

The Story of the Elephant Detector

Wildlife research is a career which involves digging deep into the nature and existence of an animal, with a special goal of protecting it from extinction. Wildlife researchers usually choose an animal to dedicate their life's work to. They do this by hypothesising a question on them and then they conduct research to answer those important questions. More often than not, wildlifers brim with stories – stories that go beyond the reach of their research work and revolve around the people whom they encounter during their work.

For the last six years, I have been studying a nocturnal primate - the Malabar Slender Loris. My research takes me to different forests of the Western Ghats, including the Aralam Wildlife Sanctuary, one of my field sites in northern Kerala. The region around my field site is a human-elephant interaction zone. The wild elephants leave the forests, usually at night, and raid the crop fields. They eat the crops, damage houses and sometimes kill the people who try to chase them away. The locals are very scared of the elephants and seldom leave their homes after dark.

When an elephant comes into their fields or houses, the people call the forest department to help chase the

elephants back into the forests.

Sometimes, a few brave men from the village try scaring the elephant back to the forests with noises from bursting fire crackers or by banging plates and metal vessels.

In May 2016, around the jack fruit harvest season, I was in Aralam on fieldwork. Due to brief spells of rainfall, we had frequent short periods of power cuts. I routinely headed into the forest at night to collect data on the lorises. The forest department always got calls from the villagers, requesting them to chase away the elephants. But during this time, the forest department did not find any elephants in that section of the village. The calls increased as days went by, but there were no elephants for about 50% of the time that the forest department came to investigate. The villagers demanded that the forest department put up a 'machan' (an elevated platform mostly on trees, using wood planks) to keep a night watch for the elephants. The forest department was not happy about the demand, as it would cost them quite a lot to hire extra night watchers. However, the forest department eventually gave in and deployed night watchers for five whole nights.

The curious forest department went into the village to investigate how the villagers were so sure of the presence of elephants. To their bewilderment, the villagers said they had an elephant detector, which beeped every time the elephants were near the forest border. The confused forest department officers asked to see this amazing elephant detector. I was in the forest when I got a call and was asked to rush back immediately. When I got back, the people from the village brought the range officer to meet me and to show him my 'elephant detector'. When the range officer realized what it was, he grew annoyed and told me irritably to switch off my 'elephant detector' – my UPS.

As lorises are nocturnal, I would spend most of the nights in the forest. Being a remote sanctuary, Aralam did not have proper electricity facilities. The voltage dropped often, leading to frequent power cuts. I largely depended on the back-up power from my unlimited power source (UPS). The UPS would make a beeping sound every time there was a power cut.

It just so happened that the elephants preferred to move into the village, under the cover of darkness, when there was a power cut. The villagers have keenly observed that the beeping of my UPS coincided with the elephants entering the

villages, thereby dubbing it the 'elephant detector'.

This incident is a testament to the extraordinary ways in which my research work folds into the life of the people around me and how they have affected my work. Even while elephants were a terror to the villagers, they greatly helped me with my work. The elephants terrorised the villagers, keeping them inside their houses after dark. This greatly reduced the villagers' interference with my work and ensured my safety from a few pesky villagers. The movement of the elephants created pathways through the dense foliage, making it easier for me to manoeuvre through the forest in search of the lorises. Their dung kept my lorises well-fed. Since lorises are predominantly insectivorous, they feast on the insects that are attracted to the elephant dung. As long as I respected the elephants' space and did not interfere with their movements, they did not mind my presence in their forests.

It was a good thing that the people of the village accommodated my presence in their homes. Before long, we were working together on a new, cost-effective, wildlife-friendly remedy for the frequent interaction between man and animal – the instalment of lights around their houses

and fields. To combat the problem of frequent power cuts, I helped the villagers to adapt to solar lights. The forest department has also put up solar powered white lights in the paths that were most used by the elephants to get to the village. The villagers have also begun to harvest the jack fruits just before they ripen, to avoid attracting the elephants. The interaction has greatly reduced since in this village. But I left behind the 'elephant detector'... just in case.

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