

Perception Studies on Human–Elephant Interactions in Kodagu



The Zoo Outreach Organisation, in collaboration with Humane World for Animals, initiated perception studies in Kodagu District, Karnataka, under the Human–Elephant Coexistence (HECx) Project in September 2025. During the pilot phase, Ponnampet and Virajpet taluks were identified as the primary study areas.

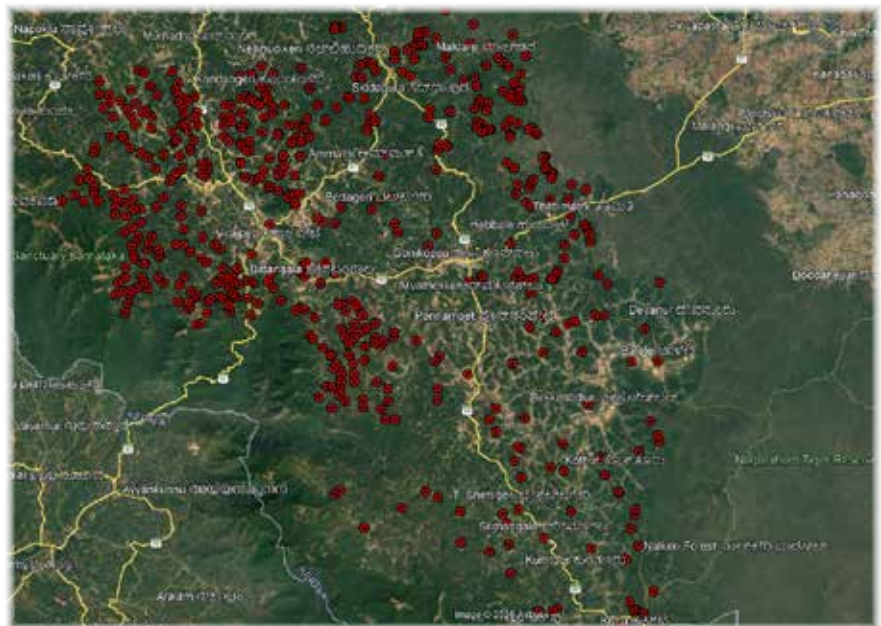
The study aims to understand local perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward elephants and other wildlife, with a particular focus on identifying areas characterized by high, moderate, and low levels of negative human–elephant interactions. The assessment also documents incidents involving human fatalities, injuries, and property damage attributed to elephants, as well as compensation provided by the forest department for crop and plantation losses. In addition, the study seeks to understand community perspectives on the factors driving elephant movement from forest habitats into agricultural and plantation landscapes and to document locally suggested measures for mitigating negative interactions.

During the initial phase of fieldwork, perception interviews were conducted with local residents, plantation owners, plantation

workers, and panchayat representatives.

Data collection was temporarily suspended in December 2025 to accommodate the peak coffee-harvesting season, when community members were heavily engaged in plantation activities. Surveys resumed in April 2026, and by the end of the month, a total of 558 individual perception interviews had been completed.

Human–elephant interactions continue to pose a significant challenge in Kodagu. According to information shared by local communities, negative encounters with elephants resulted in eight human fatalities and several serious injuries within the six months preceding the survey period. Among the documented fatalities, two occurred in Ponnampet Taluk and one in Virajpet Taluk. A substantial proportion of fatal incidents were reported to have occurred during early-morning encounters,



Study area map



Paddy crop damage caused by elephants. © Koshik V Rao



Group discussion on human-elephants negative interactions. © Koshik V Rao



Interview with villager. © Lokesh Manjanerira



Interview with plantation owner. © Lokesh Manjanerira

when people were travelling to work or engaging in routine outdoor activities.

Community members consistently reported that elephant encounters are more frequent during the rainy season. Respondents also stated that the period from April to July coincides with the ripening of mangoes and jackfruits, which attract elephants into plantations and agricultural areas. As a consequence, some plantation owners reported harvesting or removing jackfruits before they ripen in an effort to reduce elephant visitation.

Interestingly, residents in several locations indicated that elephant presence in their areas has become more noticeable only within the past two to three years. This perception suggests that many people may have limited experience living alongside elephants and may lack adequate awareness of elephant behaviour, movement patterns, and appropriate responses during encounters. Such factors may contribute to the increasing number of human injuries and fatalities reported in the region.

An important trend that emerged during the interviews was the substantial decline in paddy cultivation across the study area. More than 85% of respondents who were previously engaged in paddy farming reported having discontinued cultivation. The primary reasons cited were recurrent crop damage caused by elephants, increasing labour shortages, and low market returns for paddy. As a result, many landowners have either left their agricultural lands fallow or converted them into coffee and areca plantations.

Respondents also noted that these land-use changes may be influencing elephant foraging behaviour. Several community members reported that, over the past two years, elephants have increasingly been observed feeding on coffee berries within plantations.

One villager remarked that coffee beans could often be found in elephant dung, suggesting regular consumption of the crop. While such observations require further investigation, they may indicate an emerging behavioural adaptation by elephants to changing agricultural landscapes and food availability.

Another recurring theme raised by respondents concerned the impact of physical barriers on elephant movement. Several community members suggested that fences and other movement obstructions may restrict traditional elephant pathways, forcing animals to seek alternative routes through areas where elephant presence was previously uncommon.

According to respondents, this shift in movement patterns has contributed to the emergence of negative human–elephant interactions in locations that historically experienced little or no elephant activity. Throughout the study, we encountered a wide range of emotions among community members, including fear, frustration, anger, sadness, and uncertainty. While many respondents demonstrated an understanding of the ecological and social factors contributing to human–elephant interactions, the findings highlight the need for sustained community engagement and dialogue to foster long-term coexistence.



Setting Camera Traps. © Thammaiah Chakkera

Based on preliminary field observations, regionally coordinated community workshops, awareness programmes, coexistence-focused interventions, policy support, and habitat restoration initiatives could play an important role in reducing negative interactions between people and elephants. However, it should be noted that these observations are preliminary and are based on field perceptions collected during the survey process. A comprehensive thematic analysis of the data is yet to be completed, and the conclusions presented here should therefore be considered indicative rather than definitive.