

'Humans treat animals like slaves, taking even their flesh from them — speciesism boosts this'

Peter Singer is Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University. Speaking to Srijana Mitra Das at Times Evoke, he discusses animal suffering — and why humans cause this:

How do you define speciesism — and is this linked to the current environmental crisis?

Speciesism is an attitude of bias or prejudice against beings who are not members of our species. This also works sometimes against some beings whom we favour over others, such as dogs and cats who we prefer over pigs or chickens. This attitude does have environmental significance because it means we give less consideration to the interests of free-living animals in their natural habitat than to members of our own species — we are far more ready to cut down forests or bulldoze land for our purposes without giving weight to the interests of animals living there.

Why do we victimise non-human animals?

For very long, humans have victimised those they regard as 'others' — they have made war against them, enslaved them, denied them all kinds of rights. I think a self-interested attitude drives this behaviour where we see some as 'us' and others as different and regard the latter as 'things' which we can use for our own purposes. This has happened with people of different races who have been colonised or enslaved. It also happens with other species. At least, at some level, we now recognise that slavery, colonialism and racism are wrong — but we do not yet recognise this with regard to other species. We don't have universal declarations of the rights of animals.

Animals eat animals in nature's food chain — in 'Animal Liberation', why do you write humans eating animals is problematic?

Firstly, we have the capacity to make choices about what we eat — humans are omnivores and can be very healthy as vegetarians or vegans. A tiger simply



BATTERED: Battery chickens cannot stand



BORN FREE — BUT CRUELTY AWAITS THEE: All animals are made to live free lives but humans ensure many non-human beings live in cages and end in slaughterhouses

cannot live without eating other animals. Also, environmentally, we have developed this immense technological ability to change the entire planet — we burn massive amounts of fossil fuels and are altering Earth's atmospheric balance. We deforest huge tracts of land — other animals don't have the ability to change planetary systems in the way we are doing.

Our speciesism and preying on other animals is much more significant than predators existing in nature.

Critics argue if eating sentient animals, who can feel suffering and enjoy life, is wrong, so is eating plants which are similar — what is your view?

I do not believe plants are sentient in this way. Plant species do not have the same kind of nervous system or the capacities animals have, so there is no strong reason to argue they are sentient thus. However, even if plants were so, consider how, when we put animals into factory farms for our food, we have to feed them. This involves growing plants and animals need many times the number of plants humans would need if we were to eat plants directly. Cows up for slaughter need to be fed ten times the food value that we get out of them — so, by eating plants directly, we'd actually be destroying far fewer of their numbers than growing them to feed the animals that we then eat.



entire system is geared towards extracting a 'product' out of them as cheaply as possible — their welfare is neglected entirely.

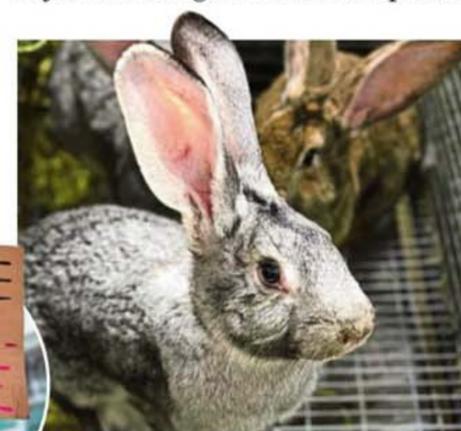
These animals live their entire lives indoors, bereft of sunshine or fresh air; crowded into tiny cages which are completely unsuitable and made very vulnerable to diseases, in addition to the pain and fear they undergo. We need to think about these factors linked to eating meat — nearly all the meat eaten globally now comes from these factory farms. This is as true of India as of the United States, Europe and Australia, particularly for chickens and pork.

You used the word 'commodity' — are there parallels to slave labour in the way we treat animals today?

Absolutely. There is no doubt that these animals are enslaved and treated as objects for our gain. In chicken produc-

What should we know about how animals for slaughter are treated in order to make an informed choice?

The question here is not just slaughter where, of course, animals suffer greatly, both being transported to slaughterhouses and in the process of being killed when they go through agonising pain. But they also suffer greatly when they are raised in confinement in factory farms. Here, they are crowded indoors in sheds and cages, closeted together in huge numbers, treated as commodities and not beings with lives. There is no interest taken in whether they should be living a natural life or have any conditions which suit their well-being. The

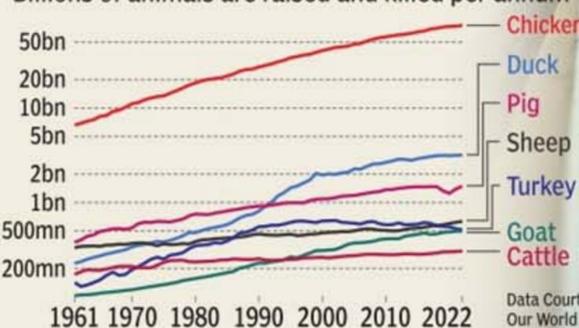


USE YOUR CHOICE: Animal testing is used even to make shampoo and paint

tion, if a producer has 5,00,000 birds in captivity, there is no interest paid to any individuals. If a bird falls sick, none of these producers is likely to call in a vet to help them — that would not be economical for them. They will let the bird

SNACKS, MEALS, LIVES: AS GREED GROWS

Billions of animals are raised and killed per annum



COOLER TYPES

Some of the world's most famous people have advocated the rights of non-humans. The writer **George Bernard Shaw** lived for over 70 years as a vegetarian, apparently writing how, 'We are the living graves of murdered beasts' and wondering why feasts full of animal dishes don't make us think of their right to savour life. Known as an acerbic wit, Shaw also quipped, '**Animals are my friends... and I don't eat my friends.**'



Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, aka **Mahatma Gandhi**, led India's freedom movement against the British Raj. A great exponent of 'ahimsa', Gandhi, who patterned himself on millennia of sages, believed in **non-violence — and vegetarianism**. He joined vegetarian movements as a student in Britain and **shunned meat for health and peace**, saying, "The most violent weapon on earth is the table fork."



In 1955, **Rosa Parks**, an African-American woman, refused to give up her bus seat for a White person. This sparked off the **US civil rights movement**. Parks also advocated **vegetarianism** — her leadership thus united many strands of empathy, seeking **human equality to animal rights**



Research: Smithsonian Magazine, CNN, Encyclopaedia Britannica, BBC, London Review of Books

suffer and perish. These animals are indeed slaves, raised for the flesh, milk and eggs we take away from them.

Why do human beings find it so difficult to accept that we are all animals?

We like to make this gulf between ourselves and other animals — we like thinking we are special. There are parallels with earlier times when people thought humans were the centre of the universe and the sun revolved around Earth. Our pride is boosted by imagining we are superior to other beings. We consider ourselves spiritual, with reflections of the divine, as many religious traditions suggest, when, in fact, we are animals who have evolved from earlier stages. All other animals are like us, part of nature, each holding the capacity to suffer and enjoy life — if only we will let them.

3,200 trees to be felled for Guwahati ring road

800 metres of road to pass through Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary

RITURAJ BORTHAKUR

GUWAHATI, May 17: Some 3,200 trees will be cut for construction of the ambitious Guwahati ring road, a project that may have serious environmental consequences for the State capital region.

Official sources said that the enumeration of the trees is being done currently along the proposed road at Khana-para, Jorabat, Sonapur, Chandrapur, etc. Around 450 trees are proposed to be felled inside Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary alone.

The proposal is to use 7.12 hectares of forest land in Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary and 44.60 hectares of non-forest land in the eco-sensitive zone of the sanctu-



File photo

ary. Around 800 metres of the road would pass inside 50 metres of the sanctuary.

The State Government has told the

National Wildlife Board that an animal passage plan has been prepared in consultation with the State Forest Department, scientists of the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and the Ministry of Road Transport & Highways.

The animal passage plan includes two underpasses of over 200 metre span and one bridge of over 150 metre span and height of 8 metres and nine box culverts.

The Standing Committee of the wildlife board has directed a comprehensive study by the WII or any other relevant agency to assess the potential impact of the project, particularly on the movement paths of elephants and other mitigation measures.

» SEE PAGE 2

3,200 trees ...

(Contd from page 1)

The committee also said that widening of the existing highway from Basistha to Jorabat section will have to integrate construction of at least a 4-km elevated road from Jorabat towards Sonapur in order to restore the traditional elephant corridor connecting Amchang sanctuary with Marakdola Reserve Forest and Aprikola Reserve Forest and beyond.

Stating that no adverse impact should be caused to wild animals and their habitat, the board also directed that minimal tree felling should be done in the forest land. The board has also sought a human-elephant conflict mitigation plan and wildlife conservation plan.

Around 55 km of the proposed road from Baihata Chariali to Sonapur via Kurua will be greenfield and comprise a 3-km-long 6-lane bridge from Kurua to Tintukura (Narengi). In the last couple of years, over 8,000 trees were cut for developmental projects in and around Guwahati, despite concerns and rising adverse impact on the city's climate and environment.

3-day synchronised elephant census in southern states from May 23

BOSKY KHANNA @Bengaluru

AN elephant census in the border areas of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Telangana, and Andhra Pradesh will be held from May 23 to 25. While the elephant census is usually held for an entire forest patch once every five years, this time it will be held only in the border areas of the southern states.

“The exercise aims to understand the area, the conflict and

chalk out better policies for better coordination and future planning. This is the first time such an exercise is being carried out. It is the outcome of the inter-state coordination committee meeting held in March 2024 in Bandipur Tiger Reserve,” said a senior Karnataka Forest Department official. The inter-state meeting was held after a radio-collared tuskless male (makhana) killed a man in Wayanad, Kerala. The

makhana was radio-collared by Karnataka forest officials after it was captured in Hassan. In the meeting, an Interstate Coordination Committee Charter 2024 was prepared to foster collaboration for human-animal conflict mitigation. The charter was signed by chief wildlife wardens and heads of forest departments of Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu on March 10, 2024. The charter listed five sections for implementation,

one of them included population estimation exercises.

Earlier in 2022–23, Karnataka had taken the lead for southern states elephant estimation reports, which showed that Karnataka topped the charts, housing 6,395 elephants. The report, Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) Population Size and Structure Estimates for Karnataka-Interim Report, August 2023, also quoted that there has been an increase in the popula-

tion by 346 since 2017.

