

Notes on rescue of strayed *Nilgiritragus hylocrius* and the habitat in Nilgiris, Western Ghats, India



IUCN Red List:

Global —
Endangered
(Alempath & Rice
2008)

The original habitat of Nilgiri Tahr *Nilgiritragus hylocrius* in the Nilgiris

Mammalia
[Class of Mammals]

Cetartiodactyla
[Order of Even-toed
Ungulates]

Bovidae
[Family of Horned
ruminants]

Nilgiritragus hylocrius
[Nilgiri Tahr]

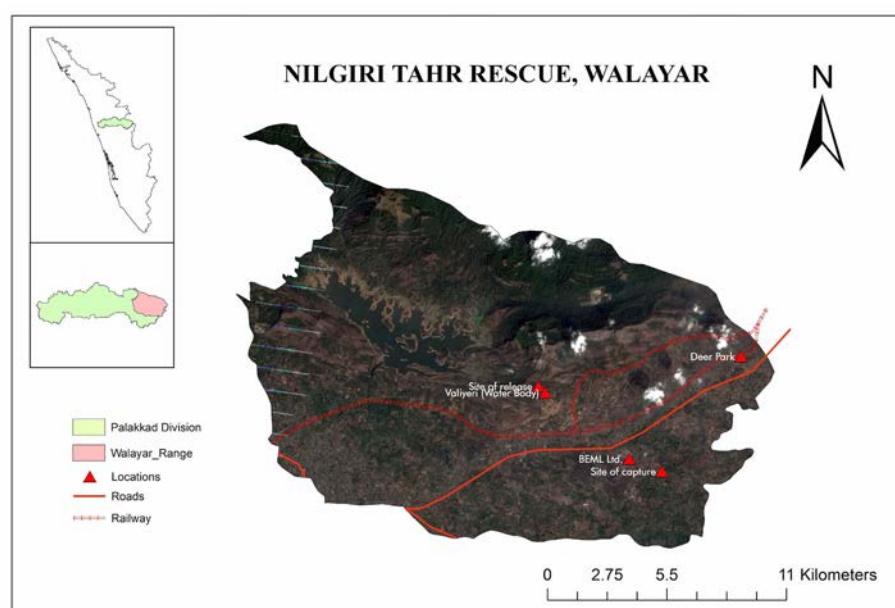
Species described by
Ogilby in 1838

The Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*) is a mountain ungulate endemic to Western Ghats and the only species in the subfamily Caprinae found south of Himalayas. It is the most equatorial wild caprid (Rice 1988a). With a habitat not spanning more than 400 sq.km. in the South Indian states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, this species is listed as Endangered in IUCN Red List category (Alempath & Rice 2008; Vergis et al. 2011). Nilgiri Tahr typically inhabits the fringes of the grassy plateaus and the adjacent cliffs and steep rock slabs in higher elevations (over 1200m). The present range of Nilgiri Tahr is restricted along a narrow stretch between Nilgiri Hills in the north and Ashambu Hills in the south (11°30' N - 8°20' N) (Mishra & Johnsingh 1998).

On 24 March 2016, a sub-adult female Nilgiri Tahr (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*) was captured from Edappukulam (10.785202°N & 76.798658°E), near Kanchikkode in Walayar Range of Palakkad Forest Division, Kerala. The area lies in the extreme south of Nilgiris, along the northern border of Palghat gap. The animal was spotted in the plains (Elevation 143m) of Palakkad gap almost 6 km away from the nearest hillock. It was found stranded amidst human habitation near BEML Ltd., Walayar. The exhausted animal was captured in the evening by the local people and later handed over to the Forest Department on the same day. The animal was then transferred to 'Sree Loknayak Jayaprakash Smritivanam Deer Park', Walayar, managed by Kerala Forest Department. Since then, the animal had been housed there in isolation.

