

The Menacing Threat of Stray Dogs to Wildlife: A Case Report in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, Kerala

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Since time immemorial Dogs (*Canis familiaris*) have been a trusted companion of human beings and people all over the globe have passionately domesticated dogs as a dependable support in their pursuit of food and safer havens of living. This has gradually led to a situation where they now occupy a prominent space of companionship in human life. Dogs have, more often than not, come to pose themselves as an emotional subject to a vast majority of people. But the menacing and ubiquitous presence of stray dogs in certain areas of Kerala where wildlife is protected and preserved with great efforts has come to pose an all together different matrix of social and ecological issues. Stray dogs generally perpetrate themselves when their owners disown them for various reasons or else when they find an easy escape from their owners. As a result of this they freely and unrestrictedly breed on streets and form themselves into a local population. This breed of local population has now become a major problem on all streets of Wayanad. As such they tend to become a major terrestrial predator in people friendly habitats. However, dogs can significantly disrupt or modify intact ecosystems well beyond the areas occupied by people (Young, 2011). It has come to such a grave situation where stray and feral dogs, as predators and competitors, do pose serious threats to environment and wildlife.

Predation is a natural process that affects wildlife and studies have shown the fatal consequences of stray and feral dogs on biodiversity (Butler and Toit 2002; Butler *et al.*, 2004; Hughes, 2013). In Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary, Tiger, Leopard and Wild Dog (*Cuon*



Fig 1. Barking deer with injuries in head



Fig 2. Barking deer with left hind limb bitten by dogs

alpinus) form the major predators of herbivores. Stray dogs are now found to compete with them for hunting for a prey. Cases of stray dogs hunting down deer have been noted in Wayanad and within a short span of time (one month) four cases of Barking Deer and a case of Mouse Deer hounded by

stray dogs have been reported in the hamlet of Kalpetta in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary alone.

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Fig 3. Dog attacking a bandicoot in Mepadi town



Fig 4 A mouse deer with fore limbs bitten off by stray dogs

As wild species may be easily susceptible to infectious diseases dogs can very well become a fatal agent in spreading diseases to wildlife and it would turn out to be a serious conservational issue. Rabies is the major disease found among the canine population in this area and added to this is the menace of canine distemper. These two problems when compounded becomes a formidable threat to wildlife and the major source of the menace is the population of domestic/feral

dogs in the region (Cleaveland, 2000). Canine distemper has been reported in all families of terrestrial carnivores: Canidae, Felidae, Hyaenidae, Mustelidae, Procyonidae, Ursidae, and Viverridae, it is epidemic and can cause catastrophic decline in population (Deem *et al.*, 2000). It is a serious threat when an endangered species like Tigers get affected by the problem. Leopard's fondness towards dog in its diet has been documented (Edgaonkar and Chellam, 2002)

hence leopard conflicts were more frequently documented in dog populated areas (Athreya and Belsare, 2007). In several cases as the dog becomes the direct prey any infectious disease carried by it could be spread to the leopard community also.

Another channel for the spread of the diseases is the fairly high probability rate of dogs to getting hybridized with wild canid species. Dogs hybridizing with Jackals (*Canis aureus*) are often observed in Wayanad and Kannur Districts of Kerala. Studies have shown that the activity of small mammals was significantly low in dog inhabited areas (Lenth, 2008). Dogs outcompete vultures on wildlife reserve boundaries owing to their high densities, nocturnal and diurnal activity, physical dominance and greater tolerance of human disturbance (Butler, 2002).

On 21st April 2014, two Barking Deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*) fell into a man-made well after being chased by stray dogs near Kalpetta KSRTC Garage. But they were rescued by Ahammed Basheer, an animal rescuer of southern Wayanad Forest Division. But these fugitive animals died soon, one was having deep bite marks in forelimbs, face and neck (Fig-1) and the other was dead due to drowning and stress. Another case of Barking Deer attacked by stray dogs was reported on 25/4/2014 in Rippon, Mepadi-Vaduvanchal road. The animal died mostly due to stress, it also had injuries on its back.

On 2nd May 2014, a group of stray dogs attacked a Barking Deer in Mepadi. The animal was taken to KVASU-Center for Wildlife Studies, Pookode for treatment by the Forest Department Officials. The condition of the animal was so poor that most of the flesh of its left hind limb was bitten off by the dogs (Fig -2). The animal died due to its severe injuries. A pair of stray dogs attacked and killed a

Bandicoot (*Bandicota* sp.) at Mepadi town during the night at about 11.30hrs (Fig-3). All this points to the nocturnal activities of stray dogs which implies small nocturnal animals like rodents and hares to be under the pressure of threat from the feral dog population in the region.

A case of attack on a Mouse Deer (*Moschiola indica*) was reported in Mannivayal (Kalpetta) where the legs of the animal were bitten off by stray dogs and it was reported dead before being given treatment (Fig-4). On 21st May 2014 dogs chased away a Barking Deer and the animal ran off and was found holed up in a bathroom at a house in Chundale. The animal had minor injuries; it was treated and was released back into the forest.

Most of the deer species with minor injurious also die as these animals are more vulnerable to stress. These incidents show the gravity of the threat caused by stray dogs in a small area in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.

Stray dog menace is also a major concern of the people living in the area as they are major cause of rabies. About 20,000 persons die of this disease every year in India and Human rabies continues to be endemic in India (Anon, 2004). Dog bite cases are also on the increase and dogs also host different zoonotic diseases and parasites (Salb, 2008). As far as Wayanad is concern it is a major tourist attraction and the presence of stray and roaming dogs along roadsides and tourist areas seems to create an image of an uncaring society.

To stop this dog menace proper control measures have to be employed early. Destroying dogs in some humane way is the only means to stop stray dog menace. Castrating dogs (Early Neutering in Dogs; Narayanan *et al.* 2012) is another option but their practicability needs to be discussed. Predicides were also

used as an option to control dog population. But the emotional attachment of human beings for their pet dogs is frequently as strong as attachment that one human being has for another; this makes people raise voices to protest against any dog control regulations (Beck, 2002). But sacrificing a few canine pets for the better survival of the ones in the same species may in the long run become beneficial. Hence the Government, veterinarians and NGO's should join their hands to solve this issue. Scientific research and public awareness should be carried out and complete exclusion of dogs from wildlife habitat should be done.

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