“This census exercise will be limited to only the bordering areas to identify conflict areas and chalk out better solutions. On the first day (May 23), the block count will be done, the transect method will be done on May 24, and the waterhole count will be done on May 25. Radio-collared elephants will also be tracked. Only the wild ones will be tracked and assessed, not those in captivity. The all-India

elephant assessment will be done later on a large scale,” the official added. In Karnataka, the exercise will be done in Kolar, Bannerghatta National Park, Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, MM Hills (all bordering Tamil Nadu), Bandipur Tiger Reserve (bordering Tamil Nadu and Kerala), Nagarahole Tiger Reserve (bordering Kerala), and all three divisions of Kodagu. The other forest divisions of the state are not included in this exercise.

Anti-rhino poaching strategies discussed at 2nd task force meeting in Kaziranga

KAZIRANGA, May 17: The second meeting of the Anti-Rhino Poaching Task Force was held on Thursday at Kaziranga to review the existing rhino protection measures, forest-police co-ordination, deployment of existing Forest Protection Forces, and strengthening of the intelligence networks.

Sharing details of the meeting, Sonali Ghosh, Director of Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve said, "The key agenda of the meeting was to review the existing rhino protection measures, forest-police co-ordination, deployment of existing Forest Protection forces, and strengthening of the intelligence networks."

Presentations were made by Forest and Police officials from the 4 Rhino-bearing areas.

The Task Force made several crucial recommendations to bolster anti-poaching efforts, particularly in light of the increasing rhino population.

With the increase in the Rhino population due to concerted efforts of the

Government of Assam, Rhinos are increasingly venturing into newer areas, including Bura Chapori and Majuli, as seen over the last 2 years.

The Task Force recommended that the vulnerability of the newer areas be mapped and measures identified, including the setting up of forest camps and patrol routes," Sonali Ghosh said.

The Task Force also recommended including additional members in the Committee - IGP (CR, NR, ER), DFOs from Nagaon, Golaghat, and Jorhat territorial divisions and the Commandants of the Assam Forest Protection Force) for greater co-ordination and strengthening of the surveillance.

The Director of Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve also stressed the importance of conducting regular meetings in all rhino-bearing areas in district areas.

"Regular co-ordination meetings in all rhino-bearing areas were recommended to be conducted at the

district level to increase operational capabilities," Sonali Ghosh said.

The meeting concluded with a vote of thanks to all stakeholders for their unwavering commitment to protecting Assam's wildlife.

The meeting was chaired by Harmeet Singh, Special DGP and senior police officials, including IGPs (STF) and (CR), SPs of Rhino bearing areas and senior forest officials, including Field Director Kaziranga and other directors and DFOs.

Known for its one-horned rhinoceros population, Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The park also houses a significant number of Bengal tigers, making it a tiger reserve. Other animals you can spot here include elephants, wild water buffaloes, and various species of deer. Kaziranga offers a plethora of activities for nature and wildlife lovers including elephant safaris, nature walks and jeep rides. (ANI)

Assault most foul for kindness to animals



HIRANMAY KARLEKAR

The man who savagely assaulted a young girl who was feeding stray dogs in Delhi must receive exemplary punishment

According to a report in the *Free Press Journal*, a young girl, Manisha Solanki, who feeds 150 stray dogs daily, was abused, harassed, beaten with a stick and left bleeding and crying in pain in Raghbir Nagar in North Delhi on May 14, 2024. The man, who reportedly attacked her, works in a roadside shop. He is also said to have savagely attacked the dogs who were quietly and peacefully eating the food she had brought. At least one dog was severely injured as the stick had nails attached to it.

The police, who have lodged an FIR following a complaint by the girl's father, need to follow up the matter vigorously and ensure that exemplary punishment is handed out to the culprit. The report that the stick had nails attached to suggest indicates that the intention was not just to hit but cause the maximum amount of pain. Also, the report that Manisha Solanki was doing no more than pleading with the man not to attack the dogs who were just peacefully eating, suggests that the person is utterly vicious by disposition. Such men are a threat to society and have to be regarded as such by the police. This is not the first incidence of its kind. In July, 2021, a 28-year-old woman was assaulted in East of Kailash by a mother-daughter duo. For the same reason, a woman was savagely beaten in Delhi's Sunlight Colony May, 2018. These are just two examples; others can be cited. Besides being assaulted, those who feed and care for stray dogs in India are also abused and harassed. It is often argued that this is because stray dogs bite and feeding ensures that their numbers grow. What is not realised is that there has been a steep fall in the number of dog bites in recent years. According to a report in *The New Indian Express* (datelined December 3, 2023), by Jitendra Choubey, over 75 lakh cases of dog bites were reported in India in 2018; the figures were over 72 lakh in 2019, 46 lakh in 2020. It was over 17 lakh in 2021 and 21.8 lakh in 2022. Another report by Nikhil Ghanekar in *The Indian Express*



(datelined March 27, 2024) cites data tabled in Parliament by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare showing an increase to 27.8 lakh in 2023. Despite being higher than the preceding two years, the figure of 27.8 lakhs marks a massive decline from that of over 75 lakh recorded in 2018.

Besides, the accuracy of these figures has been a subject of scepticism. A report (datelined March 19, 2024) by Shainu Mohan in *The New Indian Express* cited N. Jayachandran, an animal rights activist and a former member of the Kerala State Animal Welfare Board, as describing the figures of dog bites as inaccurate and saying that there were no specific details and even scratches by cats were recorded as dog bites.

Doubts about the reliability of the existing figures of dog bite cases, is implied in the communication dated March 7, 2024, from the Union Government's Directorate-General of Health Services (DGHS), to State Governments asking them to provide quality data on animal bites from all public health centres, community health



KONRAD LORENZ (1903-1989) WROTE IN *MAN MEETS DOG*, 'THE WHOLE CHARM OF THE DOG LIES IN THE DEPTH OF THE FRIENDSHIP AND THE STRENGTH OF THE SPIRITUAL TIES WITH WHICH HE HAS BOUND HIMSELF TO MAN'

centres, district hospitals and tertiary care facilities with inclusion of specific details regarding bites by pet and stray dogs. Of particular significance is the directive to avoid multiple entries of the same animal bite victims by maintaining separate records for new and follow-up patients in the animal bite exposure register.

The suggestion is clear: there have been duplications.

In many cases, pet and not stray, dogs have been responsible. Reliable figures for the whole of India do not exist. The ones that are available clearly underline this point. According to a report by Anuradha Kher in *The Times of India* of May 24, 2004, Sassoon Hospital at Pune had recorded as many as 3,185 dog bite cases until May that year. She quoted Namdeo Patil, the hospital's medical officer, as saying that pet dogs were responsible for 70 per cent of the cases.

That the percentage of bites by stray dogs continues to be very high and one needs accurate statistics regarding their involvement, is clearly reflected in the DGHS's communi-

cation directing that the cases of pet dogs biting people be separately recorded.

Unfortunately, people who assault, abuse and harass those who feed and care for stray dogs do not realise this. They are emotional cripples brimming with hatred. Notwithstanding their aggression, the number of people looking after stray dogs is increasing all over India. Twenty years ago, one rarely saw people feeding them or vaccinating them on the streets.

Today, one sees them in most neighbourhoods. This is hardly surprising given the nature of dogs. Konrad Lorenz (1903-1989) wrote in *Man Meets Dog*, "The whole charm of the dog lies in the depth of the friendship and the strength of the spiritual ties with which he has bound himself to man." Lorenz, ethnologist and ornithologist and recipient of the 1973 Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine along with Nikolaas Tinbergen and Karl Von Frisch, should know.

(The author is Consulting Editor, *The Pioneer*. The views expressed are personal)

Bandipur Tiger Reserve rejuvenates after year-long drought

HANS NEWS SERVICE
CHAMARAJANAGAR



THE Bandipur Tiger Reserve Forest, nestled within the Gundlupet Taluk of Chamarajanagar District, has undergone a remarkable transformation after enduring a year-long drought. With no rainfall for the past twelve months, the once-thriving forest had withered, leaving behind dried-up lakes, ponds, and dwindling water sources, posing severe challenges for the resident wildlife.

The parched landscape painted a grim picture, as lakeshores turned barren and vegetation wilted under the scorching sun. The dire situation forced the wild inhabitants to seek refuge elsewhere, migrating in search of water towards the Kabini backwaters and other areas.

However, hope emerged on the horizon as the pre-monsoon showers graced the region, bringing much-

needed relief to the arid terrain. The rejuvenating rains, sporadic yet substantial, began to replenish the once-desolate water bodies, infusing life back into the ecosystem.

Bandipur, known for its rich biodiversity and lush greenery, began to reclaim its verdant charm as the emerald hues returned, painting the landscape in vibrant shades of green. More than 400 lakes, integral to the forest's ecosystem, witnessed a remarkable resurgence, with their banks brimming with

water once again.

Reflecting on the past year's ordeal, forest officers recounted the challenges faced in attempting to mitigate the water crisis. Despite efforts to replenish the lakes using solar bores, the impact was limited, leaving much of the forest desiccated and its inhabitants struggling to survive.

The recent downpours, however, signaled a turning point, heralding a new chapter of abundance and vitality. From the dense canopy of the forest to the sprawl-

ing grasslands, the revival of vegetation mirrored the resilience of nature in the face of adversity.

Moreover, the ripple effects of the rejuvenating rains extended beyond the boundaries of Bandipur, with neighbouring regions, including parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala bordering Moohole, experiencing bountiful rainfall. This collective resurgence not only revitalized the forest but also alleviated the water scarcity plaguing the wildlife.

As Bandipur emerges from the shadows of drought, its transformation serves as a poignant reminder of nature's capacity for renewal and the delicate balance that sustains life within its realms. With the onset of the monsoon season, the forest resonates with a symphony of life, a testament to the enduring spirit of resilience and hope in the wilderness.

Bird watching good for mental health: Study

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

Bird watching is good for your health. Especially mental health. This is not a pitch by ornithologists and avid bird watchers. It has been proved by a detailed study. In fact, psychologists and psychiatrists are now advising people to indulge in bird watching, spending time in the forests and indulging in nature-related activities to improve mental health.

Recently, the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* published a paper titled Bird-watching linked to increased psychological well-being on college campuses: A pilot-scale experimental study. It found empirical evidence on bird watching enhancing psychological well-being, especially among students who are at great risk for experiencing mental health challenges.

In the study, researchers engaged with 112 campus participants in an experiment where they evaluated the degree of weekly bird watching and nature walk exposures and the impact on well-being and psychological distress levels relative to a control group.

“The directions of all relationships supported hypotheses that nature-based experiences and bird watching in particular, would increase well-being and reduce distress. These results build on preliminary evidence of a causal relationship between bird watching and well-being and highlight the value of considering well-

being impacts for specific types of activities in nature, underscoring the need for future research with larger and more diverse samples,” the researchers said.