Global Distribution :
India - Kerala & Tamil Nadu (Alempath, M. & C. Rice 2008)

Upon inspection of the animal, no external injury was found. The animal was healthy except for very slight dehydration observed from the tongue. Also, ribs were slightly visible which was resulted from poor food intake and exhaustion. Oral hydration supplement was given and urine turned out to be normal. Body temperature at 102°F was found normal. The animal was given fodder grass. Since the deer park had not enough facilities to house a Nilgiri Tahr especially in terms of feed, decision was made to release the animal at the earliest in appropriate locality. Transportation of the animal to a better facility was not feasible as the nearest captive facility with CZA recognition (State Museum & Zoo, Thrissur, Kerala) was 82kms away from the locality. There were major risks associated with transportation of the animal considering the health of the animal and the transportation time (to captive facility as well as to the release site later). Moreover, none of the zoos in India houses Nilgiri Tahr. Since very little information was available on the captive



The rescue and release site of Nilgiri Tahr from Walayar

management of Nilgiri Tahr (Pillai 1963; Chandran 1980), keeping the animal in captivity was difficult.

Multiple sites near Walayar hills were searched to release the animal. Two locations were found suitable for Tahr i.e. Kuppalan Challa (10.818889°N & 76.747156°E) and Kottamutti (10.828210°N & 76.781646°E) of which the latter was discarded due to the



Release site of Nilgiri Tahr (Inset image: Nilgiri Tahr after release)

nearness to railway track (100m). The former site was located near the base of the Walayar hills in the forest land, which was 6.7kms away from the site of capture. According to the forest staff Tahr have been spotted in the locality before. The area was largely uninhabited with a stream near the site of release; also a large pond within 1 km distance (Valiyeri).

Indirect evidences of herbivores including elephants, spotted deer and wild boar were found. The site was 2 kms away from the nearest railway track which was a safer distance. Although it would have been better to take the animal up the hill, logistical difficulties in transportation didn't allow it.

On 28 March 2016, the Nilgiri Tahr was released in the proposed site by 08.30hr. The animal remained docile during transportation. Once it was released in the open rocky terrain it climbed the rocks and moved out of sight. Forest staff monitored the movement of the animal immediately after the release. Though after sometime they lost track of the animal, it was found ascending the hill before disappearing.

Apart from the above incident, two other individuals were found stranded in the plains later in the summer of 2016. Both of the animals died during treatment phase, of which one was pregnant and injured by free ranging dogs.

Walayar hills form the Northern border of the Palghat gap. Mostly affected by the drier climate from Tamil Nadu side, the area often records highest temperatures in summer in Kerala. Most of the water bodies dry out during early months of the year. Animals like deer and elephants stray into human habitations especially during summer season

when food and water is scarce. Incidents of elephants knocked down by trains while they attempt to cross the railway tracks were recorded multiple times in the past. Such incidents are seldom recorded in case of smaller mammals. This was the first recorded incident of a Nilgiri Tahr straying into the plains. The animal which was found in the fallow land in the plains crossed two railway lines and the national highway to reach the location, instinctively (for food or water?) or forcibly (chased by free-ranging dogs?).

First recorded incident of a Nilgiri Tahr straying into the plains.

Although, situated in a 'tropical-setting' the Tahr habitat is partially modified into a temperate form at high altitudes (Rice 1988a). These habitats were disturbed in the past to large extent by hydroelectric projects, road networks, coffee and wattle plantations (particularly near Ootacamund), with hunting further endangering Tahr populations across Nilgiris (Willet 1968; Schaller 1970; Rice 1988b). The second largest population of Nilgiri Tahr is in the Nilgiris, north of the Palghat gap with an estimated number of 300 animals in 1969 (Schaller 1970) and around 450 in 1978 (Davidar 1963; Davidar 1978). Nilgiri Tahr population in the Nilgiris is showing a decreasing trend (Sumithran 1997). The increasing incidents of Tahr straying into human habitation demand investigation on the quality of the habitat and the threats faced by Tahr in the landscape. Seasonal analysis of Tahr movement and barriers in their movement should be the focus of future conservation strategies. Moreover, for long term conservation, it is essential to know how the climate change is affecting a species which is a habitat specialist.

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