

# 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.

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### 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.
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### 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.
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## 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.
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## 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.
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## 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**.

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## 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.
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### 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**.