For the study, the researchers used the stepped wedge design where participants (college students) were randomly assigned to either (a) a bird watching walk treatment, (b) a nature walk treatment, or (c) a control group for five weeks (where they were taken for bird watching and then were randomly assigned to one of the other two groups for another five weeks).

Putting it in context, the study said, “Over the past decade, mental health has worsened on college campuses. The national Healthy Minds Study found that 60% of college students reported mental health challenges.

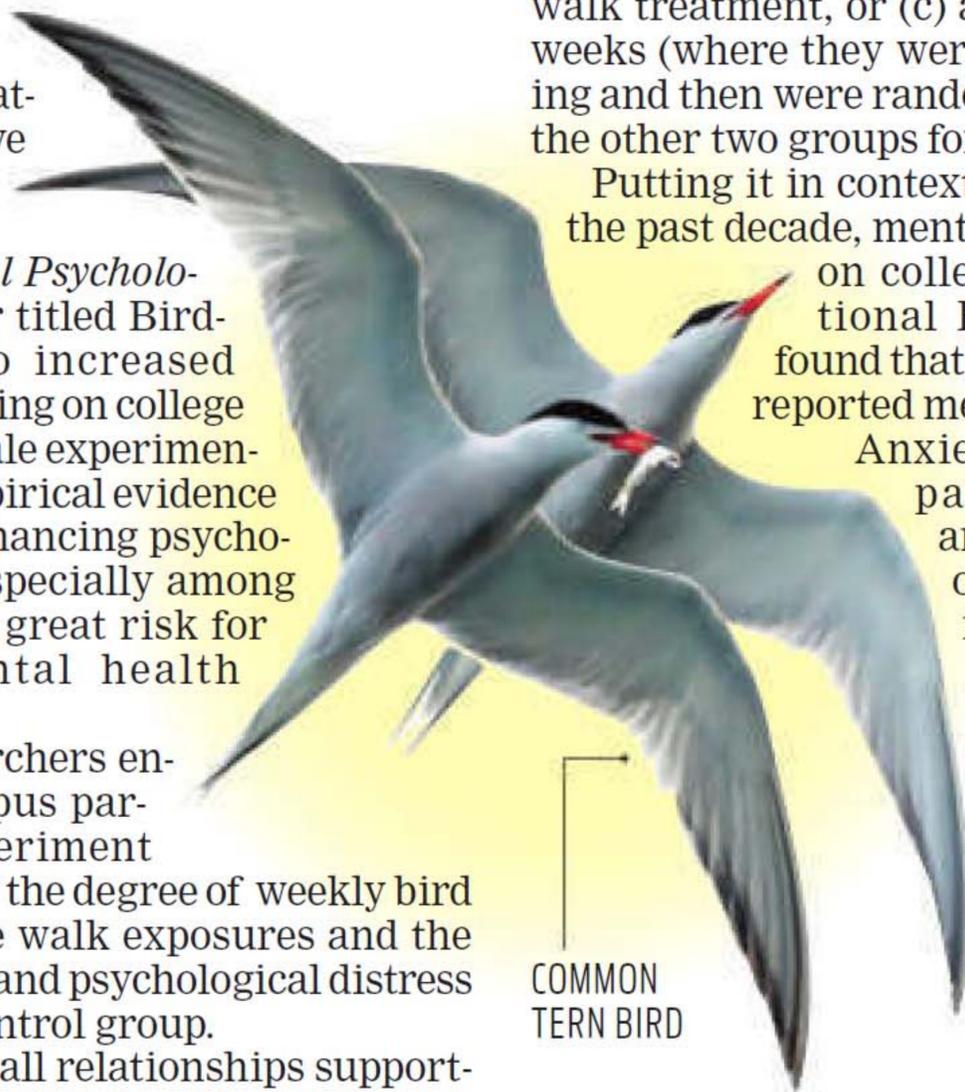
Anxiety and depression, in particular, increased among students in wake of Covid-19. The growing mental health crises on college campuses has catalysed a search for solutions to promote the well-being of graduates and undergraduates. Nature-based interventions might help improve college students’ mental health. Spending time with nature may improve mental health, alleviate stress and reduce depression.”

Speaking on the impact of bird watching, Prabha S Chandra, Dean, Behavioural Science at the National Institute of Mental Health and

Neuro Sciences (Nimhans) said, being in nature, paying attention and focusing on something helps in being mindful and improves mental health. Bird watching is an activity and needs attention. People are nowadays being recommended to involve in nature activities to improve their mental health. A retired Nimhans professor, independent psychiatrist and avid bird watcher said: “It does improve mental health. It calms one down as it demands focus, concentration and paying attention. It sharpens your natural skills of hearing, minute observation and focusing on details. Earlier when I would advise patients to indulge in bird watching or wildlife activities, people wondered about my qualification, but when they participated, they started to calm down and improved professionally.”

Kishore Rithe, Director, Bombay Natural History Society said, bird watching gives a lot of satisfaction. It has now started to flourish in urban areas, where stress levels are very high. A number of students, especially medical and engineering, are largely participating in bird watching sessions. Many IT professionals are also part of multiple groups like Delhi Birds, e-birders, Royal Society for Protection of Birds or BirdLife International. Besides, student and youth participation is also on the rise, he said. They indulge in activities, not just seasonally, but all through the year.

B P Ravi, Director General, Environmental Management and Policy Research Institute (Empri), said, anything that diverts attention from daily routine and connects with nature helps. People suffering depression and other mental health issues are being advised to participate in nature activities, especially bird watching, he added.



COMMON
TERN BIRD

Elephant calf rescued from well

A CORRESPONDENT

BOKO, May 17: With the help of locals, Assam state Forest officials took timely action to rescue a wild elephant calf from a well in Karekura Forest village under Chaygaon Revenue Circle in the Kamrup district along the Assam-Meghalaya border. It is to be mentioned that the area falls under the Kulshi Forest Range of West Kamrup Forest Division.

According to the Kulshi Range Officer Dipen Deka, the incident occurred on Wednesday night when a herd of wild elephants was roaming in the area, and one of the calves accidentally fell into a well situated near a local

residence. Upon discovering the situation, villagers immediately informed the forest department.

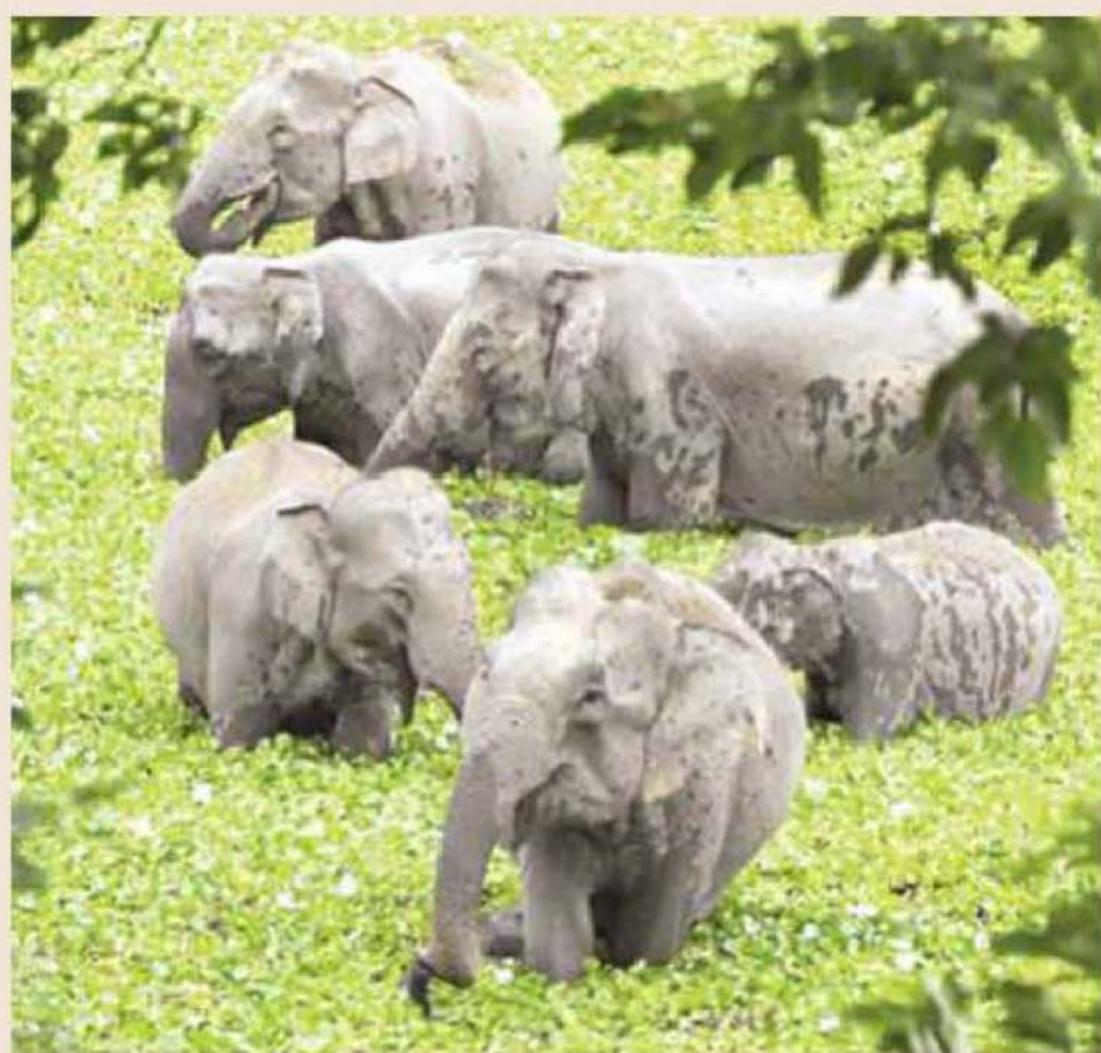
Dipan Deka, the forest officer of Kulshi Forest Range, along with several forest personnel, arrived at the scene. With the villagers' cooperation, they were able to rescue the elephant calf unharmed from the well. However, Deka believes that the calf fell into the well not long ago as it was not tired during the rescue operation and after being pulled out of the well.

“Two excavators were used to make a passage towards the well and safely rescued the baby elephant. The rescued elephant calf was then

safely sent back into the forest and reunited with its herd,” added Dipen Deka.

Deka expressed satisfaction with the villagers and said that the villagers under the Kulshi Forest Office know how to coexist with wild elephants. “This is why when a herd of wild elephants enters the village, the villagers maintain a safe distance and inform the forest department to drive the herd back into the forest. This results in a very little human-elephant conflict in the area under the Kulshi Forest Office.” Dipen Deka said. Deka also mentioned that a total twenty villages (forest village) falls under Kulshi range office.

