An elephantine problem

Human-wildlife conflicts are almost a daily occurrence as agriculture and urbanisation move closer and closer to natural habitats. We grow crops next to the forests or reside close to the forest all of which attracts wild animals in search of crops, cattle or dogs; if food is not the case we curtail their annual migratory movement by building resorts or homes in their routes. The issue of elephants seen close to the road from Cheranmadevi to Kalakkad which was in local papers is due to the latter. It has always been customary for the elephants to come from the hills during winter, spend some time in the scrub forests and move up again when it becomes dry. The Cheranmadevi scrub was the last remaining ones that now stands converted to a barren land fenced by electric wires. With the scrub gone where would these animals go? It’s an issue of ‘customary rights’ of animals but who is bothered when even human customary rights are violated. Ironically, the Panchayat presidents from the area seemed divided in this issue. The ones from villages close to the forest condemned the clearing of the bushes and confirmed that elephants are annual visitors and do no great harm while the ones farther away were paranoid on seeing the elephants and wanted them driven off. They also later accepted that the scrub acted as a wall and kept these ‘scary’ animals out of sight. We hope the newly formed Buffer Zone Management Committee for KMTR and the proposed KMTR Tiger Foundation will just not deliberate on these issues but do something constructive to stop the denudation of the buffer.

The KMTR nature guide ‘Treasures on Tiger tracks’ launch at Tirunelveli was attended by several important dignitaries and other invitees. We thank them all for coming and supporting our activities in the region and hope we can all continue our good work to conserve the natural resources of Tirunelveli district.

T. Ganesh

A ticking bomb: Human wildlife conflict in KMTR

Our study on attitudes of people along the eastern boundary of KMTR inspired us to work on the human wildlife conflict in the region. We are now conducting a preliminary survey using focus group interviews to know the extent of the problem. Our focus was on crop raids, but it appears that the problem is not just confined to that. Out of the twenty four villages sampled so far, two villages have reported human casualties caused by wild pigs, two others caused by bear. A few more villages have reported physical injury while one village reports frequent cattle lifting by leopards. In our earlier interviews, we have met respondents who would spend entire nights in their fields to chase away pigs and sambar. All villages sampled within a 3 km radius from the boundary report an increase in conflicts over the years.

The main reason for the increase, they cite, is the increased strictness by the forest department against hunting. The raiding animals are not killed like before because of fear of the forest department. Hunting parties that used to go for pigs and sambar are rarer than before. In the region near Gadana, it is believed that wild pigs and sambar hide in private farmlands in the morning and raid crops in the night. Electric fences installed along the forest boundary in a few villages are not very effective because of maintenance issues. Langurs and macaques are considered a nuisance here, damaging property. The increasing video coverage in popular TV channels of crop raiding elephants is bad advertisement for the forests of KMTR. With people becoming less tolerant towards wildlife, effective measures need to be taken to mitigate the complex human wildlife conflict in this region.

Allwin Jesudasan

Inside this issue:

| The big role of small mammals in forest          | 2 |
| Bleeding trees, feasting butterflies and fighting staghoms | 2 |
| Season for picnickers and polybags              | 2 |
| It was much more than counting birds             | 3 |
| A treat for Canopy Art contest winners           | 3 |
| World Environment day debut for ‘Nature Talkies Cultural Team’ | 3 |
| Threat-end Sloth bear                            | 4 |
| Snippets from field                              | 4 |
| Will their promises get transformed into actions? | 4 |
The big role of small mammals in forest

Often, one may think that it is perfectly safe and harmless to collect dead and fallen wood from the forest and use it. But little thought is given to validate the above statement. Such fallen trees often pull down several neighboring trees with them and open up the forest. In spite of this loss, they create important tree fall gaps which provide a favorable environment for ‘pioneer’ species. The lesser known small mammals like the palm civets have a very unique habit of walking on the exposed roots, branches, lianas and fallen trees. On the ground, they seem to be more comfortable moving about on these roots of trees or fallen logs than on floor laden with litter. In the process, they also defecate on the logs and roots. Being mainly fruit eaters, they have a substantial quantity of undigested seeds in their scat - this tell-tale sign is also a key to identify their diet and also to see how far they have moved the seeds from the closest tree of that species. One such seemingly silly behavior of walking on roots and logs, if seen in the larger context of forest regeneration makes great sense. They act as efficient seed dispersers. By taking the fruit pulp as reward, they disperse the seeds on places like fallen and rotting logs where the scope for germination is higher than the litter laden soil. With such seeds embedded in organic nutrient-rich rotting logs, the seeds mature to saplings before settling into the soil to become trees. With the economic importance of dead wood increasing, it is also imperative to recognize and understand the importance of this ‘wood’ in the woods rather than in the stove. Though the whole process is definitely not as simple as it seems, it is nevertheless important for forest dynamics.

