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The elephantine problem God's own country faces

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3-4 minutes



ERNAKULAM : Some months ago, an elephant ambled out of the woods and raided the tourist town of Kuruva Island in Kerala's Wayanad district. It kicked down makeshift fences made from disused steel rails, the strongest the villagers could find. Fortunately, no one was harmed.

A video of an elephant strolling down the main streets of Wayanad was widely shared on social media during the lockdown in March. Other cities have also witnessed similar episodes such as leopards moving out of the Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai and Bannerghatta Biological Park in Bengaluru.

In Kerala, with its lush green forests and expanding towns and cities, wildlife in urban areas has become a regular feature of life. So much that the Supreme Court last year upheld a night travel ban on National Highway 766, passing through Bandipur Tiger Reserve forest between Wayanad and Karnataka.

The recent death of an elephant from a pineapple booby trapped with firecrackers shows that there is little protection for an elephant from getting killed as its familiar routes are swallowed up by new urban spaces.

The Economist magazine's recent list of the world's 10 fastest-growing cities included three in Kerala. The state has diverted more than 50% of its total forest area for other purposes since 1973, according to a 2017 study by the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bengaluru. Between 1973 and 2016, Kerala lost 906,440 hectares (9,064.4 sq. km) of forest land, according to the study.

Such rapid urbanization has also turned the tide of public opinion against elephants and other wildlife. Far from being seen as a grand creature deserving of human protection, they are seen as a nuisance and an obstacle to business.

Kuruva Island, for example, comprises 950 acres of lone freshwater islands in the Western Ghats, home to a large population of elephants, migratory birds and other unique flora and fauna. Developed into a major tourism hub, it draws thousands of tourists.

When elephant corridors were converted to assist the economy, pachyderms started invading human settlements. Locals started throwing firecrackers at them, enraging wildlife activists who took the matter to the court. Kerala high court in 2019 shut down the whole place, ending a viable income for tribals.

"Wildlife corridors are getting disconnected. If there is a disruption anywhere in the path, the elephants change track and their whole territory changes. Naturally, they will then invade human settlements. Another reason for them to enter human settlements is when there is a lack of water or food," said Harish Vasudevan, a wildlife activist and lawyer who argued in the case.

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