Elephant census to be undertaken in South Indian states



Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh forest departments will participate in the synchronised elephant census

CHENNAI: The three-day annual synchronised elephant census in four south Indian states will now commence from May 23, it was announced on Wednesday.

The elephant census for 2024 was to commence on May 17 for three days but was put off after Kerala expressed some difficulties and requested a week's extension.

Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh forest departments will participate in the synchronised elephant census from May 23.

In Tamil Nadu, the elephant study will be conducted in Coimbatore, Erode, Nilgiris, Dharmapuri, Hosur, Vellore, Tiruvanamalai, Megamalai, Srivilliputhur, Tirunelveli, and Kanniyakumari.

Tamil Nadu Forest Department officials told IANS that the number of forest staff and volunteers for the exercise would be decided in the coming days.

According to a senior official, a team of four to five members would be deputed to cover a region of around 15 km and they would walk through it from 6 am to 6 pm and assess the age and sex of the elephants directly.

The team would also find out whether any elephant has any external injuries, their tusk size, and the number of "Makhna" (tuskless male elephants) present.

They will also assess the elephant dung to differentiate between the elephants. The team will also study the elephant's behaviour and movements of these elephants.

In the 2023 census in Tamil Nadu forests, 2,961 elephants were identified, or 200 more than the earlier exercise which recorded 2,761 elephants. The 2023 elephant census was held from May 17 to May 19.

The four states would be releasing the list of elephants in each state together.

Tamil Nadu Forest Department officials told IANS that the state's Conservator

of Forests, D. Venkatesh, who is also the Director of the Madumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR), will be the nodal officer for the census for the Tamil Nadu region.

Meanwhile, with an aim of avoiding train-elephant collisions, Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw on Wednesday said that the national transporter has developed an indigenous software named 'Gajraj', using optical fibre cable (OFC), to issue warning to the loco pilot about any suspicious movement on or near the rail tracks.

The Minister also said that the AI-based software device has been tested successfully in Assam and will be installed in the 700 km elephant corridors spread in several states within a time period of eight months.

He also said that the entire cost of installation of Gajraj software with its device for the 700 km corridor is estimated at Rs 181 crore.

Explaining how the Gajraj technology system works, the Minister said: "In its AI-based software using OFC, alerts are issued in case any suspicious traffic is detected from the distance of 200 metres from the railway tracks.

It can also specifically tell the distance where the movement has been detected. Any mammal which walks on land has a specific movement signature. The AI-based software has been trained to even detect the number of animals at a site. The loco pilot, those in the control room and the section station master receive alerts raised upon detection of any movement.

According to the Railway Ministry data shared in Parliament in July last year, 45 elephants have died in train accidents in the last three years. On Monday, three elephants, including a calf were killed at Rajabhat Khawa in Alipurduar district of West Bengal following a collision with a goods train. The three elephants, a mother and her two babies, died on the spot.

Enclosures mimicking natural habitat to help Great Indian Bustard chicks prepare for the wild

Mukesh Mathrani

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BARMER: The Rajasthan government and the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) have come up with an idea of creating a tunnel-like aviary to mimic the natural landscape of the desert grassland that is their habitat to acclimatise Great Indian Bustard chicks being reared in captive breeding centres before their release.

The aviaries, roughly 20,000 sq m in area, which will cost ₹8 crore to construct, is planned at Ramdevra in Jaisalmer, according to Ashish Vyas, district forest officer at the Desert National Park (DNP).

There are 34 bustards at the Sudasri and Ramdevra captive breeding centres, roughly a fourth of the estimated population of around 140 of the species that remains (some scientists say even this number is an overestimate). Vyas said these 34 birds are habituated to humans and have not

spent any time in the wild. “All their activities are monitored by scientists. They are known to be shy birds, but these have become familiar with humans. This generation is ready for release but must be prepared,” he added.

The grasslands of Rajasthan’s western parts are home to the bird that almost became India’s national bird (the idea was vetoed because there were apprehensions that the pronunciation could be a problem). Feral dogs are a problem in the area; as are overhead transmission wires of the solar projects coming up in the area. Over the decades, the bird’s numbers have decreased because such open habitats are rarely recognised as areas where it is critical to preserve the biodiversity.

The captive breeding program, then, is the bird’s last chance— else the Great Indian Bustard, GIB for short, or Godawan as it is called locally, could become extinct in the wild.



There are 34 bustards at the Sudasri and Ramdevra captive breeding centres. SHUTTERSTOCK

“At the breeding centre, GIBs have become accustomed to human intervention for food and water. But whenever they will be released back into the wild, these birds will lack the understanding of what to eat, where to find food, which animals or birds are their friends, and which are their enemies.”

Officials said that the twenty thousand square metre tunnel will also have a height of around fifteen to twenty metre which will provide flying space to the bird with no obstacles. The tunnel will have the natural sparse vegetation of the region.

“With the help of WII trainers, the birds will be trained to identify the sounds of their enemies. Since dogs are the biggest threat to the GIB, we will train them to recognize the sound of dogs and stay away from them. Initially, WII trainers will conduct the training, but if necessary, foreign trainers from countries like Abu Dhabi will be called in,” Vyas added.

Abu Dhabi is home to one of the world’s most successful breeding programs— for the Houbara Bustard, which is part of the same family (Otididae) as GIBs. The GIB is found only in India.

Vyas said that the state forest department and WII are engaged in planning for this tunnel. Vyas

said that the state forest department and WII are engaged in planning for this tunnel.

“The program has secured a captive GIB stock by artificially hatching eggs collected from the wild. These birds - meant to be retained in captivity for breeding— are familiarised on humans so that they can be closely monitored, reared, and can breed without stress. Now that birds have started breeding in captivity, some captive produced chicks will be released in the wild in future. Before release, they have to be acclimatised in their natural habitat in a large re-wilding structure, that is yet to be developed. Here, they will have more space to walk and fly around. They will learn to live away from humans, search for food, and will be trained to avoid threats such as dogs. After some time of acclimatising in the re-wilding structure, they will be released,” Sutirtha Dutta, lead scientist on the project.

Fury against cops after jumbo kills woman

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Jalpaiguri: Foresters and police were attacked by villagers near Baikunthapur forest in Jalpaiguri on Friday after a young woman died in an elephant attack.

Sources said Beauty Roy, 24, of Nodhabari near the forest, entered Bodaganj forest for firewood when a wild elephant kicked her to death.

A team led by Chiranjit Pal, the Belakoba forest range officer, and cops from Bhorer Alo police station reached the spot to face angry villagers who toppled the foresters' van and damaged the police vehicle. An altercation with villagers ensued, in which foresters and cops were outnumbered by villagers, who dragged them to a school ground and beat them up. Only around noon could the foresters and cops take away the body.

Govt may give 2 more months to return wildlife articles

Niranjan.Kaggere@timesgroup.com

Bengaluru: A month after the end of a three-month deadline for people to return wildlife articles, the forest department is now considering giving another two months' time for the purpose.

With several citizens choosing to take shelter under state high court stay orders in two cases and a lack of timely response from the law department, officials have decided to consult forest minister Eshwar Khandre and provide yet another chance for people to return wildlife articles.

Complying with the forest department's diktat, so far, only 192 people have surrendered wildlife articles to officials. About 60% of these 192 citizens are from Bengaluru. Surprisingly, the forest department has not received any article in Kodagu where it had suspected that maximum wildlife

THE SURRENDER STORY SO FAR

- Forest department notifies rules in Jan for surrendering wildlife articles and sets April 9 deadline
- Only 192 people, mainly from Bengaluru, have surrendered such articles to officials till now
- Two petitioners from Kodagu get HC court stay orders on the notification
- Officials say many people mistook case-specific stay orders for a general order and this has slowed down the return of articles



- Plans afoot to hold consultations with Eshwar Khandre to extend the deadline

articles could be lying.

Following a bitter controversy involving the wearing of a tiger claw by a Bengaluru-based contestant in a TV reality show in Dec 2023, chief minister Siddaramaiah had directed the forest department to provide people with an option to surrender the wildlife articles

in their possession voluntarily.

Notifying the rules in Jan 2024, the forest department announced a three-month deadline of April 9 and asked people across Karnataka to surrender all kinds of wildlife articles without any documentation or lacking permission from the state govt. Even as people

were gradually coming forward to surrender them, two people from South Kodagu — Ranji Poonachha of Virajpet and KA Kuttappa from Napoklu — approached the High Court for an interim stay on the notification.

While the HC's stay orders applied only to the two petitioners who had challenged the notification, many people mistook that the entire notification was stayed and stopped surrendering the articles, officials said. Post the HC stay orders, the process of returning wildlife articles also turned sluggish. Seeking clarity on the legal confusion, the forest officials wrote to the law department.

However, a delay in the law department's response to the query and resolving the confusion has affected the entire process. Among the returned wildlife articles, antlers of ungulates and elephant

tusks topped the chart. Even though the tiger claw triggered the entire controversy, very few of them have been surrendered.

“Had the law department responded to our query and resolved the legal confusion, more citizens may have surrendered the articles. In the absence of legal clarity, we (the forest department) also remained silent on the entire issue. We got a response from the law department only towards the end of the deadline and there was hardly any time left for the citizens to surrender the articles,” a senior forest official said.

“Now that the law department has clarified that the stay orders are applicable only to the two petitioners, the others have to surrender all articles. Hence, we have decided to consult the forest minister Eshwar Khandre and extend the deadline by a month or two,” a senior forest official clarified.

THIS IS THE FIRST TIME IN DECADES THAT A TIGER HAS KILLED A MAN IN THE AREA

Killer tiger on the prowl near Bhopal, 90-member team tasked with tracking it

ANAND MOHAN J
BHOPAL, MAY 17

THREE TEAMS of experts placed over 100 cameras in and around 36 villages in Madhya Pradesh's Raisen district as they hunted for a killer. Several officers and experts also scanned a digital map of the Ratapani wildlife sanctuary, which borders the villages, as they looked for clues. A red alert has been issued.

The victim was 62-year-old Maniram Jatav, a farmer and father of six. He was killed Wednesday at Neemkheda village while he was out picking tendu leaves.

The culprit is a tiger. It was for the first time in several decades that a tiger has killed a man in the area, which is just around 32 km from Bhopal.

Divisional Forest Officer Vijay Kumar is pulling out all the stops to track the animal. He formed the expert teams that have also been running an intensive awareness campaign in the villages.

"We have at least 90 people helping us track the tiger from morning to evening. We found fresh paw prints and are tracking the animal, which has moved towards a new area," the DFO said.

