

Human – elephant conflict rears up again

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By
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By Risidra Mendis
Ceylon Today Features

A visit to the Yala National Park with no elephants to see! Tourists and locals who visit the Yala National Park may soon have to get used to not seeing elephants if wildlife officials and Forest Department officials don't take quick measures to save the starving elephants from dying. While the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC) and the Forest Department put up fences to protect humans in areas that belong to wildlife the country's elephants are slowly dying due to starvation and lack of nutrition. The relevant authorities who have failed to realize that forest land belongs to the elephants and other animals and not to humans have erected a fence separating forest land from the Yala National Park.

While Forest Department officials have ignored the plight of the starving elephants due to the fence that has come up along Wedihiti Kanda, Divulpatana, Tambarawa, Nimalawa down to Kirinde they have also allowed the villagers to run the show and engage in illegal chena cultivation on forest land.

With the elephant population on the decline it is only a matter of time before the Yala National Park will lose its elephant population due to the irresponsible decisions taken by the Forest Department and the DWLC.

Elephant Researcher Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando says the electric fence constructed in 2001 separating Forest Department land from Block 1 of the Yala National Park continues to result in many elephants dying due to starvation.

"Instead of a fence between the surrounding villages and the Forest Department area to prevent elephants entering the villages, the current fence is in the middle of the forest. One side of the fence belongs to the Forest Department and the other side of the fence belongs to the Wildlife Department (DWLC). The decision to put up a fence like this was taken by the authorities due to public and political pressure. Part of the fence is on the DWLC boundary and part through the Forest Department land. The fence separates Forest Department lands in the areas of Wedihiti Kanda, Divulpatana, Tambarawa, down to Kirinde and also the DWLC's Nimalawa Sanctuary from Yala National Park.

Before the fence came up the elephants used to go to the forest area and return to the Yala National Park. But after the fence came up the elephants were forced to stay within the national park. This is a common thing in Sri Lanka. A lot of our electric fences are like that. The villagers don't live in the DWLC area but in the villages. Nevertheless the forest area is used for chena cultivation. Chena cultivation in this area is illegal because the land belongs to the Forest Department. But chena cultivation creates a very good habitat for the elephants," Dr. Fernando explained.

He added that during the period when chena cultivation is not done the elephants go to the forest area for food and return to the national park. "The fence didn't make much of a difference because some elephants break through the fence and still go out into the villages. Around 150 to 200 elephants used to enter the forest area during the dry season when there are no people engaged in chena cultivation and would go back into the park. People and elephants shared the land at that time. In 2001 two people got killed by wild elephants. The villagers protested and went to the wildlife office in Bambawa and attacked it and then marched to the head office in Yala. DWLC officers shot one villager and he died. In 2001 the forest area was separated to protect the villagers," Dr. Fernando said.

In 2004 Dr. Fernando started tracking a young male elephant Kavan with a GPS satellite collar. "Kavan was using the DWLC area and the forest area. During the wet season Kavan went to the National Park and during the dry season he went to the forest area. But six months after the fence was put up and the elephants were confined to the park I noticed Kavan's herd were all skin and bone. The elephants were starving because they had no food and couldn't return to the forest area.

Two months later the DWLC officers found an elephant stuck in the mud in the Bambawa tank. The elephant was all skin and bone and it was Kavan. He was very weak and couldn't stand up. After he was found in that condition while lying on his side he ate more than 60 kilos of vegetables a day. But

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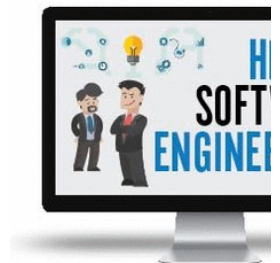
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despite the efforts of the DWLC officers on 2 Sept 2006 Kavan died. He was too far gone and never recovered.

Even though the elephants were separated from the forest area they had a large area to roam in but they stayed in the small area and within their home range and didn't move away from there. Elephants have a strong attachment to their homeland.

These herds didn't want to explore new land. There are others herds in this forest area and it is possible that there wasn't enough food in that area so the herd didn't go there," Dr Fernando explained.

He added that they were also monitoring another herd with about 30 elephants. "We collared another elephant Biso Menike from the herd. This herd used 75% of the forest area inside the national park and used to go to the forest area in the dry zone. After the fence came up the herd was suffering without food and water. Biso Menike had a baby while confined inside the park and the baby died. She had a second baby in Jan 2011. That baby died in 2012. Inside the park many elephants started dying after the fence was put up and the elephants were drawn in and shut inside the national park.

"We found many dead elephants inside the park. This was very unusual. We have also been following Gemunu's herd since 1993.

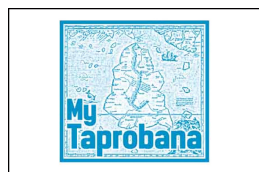
Gemunu's herd has about 30 animals. This herd's home range was within the Yala National Park. They never went out of the park. Gemunu's herd was badly affected by the other herds that were driven into the park and his herd also suffered without sufficient food and water. More than 50% of the babies in Gemunu's herd have also died. Up to 2014, 17 babies from Gemunu's herd had died. This year may also be very bad due to the drought," Dr. Fernando said.

He added that people went to Yala initially to see elephants not leopards and now you can hardly see elephants in the national park. "In 2014 the relevant authorities had discussions with the villagers to move the fence. But the villagers were not happy about moving the fence because they feared that they wouldn't be allowed to engage in their seasonal chena cultivation. Even though the fence has come up the villagers are still having problems with the elephants. When the males become 10 to 15 years old they leave the herd. They are single elephants and cannot be driven away. These lone elephants break through the fence and enter the villages. But the herds that were not causing problems were driven out. Now there is more encroachment taking place and people are trying to permanently settle there. Elephants should be allowed to use this area but chena cultivation should also be done. The relevant authorities have to manage this area. Ideally a fence should be put up near the village without removing the present fence. This problem should be addressed by the Forest Department and not the DWLC," Dr Fernando said.

Environment Lawyer Jagath Gunewardene commenting on the fence coming up on forest land said if the land belongs to the Forest Department they can shift the fence to another location without discussing it with the villagers.

Pix Courtesy Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando

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