



News

Mob-style leopard killing – Lanka’s day of shame

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Outcry for crackdown on kethi-polu wielding offenders

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As right-thinking people cringed at Sri Lanka’s day of shame over the brutal killing of a leopard in Kilinochchi, strident were the calls to the authorities to take stringent action against the perpetrators.



Villagers are seen dragging the battered carcass of the dead leopard

Stern action is the need of the hour, was the overwhelming demand not only from conservationists but also from the public, which gathered momentum with each passing day, since Thursday (June 21) when the horrendous killing of the leopard in Ambalkulam sent shock waves across the country.

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Such a dastardly act must never-ever happen again in Sri Lanka and the message to the perpetrators has to be a red warning that will act as a deterrent against others who may resort to despicable mob violence against any wild animal, numerous sources told the Sunday Times.

The law should come down “fast and hard” on the miscreants, they reiterated, as there were reports of the Kilinochchi Magistrate’s Court on Friday ordering the police to examine video footage of the incident and arrest those involved.

On Thursday, the country saw video footage which went viral of a milling crowd wielding all types of weapons in a frenzy, “murdering” the leopard in cold blood and then showing off their “triumph” by dragging the creature, battered and bruised, here and there. Swinging up the leopard, the mob was wringing its paws, pulling its head hither and there and throwing it up above their heads, all the while capturing the gory scene on mobile phones.

“The leopard had been spotted in the village around 7 in the morning,” said the Director of Wildlife Health, Dr. Tharaka Prasad of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC), when contacted by the Sunday Times.

Explaining that most probably it may have strayed there at dawn and got trapped without an escape route when daylight came, Dr. Prasad said that people had been going near the animal and it had been making runs at them and swinging its paws, most probably because it was very scared, injuring a few. The DWC staff arrived on the scene after about 10 a.m. but had not been able to do anything because of the large, unruly crowd.

A request to the police to disperse the crowd had been futile, while DWC staff attempting to get close to the leopard to tranquillise it had also been injured slightly, sources said, adding that only those from among the taunting and jeering crowd who got very close to the frightened animal got mild injuries. The leopard had been killed around 2 p.m.

“People must not take the law into their own hands. The DWC should have been allowed to carry out its duty of capturing the leopard as deemed necessary,” said Wilderness and Wildlife Conservation Trust (WWCT) Founders, Anjali Watson and Dr. Andrew Kittle whose major focus is the leopard.

They stress that there is no excuse whatsoever that could be used to justify the brutal killing of the leopard. The behaviour of the leopard showed that it was clearly terrified of the lynch mob-style group of humans that surrounded it and clubbed it to death. A leopard will not attack unless provoked, surprised or is cornered and in fear. Had the leopard wanted to, it could have caused more injury in self-defence but it did not and, in turn, was the “sad victim” of a terrible and disturbing crime.

“Sri Lanka has managed to co-exist with its large terrestrial wildlife, including elephants and leopards, for thousands of years. On an island of 65,000 sq. km with a human population of nearly 22 million, this is an impressive feat. It is something about which the nation can be justifiably proud. The reasons underlying this ancient coexistence appear to be

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cultural and religious, with an unconscious conservation ethic intrinsic to the way society operates. But the killing of the leopard in Kilinochchi puts this all to shame,” they add.

“Most disgusting” and “morally reprehensible” are the conduct of the leopard-killers, with the subsequent events of treating the carcass in the most degrading and humiliating manner, being no better, is environmental lawyer Jagath Gunawardana’s scathing criticism.

“It is the first instance that we have witnessed such perverse pleasure exhibited by people in this country and is an example of the low moral standards exhibited by some. It is seen that these elements have derived some sort of perverse pleasure and satisfaction in such behaviour. This reflects a dangerous sadistic streak and should be dealt with severely to prevent it from becoming a pastime. The authorities should investigate this thoroughly, bring the culprits before the law and do their best to ensure that the most severe punishments are meted out to stop this despicable behaviour,” he stressed.



This is not just a conservation issue, but clearly points to the depths to which Sri Lankan society has sunk, said the Chairman of the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR), Dr. Prithviraj Fernando, urging immediate action against the perpetrators.

“While conservation authorities have a duty to bring the culprits to book, this act and others such as the murder of an iconic tusker by a group of leading persons in society for financial gain, skinning alive of an eagle by a group of youth and the increasing use of hakka-patas or jaw bombs are a stark warning of social failure and the rise of intolerance, perversity and anarchy. The law enforcement sector, the government, religious leaders and society at large must condemn such acts and prevent future occurrences for the sake of our society and country,” said Dr. Fernando.

Echoing similar sentiments is the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society (WNPS) of Sri Lanka which urged that the tragedy be addressed promptly, before individuals feel a sense of justification, which in turn breeds a culture of impunity, dragging the country down the road to anarchy.

“It was appalling and worrying to see the triumphalism displayed by people after committing what was a criminal act. Regardless of the circumstances, people cannot take the law into their own hands and destroy endangered animals that have the highest level of statutory protection in the country,” the WNPS said, condemning in the strongest terms the “brutal” killing.

In this light, it said, we see serious lapses on the part of the police, purely based on existing video footage. The rule of law must apply especially when uniformed officers are present. “We urge the government to view what happened on Thursday with due seriousness and bring all parties that were responsible (including state employees) swiftly before the law and facilitate due legal process to take place, free of political interference,” the WNPS added.