On Wednesday's killing of Jatav, he told The Indian Express, "It appears that the tiger was

resting when the farmer was collecting tendu leaves on all fours. It must have gotten spooked and attacked the man as he came close. Portions of his thigh and hips are missing and there are canine marks on his neck."

It would be wrong to call this tiger a "maneater", he said, adding, "It is very rare for a tiger to kill a man."

When Jatav ventured out to collect tendu leaves at around 7 am Wednesday, the tiger was hidden in four-foot-tall grass, where wildlife officers speculate it was resting.

When Jatav did not return home even after three hours, his family began searching for him.



Veera Jatav, the son-in-law of the deceased man, near the site of the tiger attack. *Anand Mohan J*

It was at around 3.30 pm that the body was found.

"I found my father's body

was badly mangled. The forest officials then blamed us for going into the forest. In March, a

tiger came outside our house and the warning signs were there, but no real steps were taken to protect us," said 33-year-old Deepak, Jatav's son.

Friday was Deepak's wedding anniversary, and the family was set to celebrate the construction of their new house on that day. "We were supposed to celebrate a house warming, but are instead in mourning. My children are scared to step outside," he said.

Maniram Jatav was relatively well off – he had just finished constructing his new five-room house, bought a tractor and a keep, and had nine acres of land where he grew moong and gehu. His family said he did not need

the additional income from tendu leaves. They had forbidden him from going towards a mango tree farm that had served as a gateway to the forest.

However, it was by the mango tree farm that Jatav was found.

Following Jatav's killing, the DFO formed one team comprising animal trackers, another team that has been setting up camera traps and pug impression pads, and a third team supervised by the local Sub Divisional Forest Officer, that will analyse field data and formulate strategy.

SDO Sudhir Patle has been busy formulating ways of tracking the tiger with the help of two wildlife researchers – Amit Kumar

and DP Shrivastava. However, the question on Patle's mind is why a tiger would kill a man. "A tiger rarely attacks a human. It usually does so when it is injured and cannot hunt for itself and has no option during old age. There are abundant cattle in that area.. We think Maniram was crouching and must have resembled a four legged creature," Kumar said.

Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) Aseem Shrivastava said it was unlikely the tiger would go on a killing spree of humans. "We don't think the tiger will go on a spree killing other humans. Once we track the animal, we will study its behaviour and later relocate it."

Linear casualties 'Design effective crossing structure for animals'



Roads, rail tracks run through state's forests; experts call for better planning to prevent collisions with wildlife

| Garima Prasher
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TWEETS @BangaloreMIRROR

So far, over 1,000 hectares of forest land in Karnataka has been diverted for as many as 94 road and railway projects.

While many linear transport infrastructure (LTI) projects are running through forest patches, strategies to address the negative impacts of these projects on wildlife have been few and far between.

In the given scenario, some wildlife conservationists point to a recent handbook by IUCN specialist groups on eco-friendly engineering and technical solutions. They say implementing these ideas might bring down the number of wildlife dying on roads and railway tracks due to collisions.

The IUCN handbook highlights that poorly planned LTI development can have severe impacts on ecosystems and species. These include loss, fragmentation, and degradation of habitat, increased rates of hunting and poaching of wildlife, increased resource extraction, such as legal and/or illegal mining and logging, pollution due to noise, light, vibrations, and chemicals from vehicles and trains, increased frequency and intensity of wildfires, land speculation or land

use change, and illegal settlements and increased human activity. According to the handbook, several criteria such as structure type, size and openness, approaches to structure, and structure spacing and site selection are some important factors that must be considered when designing effective crossing structures to address the negative impacts of linear infrastructure for elephants.

"Train collisions with Asian elephants are a significant and well-documented source of mortality, especially in India. Various factors contribute to this mortality, including ecological factors, railway physical factors (steep embankments and curves), technical factors (train speed, frequency, and time of travel), elephant behavior, and lack of awareness among operators and planners. Train-related elephant mortalities are higher near curves and areas adjacent to heavy forest cover

that reduces visibility," noted the handbook.

Careful analysis needed

However, some wildlife conservationists say these guidelines should be carefully analyzed before implementing them in a landscape such as that of Karnataka. They opine that implementing the guidelines and modifying structures will impact the ecology and biodiversity of the area. While all the measures mentioned in the handbook might bring down the number of cases in the case of rail tracks, the situation with highways in Karnataka is different due to the state's topography. "The state's landscape itself is wildlife friendly. Thus bare minimum interventions are required to bring down the number of road kills inside reserve forests and protected areas. Installing scientific speed bumps and reflectors at every bend and corner of these roads should be sufficient. The frequency of speed bumps can also be increased so they act as deterrents for people to use these routes. In addition to these, ramblers should be replaced with speed bumps. The National Highway Authority of India has guidelines on the design and installation of speed bumps, which should be closely followed," said Ramesh Belagere, a wildlife researcher at the Foundation of Ecology and Education Development.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 2 >>

Man killed by wild elephants

A CORRESPONDENT

NAGAON, May 17: Jitendra Mandal, a resident of Ambagan Tubuki Jaroni village near Laokhuwa wildlife sanctuary was killed by a herd of wild elephants in the wee hours on Thursday. Sources claimed that the herd of the wild elephants entered into his agricultural farm in search of food on Thursday night from Laokhuwa wildlife sanctuary. The victim went to work at his agro farm near his village in the wee hours on Thursday. But suddenly he confronted with the herd of wild elephants. In the sudden attack, the herd thrashed him to death inside his agro farm, sources added.

On being informed, the forest personnel from Laokhuwa wildlife sanctuary as well as local police personnel from Ambagan PS rushed to the spot and recovered the body of the deceased.

Meanwhile, police sent the mortal remains of the victim to Nagaon BP Civil Hospital for autopsy.

Mothers should be allowed to show their teeth



A WALK
IN THE
WOODS
NEHA SINHA

In Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar-winning film, *The Boy and the Heron*, the young protagonist Mahito follows a mysterious Heron (with a set of teeth and a twinkle in his eyes) through a life-changing adventure. Like many other Miyazaki movies, this one too tells complex stories through deceptively simple tropes—a boy, a talking animal, creatures both odd and good-looking. It strikes me that there is a larger metaphor in having an animal carry a message. One, of course, is the visual—it is unexpected to see and hear an animal speak. The other is implicit—the fact is that if we are to take a lesson, we will likely do so from a novel source. Would you listen to the person who you see on the street every day, or from someone who has never spoken before?

If one were to ask ecologists though, animals are always talking. They communicate stories of comfort and appreciation, distress and surprise. And the best stories are those in relation to others. For example, those of mothers and young.

On a searingly hot day in central India, I watched a mother tigress on the forest floor. She was lying with her back to us. Her body was like a broad log, lined with stripes. Her ears twitched occasionally, the black spots on them looking like moving eyes. Near her, a sambar kill spilled like a bloody set of flowers rushing through the ground, and one of her cubs tugged the skin on it. It was too young to tear the skin, but it kept trying: a game of strength-building and resistance. Another cub prowled nearby, paws too big for its body, steps and face set in determination as it moved around. I was looking at something akin to a domestic scene: the tigress had made the kill, she'd had her fill, and was now in much-needed repose. Her cubs had eaten too, and were presently clattering the metaphorical spoons in the cupboard. As I watched, the second cub came up to its



ISTOCKPHOTO

mother, its belly round like a half-moon, eyes full of mischief. It went straight for its mother's neck and head: climbing up, it started tugging her efficient ears. The tigress didn't open her eyes. A feeling of forbearance stretched around her—the look of a tolerating mother who is completely done with the day. The cub continued tugging, tiny teeth latched like hooks on to her skin. It would tug, then pause, look at its mother with rounded eyes, and then tug again. I watched, fascinated. She opened her mouth in a snarl. Her patience with her cub was begin to fray. It was still rather homely looking, when the call of a langur broke the air. In a snap, the tigress was up. Faster than my eyes could follow, she leapt towards something on the left. It seemed like everything scattered away from her, and her cubs ducked down. If I could describe the sudden movement as a sound, it would be the sharp sizzle of mustard seeds hitting hot oil.

After moving to the left, the tigress looked at something, her neck like an arrow. She was completely still—the muscular, deliberate stillness that conceals great strength. We followed her gaze. What hadn't been evident to us was clear to her: she was looking at a leopard who had come too close to her family. As we watched, he rapidly loped away. He wasn't going to take on an adult tigress. In the matter of a few seconds, the tigress had transformed from a patient playmate to a whip-smart soldier. She was perhaps no longer fully familiar to her cubs, and just a tad frightening—a mother with a wicked set of teeth. Patient, protective, and not always cuddly.

We often award human-like qualities to animals, but it's also rewarding to think about the opposite—what animal relationships can teach us about being human. For instance, the tigress is a reminder that our relationship with mothers is never just vanilla white

The tigress is a reminder that our relationship with mothers is never just vanilla white goodness.

Society tends to put mothers on pedestals, edifying them as monuments that keep on giving; nature teaches us instead to embrace complexity



NEHA SINHA

goodness. Sometimes, that vanilla has a sting of mustard.

For one, our mothers know everything about us, including the versions of us we have left behind. When my mother and I speak, she tends to bring up something I did when I was eleven or eight, or twenty-one, laughing about something that now makes my toes curl. She doesn't just know some things, she knows all things, except the fact that I'm no longer eight, and that internally I have permitted myself to change. Conversations with mothers are rarely pure comfort: there's usually a tail of frustration in there. That's because like the familiar-yet-fierce tigress, our relationship with our mother is often loving but also endlessly complex.

Society tends to put mothers on pedestals, edifying them as monuments that keep giving; nature teaches us instead to embrace complexity.

On another day, I watched a purple sunbird bring insects to feed her chick. She was tiny, her wings a blur. It was nearly impossible to believe that something so small could have so much energy. Just then, a loud sound came from somewhere in the city, and she dropped the food in shock. She whizzed off into the bushes, returning after a few minutes with a new morsel. She was exhausted, but doing her best. She was also devoted, but that's not the virtue I want to remember her by. Instead, I'd like to consider her as an individual too: an expert bug hunter, learning and implementing a skill that helped her survive.

If I were to take Miyazaki-style lesson of learning from animal teachers, it would be this: our mothers are both comforting and unfamiliar. And they belong to us, but also to themselves. It is not a bad thing to take off mantles of glowing goodness, and permit them to show their teeth.