K. S. Seshadri

Season for picnickers and poly bags

The hot days of April have given way to the windy ‘saaral’ or Courtalam season. The southwest monsoon winds have started to blow over the Agasthyamalai peaks, bringing along with it some picturesque clouds that drape the hills like snow over the Himalayan peaks. The interplay of light and clouds create fleetingly stunning displays that are sometimes hard to capture on film but will remain etched in ones memories.
It was much more than counting birds

As an amateur birder, when I joined Abhisheka for a water bird survey in Tirunelveli, it was an experience filled with unforgettable moments. Be it admiring the beauty of the Western Ghats, or traversing numerous cross-country routes leading to some hidden gems of lakes or counting birds till your eyes squint or the soul satisfying.

An owlet was “spotted” Photo: Abhisheka K.

It was much more than counting birds from its hideout about an arm’s length away, we felt a great sense of kinship. The second was seeing a Common kestrel amidst a landscape which was falling prey to mining. I can never forget the sense of helplessness, with which we watched that Kestrel and the Waders braving the dust from the excavators!

I got to know village life, the issues concerning not just the environment but also the intricacies of the local socio-political realities and the logistic difficulties like arranging a punctual driver that a researcher has to deal with. It all gave me a glimpse of the “normal” routine of the dedicated ATREE team.

Anjali Pande

A treat for Canopy Art contest winners

ATREE had just the perfect award in store for the artists who won the art contest in the 5th International Canopy conference, 2009. It was a simple village meals, everything was a lifetime experience. Among the many beautiful moments, two stand out in my memory. We had walked along a big lake through fairly rocky terrain in extreme heat. We climbed behind some huge rocks and sat down in the shade. Suddenly we realized that a cute Spotted owlet was looking at us.

Photo: Manju Das

ATREE’s Agasthyamalai Community-based Conservation Centre (ACCC) is working with rural children to improve their knowledge of ecology and environment. Being part of our conservation education (CE) programme, the kids have learnt local folk art such as kaliyal, paraiattam, oyilattam and dramas. A cultural team called ‘Nature Talkies’ was formed with vocalists Merlin and Ambai Shanmugam. The villagers dance and they also sang along with the dedicated ATREE team.

Sangeetha Kadur

World Environment day debut for ‘Nature Talkies Cultural Team’

ATREE’s Agasthyamalai Community-based Conservation Centre (ACCC) is working with rural children to improve their knowledge of ecology and environment. Being part of our conservation education (CE) programme, the kids have learnt local folk art such as kaliyal, paraiattam, oyilattam and dramas. A cultural team called ‘Nature Talkies’ was formed with vocalists Merlin and Ambai Shanmugam. The villagers dance and they also sang along with the dedicated ATREE team.

M. Mathivanan
Threat-end Sloth bear

If we would attempt to estimate the number of times we encounter the word “threatened” during office hours, I’m sure it will be a sizeable number. On the other hand, I’ve lived through a short five seconds of “threatening” charge by two sloth bears which are not really a threatened but vulnerable species! Barely a hundred meters away from the Chinna Manjolai camp, while I was walking towards a few camera-traps, the bears and I walked into a common junction on the trail! The sloths uttered a “threatening” grunt, which sent me into “life-threatening” mood and I instinctively shouted a “life-saving-yell”. It can be best verbalized as an “exponentially raising aaaaaahhhhhhhhh, that dipped to silence for a nanosecond, and once again rose to an “aaaaaahhh”!! I do not know whether the resulting pattern was “sinusoidal”, but was certainly “simultaneous” in terms of locomotion! My limbs started moving immediately and I managed to run back to the camp in a jiffy to meet my colleagues!

Far away from this location, while in lowland Singampatty, my colleagues and I met two more sloths once again last week. They were seen scurrying for cover from the jeep headlights twenty feet away; everybody had a grin on their face. I too managed it but “simultaneously” latched on to the wind screen handle and shut the window!

Prashanth. M.B.

Will their promises get transformed into actions?

