

Elephants at Risk

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Elephants at Risk : Poaching, Policy, and Protection

Context:

A recent poaching incident in Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu has triggered fresh concerns over the **illegal wildlife trade**, particularly involving **elephant tusks**. This case underscores the ongoing vulnerability of wild elephants, despite improved conservation outcomes in recent years.

What is Elephant Poaching?

- **Poaching** refers to the **illegal hunting or capturing of wild animals**, usually for commercial gain.
- In the case of elephants, poaching is driven by demand for:
 - Ivory (elephant tusks) used in ornaments, jewellery, and traditional medicine, particularly in Asian markets.

• Live capture for use in tourism, entertainment, or exotic pet trade.

• Other body parts for unregulated medicinal or cultural uses.

Current Status of Elephant Poaching in Tamil Nadu

• As per the **Elephant Death Audit Framework** of Tamil Nadu:

• Poaching accounts for less than 1% of all elephant deaths since 2010.

• However, it still constitutes **7.5% of all unnatural deaths**.

• Recent incidents suggest that **poaching networks** may be **reactivating**, especially as elephant numbers recover.

Elephant Population Trends in Tamil Nadu

- 2012: Elephant population was over 4,000.
- 2017: Declined to **below 2,800**.
- 2024: Rebounded to 3,000+, according to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).
- This rebound indicates improved habitat protection and enforcement measures.

Distribution and Conservation Status of Elephants in India

- Species: Asian Elephant (Elephas maximus) India's largest terrestrial mammal.
- 60% of the global Asian elephant population is found in India.
- Major regions:

Southern India, Northeast India, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Ut<mark>tarakh</mark>and, Uttar Pradesh.

• Legal and Conservation Status:

• IUCN: Endangered.

• Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: Schedule I species — highest level of legal protection.

Key Concerns and Challenges

1. Resurgence of Poaching Activity

• The Dharmapuri case signals possible reactivation of **illegal wildlife trade networks**.

2. Investigation and Reporting Gaps

• The Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB) in 2019 noted major lapses in poaching investigations across several forest divisions.

3. Underreporting

• Official records may **underestimate** poaching, as many cases go undetected or unprosecuted.

4. Habitat Vulnerability

• Forest patches like **Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve** are **ecologically sensitive** and easily exploited by poaching gangs due to **forest connectivity**.

Government Initiatives for Elephant Conservation

1. Project Elephant (1992)

• Launched by the **MoEFCC** to protect elephants, conserve their habitats, and manage human-elephant conflict.

MIKE Programme (Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants)

• Under CITES, tracks poaching trends to shape global conservation responses.

3. Elephant Corridors

- **Identified and protected** across India to ensure **safe migration** and reduce conflict with humans.
- 4. Gaj Yatra Campaign

 \circ Nationwide awareness campaign for **coexistence** and celebration of elephants.

5. Elephant Reserves

• **33 notified reserves** in India for long-term conservation efforts.

What Lies Ahead?

- Institutional Reforms:
 - Establish clear protocols for investigating wildlife deaths.
 - Promote transparency and fix accountability gaps.
- Capacity Building:
 - **Upskill field staff** for better monitoring, enforcement, and evidence collection.
- Legal Strengthening:
 - Protect enforcement officials from **political or criminal pressures** during poaching investigations.
- Inter-State Coordination:
 - Collaborate with **neighbouring states** to dismantle cross-border poaching and trade **networks**.
- Public Confidence & Monitoring:

• Reopen past unresolved cases.

• Encourage community involvement and regular population monitoring.