In *The Nutmeg's Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis*, Amitav Ghosh writes on the need to tell stories that are beyond the human: "The great burden that now rests upon writers, artists, filmmakers, and everyone else who is involved in the telling of stories: to us falls the task of imaginatively restoring agency and voice to nonhumans." Calls by Ghosh and many other writers displace the supremacy of the human. They suggest that there is a wealth of culture in the natural world.

As a final lesson from animal teachers, one observes that animals live in the now. Thus, admonishments are dispatched with a lack of sanctimony. Anger is demonstrated, and then forgotten. The only high grounds are literal, not moral. We've just "celebrated" Mother's Day, with a surfeit of sales, sappy forwards, and promises that likely won't be kept. But I'd like to keep it real, even if I permit myself some sap. I'll remember the tigress the next time I speak to my mother—a lesson from the forest to the home.

Neha Sinha is a conservation biologist and author of *Wild And Wilful: Tales Of 15 Iconic Indian Species*. Views expressed are personal.

Pet dog case: Cops check dossiers of assaulters

**MOULI MAREEDU | DC
HYDERABAD, MAY 17**

The Madhuranagar police are verifying if the five persons held for assaulting a pet husky and its owners had a criminal record..

The family members of the victim, N. Srinath, alleged that the accused attacked the pet dog and couple when the victim's two sons were away. Srinath's son Satwik said that when his parents were alone at the residence, the accused assaulted his parents and pet dog. He asked the police to inquire into the previous criminal past accused of taking action.

“The husky's condition is serious. The skull is damaged and blood clots were



Husky dog getting treated.

found in the head. Veterinary doctors kept the dog under observation. My father and mother are both in ICU at a private hospital. They were administered 14 stitches,” Satwik said.

A few days ago, their pet dog accidentally went out and headed towards a cou-

ple staying in the neighbourhood. Though Srinath's brother immediately stopped the dog, the neighbours shouted at him, Srinath, who is a government employee, and his wife Swapna.

Later, miscreants came to the victim's place with a stick and beat his brother, abused in filthy and un-parliamentary language. In the incident, Srinath and Swapna were critically injured and admitted in a hospital.

The accused were Lachireddy Dhanunjaya, Bilan Sai Kumar, Bhagantri Praveen Kumar, Lachireddy Gowri Shanker and Srireddy Rambabu — all residents of Rehmathnagar in Yousufguda.

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The sight was so stunning and majestic that they stood frozen in time. An adult tiger walked past them ignoring their presence, and then she suddenly turned around. Ramesh cannot forget her eyes that remained transfixed on them: It had an intense power that spoke of the wilderness of the Ghats. It was their first tiger sighting of the season early this summer, deep inside the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary. Ramesh says he is aware of the huge risks involved as his team enters deep into the forest zone every day to pluck and uproot the invasive Senna trees in a systematic manner. They know tigers, elephants, bison, and bears would be watching them from behind the thick green canopy. "They let us do our work thankfully, maybe because our work has turned out to be beneficial for them," he says.

An hour earlier before they sighted the magnificent tiger, the team had pulled down a huge Senna tree, an invasive species which was destroying the contiguous forests in Tholapetty forest range. Ramesh has been leading a team of 68 members from four tribal communities – Urali, Paniya, Kurichya and Cholanayakar – in Wayanad and is involved

in one of the biggest forest regeneration projects that is being done in the degraded forest lands of Wayanad.

They have so far intervened to restore 400 acres of degraded forest land and removed invasive species like Senna Spectabilis and Lantana Camara from 247 acres of forest land, where it had spread its ugly tentacles deep into the forest soil. "The region had become unhealthy. Not even a single blade of grass can grow under a Senna tree. It sucks up all the rainwater and makes the region arid," Ramesh says. He is part of Forest First Samithi, an NGO which has been undertaking forest restoration projects with the approval and support of the state forest department that aims at transforming degraded forests to their original status.

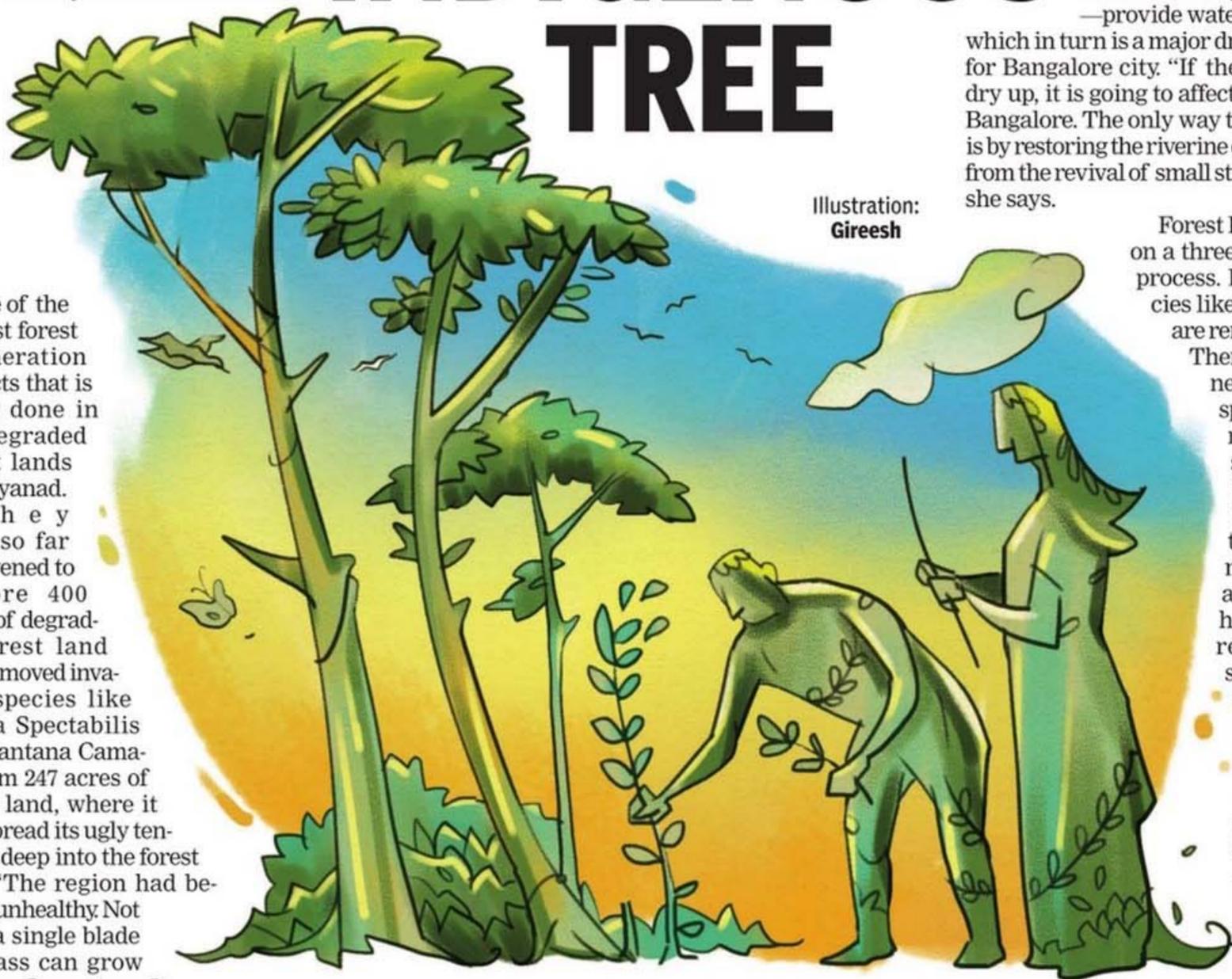
Wayanad today is at a tipping point. On the one hand, it is teeming with wildlife and tourists, but Wayanad residents are facing the brunt of rising incidents of man-animal conflict and impact of climate change. This summer was unbearable and the hill station turned into a sweat station with temperatures going up to a record 37 degrees.

As one reaches Vythiri, the first major tourist spot after crossing the serpentine 'churam' (tunnel), a halo of dust covers the long line of

Regreening the desiccated wild might be a Sisyphean labour but a Wayanad couple shows that it is perhaps the only option we have as climate change looms

RESTORING THE FOREST, TREE BY INDIGENOUS TREE

Illustration:
Gireesh



vehicles that wait to move forward to reach Kalpetta. The district is taken over by outsiders especially during weekends. Tourists land in hordes from Kerala and Karnataka, occupying every cramped boarding house that has sprung up here on the roadside. "The buildings came up without any planning, destroying the natural beauty of the place. The forests have turned barren and what is left is fragmented patches of degraded land," N Badhusha, president of Wayanad Prakrithi Samrakshna Samithi, says.

A study on impact of plantation-induced forest degradation on the outbreak of infectious diseases confirmed this shocking change in the land use pattern: 62% of forests disappeared in the period 1950 to 2018, whereas plantation cover increased by 1,800%. Meera Rajesh, co-founder of Forest First says the only way to solve this

problem is to regain the health of the ailing forest through scientific forest management with the support from local communities here. "Removal of invasive species and re-planting indigenous trees assume huge significance in reviving the lost bio-diversity of the forest," she says.

Meera is an electrical engineer who quit a comfortable job at TCS in Bangalore to tend an eight-acre farmland that she and her husband Rajesh purchased in 2008. After she settled in Wayanad, she realized that not only her farmland but almost 70% of the forest area in the district has been depleted and that is one of the

primary reasons for the increasing number of elephants foraging into non-forest areas. "We have systematically destroyed the forest corridors here. Worse, we have removed the forest fodder for wild animals and planted monocrops. It requires systematic efforts to bring back the native species and our four-year work in Tholapetty, even during the Covid period, shows that it is possible," she says.

This restoration work has a deeper ecological value beyond its immediate neighbourhood and its impact extends into other states as well which have several water-stressed regions. For instance, the three major rivers in Wayanad—Kabani, Mananthavady, and Panamaram—provide water to the Kaveri river,

which in turn is a major drinking water source for Bangalore city. "If the rivers in Wayanad dry up, it is going to affect the water supply in Bangalore. The only way to replenish the river is by restoring the riverine ecosystem beginning from the revival of small streams in the forests," she says.

Forest First broadly focuses on a three-phase reforestation process. Firstly, invasive species like Lantana and Senna are removed from the land.

Then in the second year, new shoots of invasive species that sprout are removed from the same place to ensure that land is free of all invasive species; the third year, indigenous plant saplings are sown. Meera, who had been successful in restoring degraded sacred groves and coffee estates in Coorg, says utmost care should be taken in planting the right trees that are suitable to local ecology. "We discuss with taxonomists like Salim Pichan and go through several research papers before undertaking the restoration work,"

Uma Havaligi, one of the co-founders, says.