A field visit to Koondankulam Bird sanctuary was organised for the stakeholder representatives of selected villages on 6.7.2010. The stakeholder representatives enjoyed a short bird watching session at the site. Later a presentation cum discussion on ATREE’s work in KMTR and the process of selecting the wetlands for conservation was given to the participants. The progress on the construction plan for Vagaikulam tank was also appraised to the participants. Two protected area guardians spoke about the importance of KMTR and how people should also consider protection of areas outside KMTR.

It was a privilege to have Mr. Ramkumar, IFS FD and CCF and Mr. Khader Bhai, squad Ranger visit our new field site at Singampatti.

The new CCC built with rammed earth is almost up. The community hall can accommodate 30-40 people while the dorm can house 8 people comfortably.

The District Collector of Tirunelveli visited ATREE’s filed station at Upper Kodayar in May and had an opportunity to try out the nature guide that he had released a few weeks ago.

Vagaikulam

Mr. Hasan Vava, president of Veerasamudram Panchayat passed away on 19 March. Mr. Vava encouraged our efforts to protect the trees in Vagaikulam and had passed a resolution in the Panchayat towards this. He had to do this against a divided Panchayat, some of whom were backed by the contractor lobby which is politically influenced. We owe him a lot for his support till the end.

Two masters student from Bharatidasan University did their Master’s thesis on issues related to Vagaikulam. Mr. Dhanapal studied the nutrient enrichment by roosting and nesting birds at Vagaikulam and Mr. Saravana Kumar estimated the effects of pesticide use on amphibian sp in the agricultural fields around Vagaikulam.

The Vagaikulam bird issue took a different twist when the Village Administrative Officer informed the Conservator of Forests, Tirunelveli that Vagaikulam sits on a govt. land and hence cannot be made a community reserve. Mr. A. Ramkumar, IFS, CCF and Field Director KMTR, CF Mr. Rampathi and Hon. Raja of Singampatti at a book launch in Tirunelveli of 5th March.

The authors of the book TTT met with the press at the Tirunelveli press club on 4th March to highlight the importance of KMTR and how people should also consider protection of areas outside KMTR.

The bilingual nature guide ‘Treasures on Tiger Tracks’ (TTT) was released by the District Collector, Mr. Jayaraman, IAS in the presence of the Mr. A. Ramkumar, IFS, CCF and Field Director KMTR, CF Mr. Rampathi and Hon. Raja of Singampatti at a book launch in Tirunelveli of 5th March.

Snippets from field

- The bilingual nature guide ‘Treasures on Tiger Tracks’ (TTT) was released by the District Collector, Mr. Jayaraman, IAS in the presence of the Mr. A. Ramkumar, IFS, CCF and Field Director KMTR, CF Mr. Rampathi and Hon. Raja of Singampatti at a book launch in Tirunelveli of 5th March.

- The authors of the book TTT met with the press at the Tirunelveli press club on 4th March to highlight the importance of KMTR and how people should also consider protection of areas outside KMTR.

- It was a privilege to have Mr. Ramkumar, IFS FD and CCF and Mr. Khader Bhai, squad Ranger visit our new field site at Singampatti.

- The new CCC built with rammed earth is almost up. The community hall can accommodate 30-40 people while the dorm can house 8 people comfortably.

- The District Collector of Tirunelveli visited ATREE’s filed station at Upper Kodayar in May and had an opportunity to try out the nature guide that he had released a few weeks ago.

- Mr. Hasan Vava, president of Veerasamudram Panchayat passed away on 19 March. Mr. Vava encouraged our efforts to protect the trees in Vagaikulam and had passed a resolution in the Panchayat towards this. He had to do this against a divided Panchayat, some of whom were backed by the contractor lobby which is politically influenced. We owe him a lot for his support till the end.

- Two masters student from Bharatidasan University did their Master’s thesis on issues related to Vagaikulam. Mr. Dhanapal studied the nutrient enrichment by roosting and nesting birds at Vagaikulam and Mr. Saravana Kumar estimated the effects of pesticide use on amphibian sp in the agricultural fields around Vagaikulam.

- The Vagaikulam bird issue took a different twist when the Village Administrative Officer informed the Conservator of Forests, Tirunelveli that Vagaikulam sits on a govt. land and hence cannot be made a community reserve. The option is now only for a conservation reserve.

For private circulation only. Any and all opinions expressed in this newsletter are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the opinion of ATREE.