

Bridging the Gap

Wild Seve, a unique initiative is successfully converting human-wildlife conflict to timely compensation and fostering tolerance in the villages around key reserve areas of Karnataka.

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At 1450 m, the Himavad Gopalaswamy Betta is the highest peak in Bandipur National Park

Bandipur and Nagarhole National Parks in Karnataka are among India's premier tiger reserves and part of the Nilgiri Biosphere, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Teeming with tigers, leopards, dholes, elephants and other wildlife, these parks exemplify India's fight to conserve its remaining iconic wildlife and magical wild places.

LIVING WITH THE WILD

People living close to these wildlife reserves encounter many adventures and challenges. Manu, a young farmer from Devarayashettipura near Bandipur, laughingly recounts developing a fever after rushing out of his home to chase a wild

GREEN GAME CHANGERS

In 2012, the Indian government recorded 78,656 conflict incidents from 18 states with more than 36,000 cases occurring from Karnataka alone. Of these, incidents of crop loss and property damage (around 57,714 across India and 34,576 in Karnataka) and livestock depredation (around 15,757 across India and 1269 in Karnataka) far exceeded cases of human injury or death (around 5185 across India and 246 in Karnataka). For these incidents, India paid an amount of ₹35,681,504 or approximately \$5.3 million as compensation – one of the lowest expenditures compared to several other countries. A paper by K Karanth, Gupta and Vanamamalai on this issue is under publication in the journal *Biological*



Several farmers, even those with small land holdings, hire labourers to work in their fields. Women labourers typically earn half of what their male counterparts do

pig – a persistent visitor on his field – only to find an elephant instead! While families around reserves encounter charismatic species such as elephants or big cats, these encounters sometimes result in conflict, including, taking a toll on their crops, property or life. Repeated conflicts may in turn lead to retaliation against the animal or the forest department. Nestled between the Omkar range of Bandipur, the Nanjanagud social forest and the Nugu reservoir, Manu's village is particularly prone to conflict. Few years ago, predation of livestock in the village led to poisoning of two leopards by locals, souring relations between the village and the forest department – relations that remain tenuous to this day.

Conservation. Human-wildlife conflict is a complex issue with no single solution. Compensation for affected families offers one, post hoc measure to alleviate the loss suffered, at least partially, and perhaps build tolerance towards wildlife. Our research in 17 sites across India revealed that while a majority of the families living around such reserves suffered conflict, very few actually sought, and received, the government mandated compensation.

HELPLINE TO THE RESCUE

We launched Project Wild Seve (www.wildseve.org) in July 2015 with support from the Wildlife Conservation Society, Centre for Wildlife Studies, Oracle, National Geographic Society, Prince



Nanjundappa's saplings are usually destroyed by peacocks. In a remarkable display of awareness and tolerance, he lets them be due to the bird's beauty and designation as the national bird of India. It is this tolerance that Wild Seve seeks to nurture and build

Bernhard Nature Foundation and The Rufford Foundation. It is a toll-free helpline manned by field staff that helps affected families claim compensation.

Armed with smartphones, our trained field staff respond to calls placed on the helpline within 24 hours. They handhold affected families through the entire process of filing and receiving compensation from the government. This involves documenting the loss or damage, verifying claims and the claimant's ownership of the property in question and submitting the required documentation – which varies from range to range – to the forest department. They work closely with local forest department officials and pursue every claim until compensation is deposited in the claimant's bank account.

FROM CONFLICT TO COMPENSATION

Nanjundappa, a marginal farmer in Chennamallipura, was walking home from his field one evening when he ran into a wild pig and sustained injuries to his leg. In Doddabargi village, Mahadevamma's accidental encounter with a tiger while picking cotton resulted in severe injuries to her arm and



Nanjundaswamy from Ballurahundi in Bandipur, at 44 calls, is one of the highest callers at Wild Seve. Case histories and data collected over the years help identify vulnerable families and villages.

GHANSHYAM/CWS



A trip through this landscape reveals several mitigation measures including fencing, nets and typically, machans. Keeping watch in the night is indispensable for the farmers but the stress and lack of sleep often affects them psychologically as well



Mubarak, with the livestock shed that Wild Seve helped build behind him. In the past, he was unable to claim compensation for several of his sheep due to inability in locating the carcass

PRIYADARSHINI/CWS



Wild Seve helped Kalanayaka from Berambadi build a predator-proof livestock shed. These are typically built with bricks or cinder blocks which the farmer has to provide, while Wild Seve sources the grills and roof. Wild Seve is now looking at alternative and affordable materials that can build equally strong sheds



In Naganapura, field coordinator Chikkaningaiah manages an irate group frustrated by delays in receiving compensation

PRIYADARSHINI/CWS

back. For such individuals experiencing trauma from chance encounters, Wild Seve steps in promptly to document and file their claims – a task furthest from their minds during treatment or recovery yet key to securing compensation. Over time, Wild Seve's promptness has built enormous faith and trust among people living next to these reserves.

Satheesh, also from Devarayashettipura, shares how he was forced to seek out the forest department in the middle of the night to drive away a herd of elephants from his field. Despite several frantic calls, the department's number had been unreachable. Such delays or lack of response tend to increase anger and animosity that conflict situations engender. For an understaffed department already saddled with the formidable task of protecting forests and wildlife, prioritisation becomes imperative. Wild Seve offers a crucial bridge between village and forest department with its quick response and assistance.