Today, around 50 species of indigenous plants and trees are being conserved here. "It is a green miracle to see deer and elephants grazing on the new grasslands once again. Pollinators like bees, butterflies and birds have returned here. We need to do this across Wayanad," Rajesh PC says. Moreover, it has also created livelihood for the indigenous community. "The project also provides employability for tribals over a longer period of time – as they have work for ten months in a year – with ample insurance coverage," says PH Vijaya Deepti, who works as a board member of an Indian conglomerate. C Suresh, a tribal from the Urali community, puts it aptly: "It's not about money alone, we feel our gods are smiling once more".

SUNIL KINI



DEVVRATSINH MORI



Ornithologist Devvratsinh Mori; and the Amur Falcon Watch took place from 26-28 April in Gujarat.

Spotting the Amur falcon

The Amur Falcon Watch was the first systematic count of the birds entering India during their reverse migration

Vrushal Pendharkar

On the morning of 26 April, Manisha Rajput and four volunteers reached Nait village in Gujarat, walking to a field on the edge of a coastal cliff. They lay on beds placed there, and stared at the sky. As the day warmed, Rajput spotted three fast-moving objects. These were Amur falcons entering the Indian airspace after an overnight flight crossing the Indian Ocean from Somalia. Had she not been looking for them, Rajput would not have spotted the superfast birds.

Rajput was among 30 other bird-watchers at the first Amur Falcon Watch (26-28 April), a citizen science event organised by the Bird Conservation Society with support from the Gujarat forest department to count the number of Amurs passing over the Saurashtra coast. Teams of two or four participants took to their beds close to the sea in 13 locations spread over 100km in Amreli and Bhavnagar districts in Gujarat.

“It was a coordinated activity, quite

historical,” says Suresh Kumar, who is a scientist at the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, and has been studying the falcon’s migration since 2016. “Till now this systematic count of Amur falcons passing through has not been done anywhere else.”

Every year Amur falcons undertake one of the longest bird migrations, a mammoth journey of over 20,000km. Beginning their journey around September in the Russian far-east, they come down to the Indian subcontinent through East Asia, fly over the Bay of Bengal before cutting through the Decan region and crossing the Indian Ocean to enter East Africa and fly down to South Africa, summering in the southern hemisphere before flying back on a near parallel route. On their way back, the Amurs go up to the Horn of Africa, from where they skirt the Arabian peninsula, and fly past Pakistan before cutting into Gujarat and heading straight to Madhya Pradesh, over the Gangetic plains to the North-East again and upwards. They make an elliptical migration.

From the 15 falcons Kumar had tagged with satellite transmitters between 2016-18, it became apparent that the Amurs passed through Gujarat on their return migration. The Bird Conservation Society has been recording the Amurs’ flight points and their numbers for the past three years. “This told us that the maximum numbers of these birds fly by

between 15 April and 15 May each year in this area,” explains Devvratsinh Mori, ornithologist at Ahmedabad University and executive member of the society.

The incredible aspect of the Amurs’ migration is the oceanic crossings they undertake. Kumar believes they use the wind’s assistance. During the Indian summer, it is the westerly currents that assists the birds. “The Amurs are smart enough to track these systems and are tailing them to glide into India,” says Kumar. “Our tracking data supports this theory.” Mori seconds this. He thinks they are less energetic on their return journey and make use of the winds to ease their effort. “When the wind speed is more, the falcon numbers increase in that direction,” he says. Most of the birds the participants spotted were in flight. Only a few landed in trees or in intertidal areas where the tide was low.

To avoid a repeat recording of the same birds as far as possible, all 13 teams were asked to simultaneously observe the sky for the first 20 minutes of every hour between 10am and 6pm. This also increased the detection rates of the birds. In total, 150 birds were seen.

The Amurs pass through 23 countries. “This is really amazing as these birds connect lots of people and cultures,” says Viral Joshi, programme coordinator of the event.

Vrushal Pendharkar is a Mumbai-based environment journalist.

Stray dog menace on beaches going out of hand, govt intervention sought

THE GOAN NETWORK

MARGAO

Even as the 24-year-old runner is on medication after being attacked by stray dogs on Benaulim beach earlier this week, instances of strays attacking visitors and tourists have come to light, with victims making fervent pleas to the Tourism department to address the menace.

Fishermen and other stakeholders have also requested the Tourism Minister Rohan Khaunte to intervene and ensure the safety of visitors and to take care of the strays.

A Russian lady tourist, Cristina, who had a bitter experience with strays at Benaulim beach, has said she had requested the Tourism Minister during his interac-

tion with tourism stakeholders to find a resolution to the menace of strays on the beach.

“This is my first visit to Goa and Benaulim, and I have fallen in love with the State. Goa has beautiful and clean beaches, besides kind-hearted people and delicious food,” she said.

Cristina, however, said she has come across a big problem during her visit to the State, the issue of stray dogs. While she was cycling on the beach, Cristina said she was attacked by around 10 dogs, but timely intervention by local fisherman Pele Fernandes saved her from trouble.

“I like cycling very much and when I was cycling on the Benaulim beach, around 10 dogs surrounded me and tried to attack me. Pele and



Strays on the Benaulim beach on Friday. (Right) File photo of strays at the neighbouring world-class Colva beach.

the fishermen came to my rescue in the nick of time and saved me from dog bites. I was a brave act by Pele”. Appealing to the Tourism Minister to find a solution to the

problem, Cristina said the Minister and the government may resolve the issue by creating care houses for the dogs. “This can be one solution so that the tourists and

visitors can be saved from the dogs,” she added.

Fisherman Pele informed that he was not around in Benaulim when the 24-year-old girl was attacked by stray

dogs on the beach earlier this week. He, however, pointed out that he had rescued a Russian lady tourist recently, even as he conceded that the beach stretch is facing the

problem of strays. Pele pointed out that stray dogs face the problem of food when the shacks down their shutters after the tourism season. He said there are instances when these dogs stray into the adjoining residential areas in search of food. “When I saw around 10 dogs about to attack the Russian lady tourist, I rushed towards her and rescued her,” he said, while appealing to the Tourism Minister to come out with a solution to the problem.

“In the past too, we had made a plea to the Goa government to come out with a solution to address the stray dog problem. The Tourism department has its jurisdiction over the beach belt and hence instead of waiting for the local bodies, the government should initiate meas-

ures to address the problem,” he said.

He added: “No doubt, foreigners as well as locals provide food to the strays. But, after curtains come down on the beach shack season, the strays find it difficult to find food. The government should intervene.”

The father of the girl from Loutolim, who sustained as many as seven bites on her legs in the attack by strays on Benaulim beach, said the government should find a solution to the problem. “Goa is a tourist State. My daughter had a harrowing experience while running on the Benaulim beach. Foreign tourists and domestic visitors should carry sweet memories back home and not bites of the strays,” he said.

Synchronised elephant census in four southern states to begin on May 23

Panel to Monitor Enumeration Work Spanning 3 Days

Chethan Shivakumar

Milton Lawrence & Niranjana Kaggere | TNN

Bengaluru/Mysuru: Four southern states have once again come together to take up the second synchronised elephant census across multiple landscapes of peninsular India from May 23 to 25. Aimed at mitigating the human-elephant conflict in south India, the census has been initiated after a series of meetings between the forest officials of these states - Karnataka, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

The elephant census, usually held once in five years, was due in 2022. However, the exercise could not be held as it was decided that the census will be conducted along with the tiger census by adopting a different technique. The exercise could not be held for technical reasons. A similar synchronised estimation of the jumbo population was held in April 2023 in all four states, and Karnataka had reported the highest number of elephants at 6,395. The next elephant census is scheduled for 2028.

While the census was earlier scheduled to be held from May 17, the entire exercise had to be deferred to May 23 following Kerala's

CENSUS IN A NUTSHELL

WHEN: MAY 23 TO 25

10 No. of forest divisions	65 No. of forest ranges
1,689 Manpower for the census	563 No. of forest beats

THE PROCEDURE

- **Day 1:** Direct sighting method for block-wise counting
- **Day 2:** Line transect method involving counting of elephant dung
- **Day 3:** Counting of jumbos near waterholes including tuskers, calves, sub-adults



Jumbo exercise: Stage is being set for an elephant census in Karnataka and three other southern states

special request owing to technical reasons. Even though the census should have encompassed states such as Andhra Pradesh, Goa and Maharashtra, only three states — Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu — submitted their reports after the first such exercise in April 2023. Officials from all three states again met at Bandipur in March 2024 and established an Interstate Coordination Committee (ICC) to ensure coordination for the synchronised census.

Subhash Malkhede, principal

chief conservator of forests (wildlife) and chief wildlife warden of Karnataka said preparations have been made for the census which will be conducted in three days. Kumar Pushkar, additional chief conservator of forests (wildlife), explained that the census will be held annually in four states to devise strategies for tackling the rising incidents of human-elephant conflicts. The survey will be limited to the adjacent landscapes that share boundaries with the neighbouring states covering only

a few districts. In Karnataka, the census will be held at Bandipur and Nagarhole tiger reserves, Bannerghatta National Park, Bilingiri Ranga Temple (BRT) Tiger Reserve, Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary, Kolar, Madikeri Wildlife and Madikeri Territorial, MM Hills and Virajpet forest divisions.

Enumeration sans volunteers

While the news of the elephant census has triggered excitement among wildlife enthusiasts, the ban on the involvement of volun-

teers has disappointed many. Generally, any animal census in the wild attracts thousands of volunteers from various colleges and wildlife organisations. However, the forest department has refused to take volunteers for the elephant census this time. "Given the fact that elephants are unpredictable animals in the wild, the department did not want to take any risk. So the department decided to do away with the private volunteers for the census. All our field workers, including watchers, guards and other personnel who have been hired on a contract basis have been trained in estimating animals. Multiple training courses were held to educate them on scientific methods. A total of 1,689 personnel will be part of the census," another officer explained.

App in the making

Unlike the wildlife census which involves the entry of details and data into a mobile application, the elephant census will be carried out manually by filling up data sheets. Even though the forest department has collaborated with a software developer to design a mobile app to suit the needs of the elephant census, the app is unlikely to be ready in time. In the absence of technology, the forest personnel will manually enter the field details into templated sheets.

The mean streets are no happy home for dogs

There are 60-80 million street dogs in India, and more than 90% have to be sterilised in a very short time to see a reduction in their population over the next 10-15 years



CULT
FRICTION

SANDIP
ROY

Cricket is finally evoking American passions.

