

Human elephant conflict at the bordering villages of the Udawalawe national park

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This research was undertaken to study the Human Elephant Conflict (HEC) in the villages bordering the Udawalawe national park with the support of the Rufford small grant. The purpose of this report is to obtain special attention to the HEC in the areas such as Dahaiyagala, Pokunuthanna, Aluthwawa and Neraluwa to take immediate action to ameliorate the threats to lives of the villagers in those areas. We base our recommendations on years of research experience on studying elephants, as well as experience of working with the villagers of the area. We hope this report will be useful at a critical time in HEC mitigation in Sri Lanka.

Most of the lands in Pokunuthanna, Dahaiyagala, Aluthwewa, Neraluwa and other areas have tree houses to protect both the lives of the villagers and the crops from the elephants (pictures 1). Elephants break the electric fence often (picture 2) to enter the villages.



Incidences of crop raiding are recorded in all the villages – Pokunuthanna, Neraluwa, Aluthwewa and Dahaiyagala. The male - [m155] - is becoming a real threat not only for crops but also for the villagers as he has been habitually raiding crops very frequently. It seems [m155] is not concerned about the presence of humans and roam along the villages even during the day time disturbing villagers' day to day activities (Plate 1). The elephant was observed in the early morning on 26th of June 2014 by the road near the Dahaiyagala temple. There were many people who were on their way to work but had to wait for hours till the elephant moved away.





Plate 1: [M155] was blocking the road and frightened villagers

Protection of crops in the fields and home gardens is an everyday battle for the villagers. Though the villagers guard their crops during day and night (plate 2), it is hard to protect their crops from elephants.



Plate 2: villagers guard their crops from wildlife during the day and night

Usually, farmers store the harvest (rice) in their houses. Villagers have to struggle to protect their home gardens and harvested crops from the elephants each night during the post harvesting period. Elephants not only raid home gardens but also smash houses in search of stored rice (plate 3).





Plate 3: A house completely destroyed by some raiding elephants

Villagers said that the residents of the above house had not been in the house at the time of smashing as they were in the village hospital getting treatment for their only child. The elephants (three or four) had been raiding the home garden destroying more than 150 matured banana plants, 8 coconut trees and some other vegetable and fruit plants for consecutive three or four nights. It is said that, the number of raiders had increased every night starting with two elephants at the first night and four elephants by the third day.

The number of crop raiders in the Dahaiyagala village escalated during the month of May. We observed eight elephants on the night of 27th May and six elephants on the 28th night entering the village. We could see that elephants had been all over the village and destroyed young paddy, mango and coconut trees and most of home gardens in the area (plate 4) the following day.



Plate 4: Banana, Manioc, a Mango tree and some coconut trees in a paddy land destroyed by elephants.

The incidences of breaking the electric fence of the park also had escalated during last few years (plate 5).



Plate 5: Fallen posts of the park electric fence.

Villagers are fed up with this noisome elephant problem and very hostile even to us. However, we have been trying hard to build a good rapport with the villagers getting them involved in different conservation and community activities.



Plate 6: Talking to villagers about human wildlife conflict and conservation.

I was invited by the chief incumbent of the Dahaiyagala temple to participate in the members' committee meeting of the temple to talk about the elephant problem and discuss some palatable

actions for this escalating and challenging crisis (plate 7). There were many villagers who criticized some government authorities and the political leaders complaining that nobody cares about their properties or lives. They were considering a protest campaign in the near future if the authorities won't pay their attention on HEC of the area.



Plate 7: Members' committee meeting at the Dahaiyagala temple

Human elephant conflict is not a problem which can be irradiated by a simple solution as it is a major social, economical and an environmental problem in the country. Mitigation of HEC needs a very carefully planned series of actions and may take long time. Here, I suggest a few simple and cost effective actions as initial actions to ameliorate the severity of the problem:

- Fix 6 street lamps at the entrance and the exit of the Dahaiyagala corridor (at Welioya – Thanamalwila main road) and at the Pokunuthanna entrance of the corridor.
- Re-establish the function of the guard rooms at the entrance to and the exit of the Dahaiyagala corridor (at Welioya – Thanamalwila main road).
- Re-establish the function of the electric spring gate at the entrance and the exit of the Dahaiyagala corridor (at Welioya – Thanamalwila main road).
- Recruit villagers to maintain the electric fence of the Udawalawe national park and the Dahaiyagala sanctuary.