



## THE ABODE OF THE GENTLE GIANTS

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The Wayanad district of Kerala is a forested district that lies on the border of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka and form a part of the Western Ghats habitat. The rolling hills and meadows (vayals) of Wayanad boast a great array of wildlife, the most important of these being the Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*). Wayanad Elephant Reserve forms a contiguous habitat with Mudumalai, Bandipur and Nagarhole in the neighbouring states to form the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. IUCN has reported that the south Indian population of elephants is the only recorded population in Asia to show increase in its numbers as opposed to other populations, but threats still abound in plenty for these gentle pachyderms, foremost being the constant conflict with humans. I had the golden opportunity to study and observe these magnificent beasts in Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary for my Masters project in 2017-18. The studies reflected both ecological and human factors affecting the distribution and movement of the elephants in the sanctuary and probable causes for an increase in the incidences of human-elephant conflict (HEC). My observations revealed some interesting results. The elephant population density showed a marked increase in Wayanad during the dry season which could be due to a phenomenon called local overabundance. It was observed that the elephants prefer the forests of Wayanad during the times of scarcity. They move in high numbers towards the wet patches and the moist deciduous tracts to escape from the harsh dryness of Bandipur, Mudumalai etc which are arid and warm

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comparatively. Although this is a good opportunity for wildlife enthusiasts like me to observe more elephants, this movement is one of the primary causes for increase in HEC. This was profoundly apparent during my questionnaire survey of the local farmers who complain of frequent crop raiding incidences during the dry season. It is interesting to note that as the quality of the natural forests may be declining due to unscientific practices of weed clearing by the Forest Department as well as invasion by exotic species like *Lantana camara* and *Eupatorium (Chromolaena odorata)*, the elephants are forced to search for food elsewhere. This inevitably leads them towards the juicy and easily available food crops that grow right next door to them. Despite various mitigation measures like Elephant proof trenches, electric fences and elephant squads, these huge but highly intelligent mammals inevitably find a way to obtain their golden booty.

It is quite a conundrum for both the elephants as well as the farmers and Forest Department regarding how to prevent these frequent crop raids. Some obvious measures would be to improve the quality of the vegetation within the forests through scientific forest management practices as well as adopt mixed cropping practices on the forest fringes. So, it is evident that we must act in all urgency and cooperate to ensure that the abode of the gentle giants remain so for the future generations of nature lovers to observe and admire.