Casting light on leopard behaviour, WWCT’s Ms. Watson said that in most instances where a leopard turns on a human in Sri Lanka, it is because it has been surprised at a kill or is protective of cubs. In attempting to make good its escape, it can slash at the intruder causing cuts with its claws or more rarely, teeth.

These incidents are extremely rare, emphasise Ms. Watson and Dr. Kittle, lamenting that the toll on leopards is “far, far higher”. The details of the Kilinochchi incident are still to be clarified and the encounter would not have been pleasant for the herder who was initially surprised by the leopard, albeit in a forest area, and the villagers who encountered it and we must understand their fear. However, what ensued is “simply inexcusable”, they state categorically.

Human-wildlife incidents in Sri Lanka are not uncommon, particularly with regard to elephants and there is a well-known protocol that exists with the DWC prepared to come in and attempt to defuse any such situation. That it can take time to respond is due to logistics and each situation, they state, adding: “It is clear that a mob mentality took hold of the villagers and they took it upon themselves to hunt down this animal and kill it. The video footage of the event is extremely distressing, with a large group, clearly prepared with poles, axes and motor-cycle helmets mercilessly bludgeoning and hacking at the leopard and then parading around with its lifeless, battered body.”

An example of fear, born of ignorance, manifests as mindless rage and bloodlust, then further fuelled by a dangerous mob mentality culminates in a macabre celebration of victory, says Ms. Watson, stressing that it is “truly chilling”.

Both Ms. Watson and Dr. Kittle urge people to imagine for a moment the final, terrified moments of this animal’s life. It is only surprising that more people were not injured as it fought for survival. The savagery of the mob attack is sickening and begs the question of what really happened here.

“That the leopard is an endangered species in Sri Lanka and protected by the highest laws of the land means that this type of vigilante action is not only reprehensible but also quite clearly illegal and the perpetrators must face justice. Living in close proximity to wildlife, especially large animals like elephants and leopards, can be a challenge and should not be

underestimated. It is always easy to cast blame when one is far-removed from such situations. However, the DWC should have been allowed to handle the situation without resorting to this sort of vigilantism,” they add.

Quoting Mahatma Gandhi who says: “The ‘greatness’ of a nation can be judged by the way its animals are treated,” it is Dr. Fernando of the CCR who urges everyone to look deep within.

The leopard-killing has thrown a black cloud over Sri Lanka – the country certainly does not seem to be moving towards greatness, but sliding and slithering down to the murky depths of cruel inhumanity.

The final hours of agony

From the beginning, the brutal crowd, jeering and taunting, armed with kethi, pihi, udalu, polu, swords and pick-axes, was going for the kill.....there simply was no hope or mercy for this young male leopard which many believe had strayed, by chance and was not a threat to anyone. Its fate was sealed. Scared, the leopard which was about three years old, was hiding in scrub jungle close to a palu tree in Ambalkulam about four kms from Kilinochchi town, the Sunday Times learns, when attempting to reconstruct the tragedy.

The thicket was an abandoned field, next to which was a brinjal plot and there ruminating (chewing cud) without fear, lay a Jersey cow, unharmed by the leopard.

When the DWC officers arrived at the spot, the police were already there. The crowd was huge, close to about 200 people who were wielding weapons, the Sunday Times understands.

The paw-prints of the hapless leopard had led the crowd to it, which forced it out by throwing clubs and rocks into the thicket. It was then that the leopard leapt out, ran along a gravel road and got into a manioc plot, with the crowd in hot pursuit.

Many questions arise – how did the leopard stray from the jungle, bypassing two villages to come to Ambalkulam? If it was in search of prey, why did it not pounce on the cow? If it was really wild, why did it not kill or severely injure a human and flee from the village? Was it a domesticated leopard, illegally ofcourse which was used to humans and died at the very hands of humans?

The swipes with its paws came only when humans got too close and seem more like defensive action, sources said.

The Sunday Times learns that even though there had been many pleas by the DWC to disperse the crowd, the police had apparently been unable to do so, with the crowd turning on the DWC too. When the DWC attempted to tranquillise the leopard by darting it, a few men had already crept into the manioc plot, tailing the leopard and there were fears of the darts hitting the humans. As the DWC could not carry out its duties, the officers who included an injured person, had left to lodge a police complaint about obstruction of duty and also treatment for the injured.

There is a belief that the villagers had later dragged the leopard out of the manioc plot with a heavy chain-saw used for cutting down trees, bludgeoning it to death. thereafter.

Killing a 'Strictly Protected Species' is a serious offence

The leopard is a Strictly Protected Species of mammal, according to Section 30(2) of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance (FFPO). Hence, it is an offence to kill, injure or harm any leopard or use any weapon or other implement to commit any of these offences, said environmental lawyer Jagath Gunawardana, turning to the law. Offenders can be punished with fines or jail terms or both. According to him, all such offences are cognizable and, therefore, the culprits can be arrested without a warrant. In addition, these are all deemed to be non-bailable offences. This animal has been subjected to cruelty and put to death in a most horrendous manner. Thus, it is possible to take action under the provisions of the Cruelty to Animal Ordinance, in addition to the FFPO. Since a lot of people were acting with the intention of killing this animal, all offenders can be charged with all these offences as it is clear they had a common intention as stated in Section 32 of the Penal Code, he said.

Pointing out that it has been reported that some of the people obstructed the activities and even assaulted some of the DWC officials who went to the village, Mr. Gunawardana explains that this is the use of force to obstruct the duties of officers. "These culprits need to be identified and action taken under the provisions of the Penal Code. They may be liable to be prosecuted as being part of an unlawful assembly too."

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