area attempted to scare it away with a branch lit on fire. The video shows that when the branch is thrown, the fire begins to cover the elephant's head and it runs away, trumpeting in pain and fear.

The Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR), one of the most sought-after tourist destinations in the state, is a fragile and unique ecosystem in the northwestern side of the Nilgiris Mountains. It is also increasingly becoming a threat to the wildlife that inhabit the area. In the past two years, numerous incidents of animal abuse have been reported in MTR, allegedly due to several reasons ranging from poison traps to human-animal conflict, like the death of the elephant in January.

“Nilgiris is not a tourist destination, but a resource destination. Preserving it should be paramount. However, currently illegal activities from tourism to poisoning to construction of unnecessary buildings are rampant in the area,” said state convener Vijay Krishnaraj.

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“Time and again, we have exposed killings and abuse of wildlife and reported the incidents to the officials’ in-charge. However no action has been taken so far,” he noted.

According to a 2009 Forest Survey assessment, the MTR covers 47.05 square-kilometres of very dense forest, 214.98 square-kilometres of moderately dense and 56.15 square-kilometres of open forest.

TNM spoke to a slew of environmentalists and organisations working in wildlife preservation about illegal activities and violations at the MTR core and buffer area that are worsening the living conditions for forest communities and animals.

According to the United Conservation Movement (UCM), a citizen-led movement for conservation of forest and water in India, several Schedule 1 animals — which includes tigers, deers and elephants — under the Wildlife Protection Act have allegedly been killed and poisoned in the core and buffer regions of MTR. It is to be noted that according to The Times of India, the tiger population at MTR has increased since 2018, reaching a saturation point of 103.

Vijay noted, “Though we have been reporting on the violations for many years, the previous government did not pay any heed. However, we urge the present government to conduct a fair and transparent inquiry into the killings and illegal tourism in the forest.

“All the officials who are in a division for more than three years must be transferred to prevent crimes,” he added.

The animal death toll

Though a specific number of animal deaths and abuses in the MTR was not immediately available, TNM has compiled a recent list of incidents that have occurred in the region. These have mainly occurred due to poisoning, human-animal conflict and illegal tourism reported by the United Conservation Movement. In April 2020, in the Masinagudi buffer range, a tiger was allegedly poisoned by a few miscreants. The miscreants then threw the carcass of the tiger on the side of a stream. Forest officials had earlier claimed the animal drowned in just three inches of water.

Later in November 2020, a lactating tigress died after it consumed part of the poisoned carcass of a cow. The Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) inquired into the mysterious death of a tigress in its prime after pressure from activists, including UCM. Activists say the tigress had four cubs, of which two were rescued and are in Vandalur zoo in Chennai.

UCM also claims that there is an increasing threat to predator species in Masinagudi, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR), and alleged that Tamil Nadu Forest Department has taken the issue lightly. In one incident, a male adult hyena was killed after being allegedly hit by a car driving through the forest in the night at Achakarai junction of Masinagudi.

Commenting on this, Vijay questions how a car was allowed in the forest area at night. "This is clearly a case of illegal tourism in the area. There are a lot of outsiders (from other states) staying in the reserve. On social media, tons of photos and camera trapping images of scheduled animals, cubs of leopard among others are going around," added Vijay. "Despite bringing this incident to light, no action has been taken so far."

"The NTCA directed the officials to take necessary action to prevent human-animal conflicts due to several deaths related to poisoning. However the officials failed to do so," UCM claims.

In another incident in January, a few miscreants lobbed a flaming ball at a tusker. As per UCM, the elephant sustained deep injuries. The tusker reportedly has been bleeding intermittently ever since.

The UCM has urged the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change to hold necessary investigations and has asked that officials be directed to produce camera trap data from August 2020.



Vanam S Chandrasekar, founder Vanam Trust of India, an NGO noted, "When every animal abuse story comes out, officials recite different versions of the incident. This points out their flaw in inquiry."

The standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife in January ordered the establishment of a state-level forest and wildlife crime intelligence cells to facilitate collection of information from locals and other informers regarding forest and wildlife crimes, along with a police intelligence network.

The cost to human work and life

While the harm to animal life is a cause for concern that activists are pursuing, those who rely on forest areas for their livelihood have also been struggling to cope with the recently increased nature of conflicts involving wildlife.