That's Cricket, the dog, not cricket the game. In her recently released memoir *No Going Back: The Truth of What's Wrong with Politics*, South Dakota's Republican governor Kristi Noem wrote about shooting Cricket, a 14-month old puppy she deemed "untrainable". Cricket, she complained had disrupted a pheasant hunt, killed the neighbour's chickens and tried to bite her. "I hated that dog," writes Noem. So she led her to a gravel pit and killed her. And while she was at it, she decided to put down a "nasty and mean" goat as well, name unknown.

Noem, who hopes to be on the shortlist for Donald Trump's vice-presidential picks, thought the anecdote would burnish her reputation as a practical, no-nonsense politician who doesn't shy away from tough choices. Instead she's been facing bipartisan backlash.

American politicians can afford to be ultra tough on deaths in Gaza, campus protesters, Ukraine, Black Lives Matter. But puppies are a different ballgame. It's not about putting an animal down. It's bragging about it. That's just not cricket.

Everyone from right-wing media outlets to Walt Disney's grand-niece, the film-maker Abigail Disney, is lambasting her. Noem should have known better. Republican senator Mitt Romney's presidential campaign in 2012 was rocked when he recounted what he thought was a funny family story about tying his Irish setter (in its kennel) to the roof of the car on a 12-hour trip in 1983. Now even Romney is trolling Noem.

"I didn't eat my dog. I didn't shoot my

dog. I loved my dog, and my dog loved me," said Romney, according to *Huff-Post*. Given the bizarre state of American politics, no one knows whether Noem shot herself in the foot or actually improved her chances to make it to Trump's vice-presidential shortlist. But dogs evoke strong passions the world over. As a famous politician closer home memorably said that one feels bad when a puppy gets run over.

Compassion for a puppy killed in an accident was held up as the lowest common denominator of our humanity. But nothing, not even Bharatiya Janata Party-Congress mud fights, get WhatsApp groups as worked up in India as a post about the country's dog problem. One side shares every news story about packs of stray dogs attacking children. The other side calls them heartless puppy-killers. The ones worst off are those who love dogs but also maintain that India's stray dog population is out of control and needs some hard choices. They are stuck between a dog and a hard place.

Ecologist Abi T. Vanak told me earlier this year that too many people go around feeding dogs in the name of compassion but take zero responsibility for their well-being. "Real compassion would involve forcing the state to take more responsibility and building good quality shelters. And if you don't think you can see dogs in shelters, please adopt them." He feels all the well-wishers doggedly feeding street dogs compound the problem. "The more dogs we feed, the more dogs there are on the street."

Vanak is a dog lover. He has a rescued dog at home. And he knows his views will raise the hackles of many dog lovers. There are by some estimates 60-80 million street dogs in India right now. And sterilisation cannot keep up with the booming dog population because we just do not sterilise enough dogs and we do not do it fast enough.

More than 90% of the dog population has to be sterilised in a very short time



It is hard to resist the impulse to feed a hungry puppy.

ISTOCKPHOTO

to see a 70% dog population reduction over a 10-15 year period, say Vanak and other experts. India is nowhere close to that. And animal control laws in India have very little teeth. If you have a chronic biter in the neighbourhood that's not rabid, there's very little anyone can do legally.

Few will disagree with the likes of Vanak that a dog's life on the streets is no picnic. There is 80% pup mortality within the first year, claims Vanak. The dogs are pelted with stones, maimed in traffic accidents, scrounge for food in garbage dumps. Yet we are hard-wired to go awww the moment we see a puppy.

I am no exception. The logical part of my brain understands Vanak. When I read about dogs killing the critically endangered Indian bustard, I am aghast. Yet it's hard to resist the impulse to feed

a hungry puppy. Evolution has tied us together as a species. We might think we are doing the dogs a favour by feeding them. But in reality they are nourishing us as well. As a species, we are hungry for the love a dog can provide. "It's not just food they want," filmmaker Jesse Alk, who made a documentary called *Pariah Dog* (2019) about Kolkata's street dogs and their eccentric feeders, told me. "They are deeply lonely. Take the mangiest street dog. Even if you don't have food, if you go up to him and pet him, most of them will melt."

Our street in Kolkata has quite a family of dogs. A neighbour takes responsibility for feeding them, sterilising them, taking them to the vet. Every day the neighbour goes to the park to summon them for lunch and dinner and returns like the Pied Piper with the dogs in tow. Chutney at our own house was born

on the street. He was one of four siblings. Three perished within months, under the wheels of cars. Chutney's mother deposited him in our garden for safe-keeping. One day as we were watching television, we heard a knock at the door. When I opened it, we found the little puppy looking at us literally with puppy-dog eyes after pushing at the door. Now he is ensconced in the house. He sulks if the air conditioner is not turned on on warm nights, eats American snacks and yak milk chews after dinner, though his true love is Marie biscuits. He went to my niece's wedding in his customised red brocade doggy "sherwani".

The problem is we have room for one Chutney in the house but not for a dozen. Their lives on the street remain fraught. Handsome, one of the friendly boisterous dogs on our street, was suspected of contracting rabies. Somehow

the neighbour cornered him and got him confined to a room. All night she was unable to sleep as the dog shredded the plastic chair and tore the sheets.

The next day Sanjoy, from the veterinary clinic, showed up. We watched with trepidation as he lassooed the thrashing foaming dog and jabbed him with a needle.

"How long will it take?" I asked.

"That's just the anaesthetic to calm him down," Sanjoy said. Eventually, Handsome flopped down and was quiet. He seemed almost resigned as he accepted the lethal dose.

"When will he die?" Someone asked.

"He's gone," said Sanjoy.

They dug a grave for Handsome at the back of the house and dragged him there. Covered in bleaching powder, Handsome looked oddly docile—as if talcum-ed after a bath. The animal control men joked about dog ghosts while someone got a few flowers and *bael* (Bengal quince) leaves from the tree outside.

"Throw some earth on him," said Sanjoy and we did. Then the hard-bitten cynical man shovelled dirt over him and said something rather lovely. "Poor guy, go in peace. Come back to a better life next time."

We lit two candles on his grave before we returned to our own homes.

Handsome reminded us yet again that mean streets can be no happy home for tens of thousands of dogs despite our sentimental attachment to them. He was luckier than most that someone watched out for him beyond feeding him scraps. But it was a sad end for a handsome dog.

Yet it's not every day a street dog with rabies gets a neighbourhood send off.

In these toxic polarised times that's something.

Cult Friction is a fortnightly column on issues we keep rubbing up against.

Sandip Roy is a writer, journalist and radio host. He posts @sandipr

ANNAM SURESH

MY daughter surprised me on my birthday with a two-week holiday to see the Northern Lights, and a day with the Samis — the only indigenous people in Europe with a lifestyle that is alive, but fading. More than 80,000 Samis are spread across what is called Sapmi, comprising northern Norway and parts of Sweden, Finland and Russia. About half of them are reindeer herders. Legally, only Samis are allowed to rear reindeer.

A bus picked us up from the Tromso city centre and 25 minutes later, dropped us near a huge snow-covered reindeer farm.

A herd of reindeer hauled us in a long chain across the snow, kicking up plenty of it on us. The reindeer pulling the sledge behind us would come alongside ours to strike up a conversation, which we had been told to discourage firmly. In an hour, the ride was done, and we were 'herded' to feed a group of hungry reindeer waiting impatiently.

We were taken to a *lavvu*, a 40-foot-tall conical tent designed to withstand the fiercest storms and avalanches. The dwelling can accommodate large groups of humans and reindeer. Inside were several rows of fur-covered benches around fireplaces that had kettles on the boil. It was warm and cosy in contrast to the -25°C outside. There were other tents which served as winter homes for those on such camps. But, quite often, the Samis stay in the *lavvu* itself while the reindeer are tethered in other tents.

Just outside the *lavvu* stood a cart with small plastic buckets, and a pile of moss-and-hay pellets to be fed to the ever-hungry reindeer. The reindeer were trained not to snatch the food or attack inexperienced feeders like us. They simply buried their snouts in the buckets held out by us nervously.

My feet were wet since all the outdoor activity had got a lot of snow inside my shoes. One of the herders, Myra, got a bunch of dried *sennya* grass and said, "Line your shoes with these. This grass is much better than several layers of socks and can keep your feet warm even in -5°C."

Outside the *lavvu*, antlers arranged on a long horizontal beam were used for practising lassoing. This is how they would catch wild reindeer. In a week, when the snow would melt, the herd would be moved to the mountains to give birth in spring, one of their eight seasons.

Anna Majlen, another herder, regaled us with legends and myths from the Sami society, telling us about their lives, the challenges as herders, their clothes, their food, their marriages, and birth and death rituals. Their religion, seen as pagan by many, is, in fact about respecting everything in nature — humans, animals, plants and objects. They have a well-practised, effective system of healing through herbs and minerals.

The reindeer is an intrinsic part of Sami livelihood and lifestyle. No part of the animal goes waste. Except the antlers and



It takes some resolve to feed the reindeer, an intrinsic part of Sami lifestyle; and visitors enjoy food inside the *lavvu*, the incredibly strong conical tent (right). PHOTOS BY THE WRITER

skin, every part is eaten. The skin and fur are used for attire, shoes and furnishings, and the antlers for cutlery, tools and décor.

The pattern on the edges and cuffs of the Sami tunics indicates the wearer's village and family. The buttons disclose the occasion and the marital status.

Marriages are usually arranged by par-

ents who look for brides from a family of similar stature but a different village. Marriages take place three to five years after the engagement, during which time the groom has to regularly give his bride, her relatives and friends plenty of gifts.

As evening approached, we were served a typical Sami meal of reindeer soup. The

meat was tender and juicy. For vegetarians, there was soup made from dried beans, carrots and potatoes.

And finally, Anna presented a *Joik* (pronounced as 'Yoik', one of the oldest song traditions in Europe) that she rendered in her full-throated, melodious voice, while some of us joined in. Remember, the first

song in the movie 'Frozen'? It is a 'Joik'.

As daylight began to fade, Myra handed me a gift. The Sami believe that if you are kind to the reindeer, they send magic and good fortune your way. There, in the sky, I discerned a mist that slowly grew more colourful. The reindeer had gifted me a view of the Northern Lights.

TRAVEL TIPS

- Best to fly to Tromso from Oslo (Norway), which is well connected. Flights and stay are expensive. The Oslo-Tromso flight, which takes two-and-a-half hours, cost us ₹10,500 per head. Hotels, too, have highly variable rates depending on season and demand, starting at ₹8,000 per night per head in a double-occupancy room in the city centre.
- There are plenty of hostels and hotels, all of which provide various options for a day with the Sami and their reindeer. Most of them are reliable. Tours start at ₹5,000 per head. Pack plenty of warm clothes, including jackets, gloves and waterproof wear.

