Elephants at Risk

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Elephants at Risk : Poaching, Policy, and Protection

Context:

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

What is Elephant Poaching?

- **Poaching** refers to the **illegal hunting or capturing of wild animals**, usually for commercial gain.

- In the case of elephants, poaching is driven by demand for:

    - **Ivory** (elephant tusks) used in **ornaments, jewellery, and traditional medicine**, particularly in **Asian markets**.

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

    - Other body parts for unregulated medicinal or cultural uses.

Current Status of Elephant Poaching in Tamil Nadu

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

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

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

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

Elephant Population Trends in Tamil Nadu

- **2012**: Elephant population was **over 4,000**.

- **2017**: Declined to **below 2,800**.

- **2024**: Rebounded to **3,000+**, according to the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.

- This rebound indicates **improved habitat protection and enforcement** measures.

Distribution and Conservation Status of Elephants in India

- Species: **Asian Elephant (Elephas maximus)** – **India's largest terrestrial mammal**.

- **60% of the global Asian elephant population** is found in **India**.

- Major regions:

  - **Southern India, Northeast India, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh**.

- **Legal and Conservation Status**:

  - **IUCN**: **Endangered**.

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

Key Concerns and Challenges

1. **Resurgence of Poaching Activity**

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

2. **Investigation and Reporting Gaps**

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

3. **Underreporting**

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

4. **Habitat Vulnerability**

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

Government Initiatives for Elephant Conservation

1. **Project Elephant (1992)**

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

2. **MIKE Programme (Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants)**

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

3. **Elephant Corridors**

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

4. **Gaj Yatra Campaign**

- Nationwide awareness campaign for **coexistence** and celebration of elephants.

5. **Elephant Reserves**

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

What Lies Ahead?

- **Institutional Reforms**:

  - Establish clear **protocols for investigating wildlife deaths**.

  - Promote **transparency** and fix **accountability gaps**.

- **Capacity Building**:

  - **Upskill field staff** for better monitoring, enforcement, and evidence collection.

- **Legal Strengthening**:

  - Protect enforcement officials from **political or criminal pressures** during poaching investigations.

- **Inter-State Coordination**:

  - Collaborate with **neighbouring states** to dismantle cross-border poaching and trade networks.

- **Public Confidence & Monitoring**:

  - Reopen **past unresolved cases**.

  - Encourage **community involvement** and **regular population monitoring**.