Although the conflict between human and animal habitations has been brewing for several decades, tribal communities in the region say they once lived in peace with nature. But recently the instances of violence involving humans and wildlife have only been exacerbated due to illegal tourism and ecotourism, which includes homestays and resorts built within eco-sensitive zones and deep within forested areas that ultimately create a terrible situation for traditional forest dwellers and the wildlife in the MTR. Some of these resorts are operating without the proper licenses in place.

In August last year, a 50-year-old tribal woman M Gowri was attacked by a tiger when she along with her husband Maathan and three others ventured into the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) for herding their cattle. The tiger ambushed Gowri and dragged her into the forest. Upon hearing the loud cry of Gowri, Maathan and the others rushed to the spot. However, by then Gowri had been mauled to death by the tiger.

Gowri's community struggled to come to terms with her death, and decided to target the tiger that had killed Gowri. But instead, their anger ended up killing five dholes (wild dogs), which came upon the poisoned meat that had been allegedly left out for the tiger.

Farmers have also seen their fields trampled by animals, and the aid from the government has not been enough to support them, they say. U Shivadevan, secretary of Farmers' Producers Group in Gudalur noted, "Last year, I sustained close to Rs 4 lakh in crop damage and I received only Rs 25,000 as compensation. How will it suffice?"

Offering suggestions on how the government can take measures in aiding both humans as well as reducing violence against animals, Shivadevan said, "To begin with, the government should give appropriate compensation for the damage. And in necessary cases, compensation should be increased. If human life is lost due to a wildlife attack, jobs for the family members and rightful compensation should be provided."

"To avoid animal deaths and conflicts with humans, the officials should talk to the villagers who have lived here for decades. Importantly, to keep animals inside the forest, enough food and water facilities should be made available so that they do not damage the crops and attack humans," Shivadevan added.

Speaking to TNM, K Muthamizh Selvan, a senior scientist of Project Elephant, MoEFCC, New Delhi said, "To begin with, I do not feel Mudumalai villagers can cause harm to the elephants as they live more in harmony with wildlife, despite a few miscreants who can be triggered by outsiders."

Muthamizh Selvan said that animal conservation should be done on more compassionate grounds by forest officials involving the locals and creating awareness that the forest is a home for wildlife.

"We humans are interfering in their life and it is not otherwise," he said.

Further, calling for better administration in the area, Muthamizh Selvan added, "The forest officials under the government should constantly monitor illegal resorts and high movement of jeeps in the reserve forest area. 'Eco tourism' should not affect wildlife in any case."

What officials say

According to a forest official who spoke to TNM, "All the necessary inquiries are being promptly held when cases of poisoning or abuse come out. And such incidents are not common occurrences."

The forest official further said that villagers are brought in to conduct meetings and create awareness about the forest and wildlife, under the eco development committee formed in each village. "The activities of poisoning and resulting death are the work of a few miscreants of the 'villagers' nearby," he noted.

J Innocent Divya, Nilgiris collector said, "As far as Nilgiris is considered, the administration should be done in a balanced manner as both human and animal have their right to live."

As a measure to prevent accidents involving animals, the collector states that roads within the forest are shut down from 9 pm to 6 am. A committee has also been formed to set up a corridor to facilitate the free movement of animals from one sanctuary to another, and also to prevent conflict with humans. Another corridor is underway in the Gudalur region where human-animal conflict is high, the collector said.

“Due to many interspersed regions in the forest with human settlements, there are incidents of human-animal conflict thus resulting in deaths,” she said. She also noted that the accused in incidents involving animal abuse are “dealt with an iron hand.” However, she maintained that incidents of animals attacking humans, and the death of animals in these situations, is rare and “happens due to forest and human settlement interface.”

In regards to resorts functioning outside the elephant corridor without commercial licenses, the collector noted, “We are processing this under eco-sensitive zones and based on the carrying capacity of the area, we will allow certain resorts. So far approximately 17 resorts have applied for licenses,” added the collector.

K Ramachandran, Minister for Forests said, “We are forming the budget for forest development and planning after the new government took charge. In the coming months, necessary action will be taken.”

“Violations will not be overlooked,” the minister said

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