The helpline is toll-free and service is at zero cost to the families. There are no transaction costs; Wild Seve bears all expenses associated with documenting damage and travelling to file and pursue claims. In the past, such costs discouraged claimants from applying for compensation. Claimants are spared the logistics too. Having chased claims from one range office to another due to jurisdictional confusion, Chandrashekhar from M C Tholalu is relieved to have someone else take over. Wild Seve also allays opportunity costs; particularly helpful for marginal farmers like Nanjundappa and Nagaraju from

For Veluswamy and his neighbours, Wild Seve has also come to mean fairness and transparency. Earlier, due to lax verification by an overwhelmed forest department, bogus claims slipped through. Moreover, the department awarded compensation based on broad estimation rather than actual damage. With Wild Seve, damage is recorded immediately and a claim is registered for each verified incident. Earlier, time frame was another counterproductive aspect. Compensation typically took more than a year to arrive, leading to frustration and incidents where locals locked up officials in their office! Wild Seve has supplemented the department's efforts to reduce timeframe which now stands reduced by more than half. Most claims are filed within a week of the incident although there is no prescribed time in the policy.

FOOT SOLDIERS OF WILD SEVE

A network of dedicated staff support Wild Seve. Given the requirement of language and knowledge of terrain, they are recruited from local villages. Attending calls and handling claims is often an arduous task requiring them to traverse tough terrain and bad roads, covering over a hundred kilometres a day, especially during high conflict seasons, and carefully navigate charged atmospheres that human injury or death or livestock predation often entail.

Being on the frontline means these warriors face appreciation and brickbats for delays by the department equally. Field staff members Mahadevswamy, Santhosh and Chikkaningaiah recall the initial year when they also faced local ire usually reserved for the forest department. Each member has contributed to allay this initial suspicion and anger through perseverance, in turn building trust. Farmers now approach staff to report pug marks or other signs of wildlife in their farms so the animals may be safely escorted home – a sign of growing tolerance as well.

NEXT STEPS

So far, Wild Seve has attended and assisted in more than

10,000 calls and almost 6000 families have received more than 1.6 crore rupees in compensation. Detailed documentation has built individual and region-wise case histories. Scientific analysis of data collected over the years has helped to create a spatial understanding of conflict hot spots – identifying the most vulnerable people and places. This, in turn, enables effective allocation of Wild Seve resources for better coverage.

Wild Seve has also begun to assist families affected by repeat cases of livestock predation by helping build predator-proof livestock sheds. Wild Seve provides the design and partial financial support while affected families leverage existing funds from panchayat schemes to complete the sheds. Mubarak from Bankahally lost several sheep to leopards over the years. After inception, he has filed three claims through Wild Seve, receiving ₹2000 so far. More importantly, since building the livestock shed with Wild Seve's assistance, he has not lost any sheep. Or any sleep, he exclaims with relief. Wild Seve has so far helped build 42 predator-proof livestock sheds. Wild Seve has also transitioned from pen and paper model to an online system that enables robust data collection and processing, enhancing its scalability manifold.

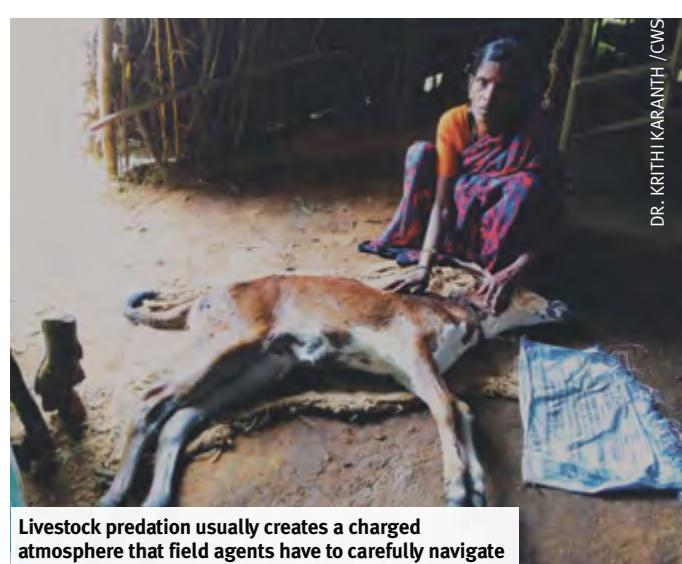
Initiated as a pilot, Wild Seve is now entering its fourth year of operation. It serves more than 600 villages and settlements around Bandipur and Nagarhole today, plugging crucial gaps in the compensation process so that families around these parks receive compensation in the shortest time possible and nurture tolerance towards wildlife around them. Moreover, scientific analysis of the data collected through the project offers an invaluable opportunity for predictive risk analysis that can facilitate targeted deployment of scarce resources to effectively handle human-wildlife conflicts. Through constant learning and improvisation, Wild Seve now offers an adaptable and scalable model that can be replicated across other wildlife reserves to conserve conflict-prone iconic wildlife and assist affected people.

For more details, contact wildseveindia@gmail.com



ANUBHAV/VANAMAMALA/CWS

Swami from Macchur in Nagarhole sustained extensive property damage by elephants



DR. KRITHIKARANTH /CWS

Livestock predation usually creates a charged atmosphere that field agents have to carefully navigate