

## Co-exist or Collapse? Defining the “new normal” existence

The human race has been thriving so successfully (or so we think!) for not so long enough; just as long as a few hundred thousand years. This is apparently a very small time period compared to the much longer period of evolution, and life on Earth. The idea of co-existence is being acknowledged by humans only very recently; since we have exponential growth rate and unfortunately, no natural or more powerful predators as yet. The concept of human-animal interaction has been around since a very long time, but they fail to grab our attention every time, unless it results in severe human fatality.

Once in a while, ‘Avni’ and ‘Sundari’ make the headlines, but are the real issues being discussed? Are we confronting the fact that human population boom has drastically reduced the land available for animals? Large mammals like tiger and elephant prefer to travel long distances and cross human-made boundaries. Spilling numbers, 2,361 humans and 510 elephants were killed in human-animal negative interactions in last five years; over 80 elephants killed every year of which an average of 50 killed by electrocution. Incidents of human-wildlife interactions like the recent elephant killing in Kerala evoked a wave of protest from all across the country. Though human-elephant interaction is one of the most intense

conservation challenges in Asia, the underlying issue is more complicated than we can fathom.

The trend of culling wildlife has been taken up by state governments across India. Animals considered vermin are now being killed irrespective of the consequences they have on a stable ecosystem. The Indian government has already listed the Nilgai (Blue bull- Asia’s largest antelope), Wild Boar and Rhesus Macaque as vermin in the state of Bihar, and Rhesus Macaques as vermin in Himachal Pradesh. The list does not end here, as way back in 2016, the state of Uttarakhand already obtained the permission to kill Wild Boars, West Bengal was seeking permission to kill wild Elephants, Maharashtra and Gujarat were awaiting permission to kill Nilgais, and Goa studying a proposal to make Peafowl a vermin. India has started a mutiny between wildlife and its citizens!

Communities that live close to forests tend to suffer the greatest damage to both livestock and humans, but are the law-making bodies aware of the struggle they go through? Let’s talk about the issue more explicitly now.

Elephants prefer to raid farms and fields since they need less energy for foraging and farmed food are often ‘tastier’ than

those in the wild. Elephants are “nomadic feeders” and tend to travel long distances for food and water, and thus cross human inhabited areas quite a lot. The damage and loss as a result of this interaction are never returned to the farmers. The insurance or remunerations given by the government to the affected parties are meagre compared to the damage. This in turn pressurizes the farmers to build electric fences and snares for animals. Unfortunately, elephants fall prey for these often. The recent elephant killing in Kerala was much publicized news in the national and international media. A bait kept for Wild Boars was mistakenly consumed by the elephant which eventually led to its horrifying death. People responsible for the event were booked, but will the attitude of the communities who continue to live in villages close to the forest change?

Hunting takes a large toll on the elephant population in India. But a significant decline in elephant population is attributed to the habitat degradation and human encroachment including the deaths due to road and rail accidents. Another reason can be the inability of females to find suitable mates. Among Asian Elephants, males have tusks, making them more vulnerable to poaching.

Habitat degradation and fragmentation adds more pressure to this situation. Undisturbed elephant corridors provide safe movement of these gentle giants to move across the fragmented habitats in different parts of the country. Currently,

India has around 101 wildlife corridors, of which many are closely monitored by NGOs. But the question of “Are we doing enough?” still lingers. The idea of “co-existence” needs to be reframed, more animal corridors need to be built, more awareness to be done among the communities that face these challenges, more financial security be given to life and livestock of forest-dwelling communities, and finally adapt and adopt to the “new normal” lifestyle where our wild counterparts are given more chances to live and not intrude into their land which has now become ours too!

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