Kerala’s Man-Elephant Conflict

Why in news?

The Kerala forest department captured a rogue tusker (PT 7 or Palakkad Tusker 7) that had been raiding villages in Palakkad district for over a year.

What is the scale of human-elephant conflict in the state?

- Of the estimated nationwide population of 30,000 wild elephants in 2017, Kerala had about 5,700, or **19%** of the total population.
- Kerala recorded only **5.6%** population that India lost to electrocution and poaching between 2018-19 and 2020-21.
- Between 2018-19 and 2021-22, Kerala accounted for only **4%** of the people killed by elephants in India.

Why is human-wildlife conflict a controversial issue in Kerala?

- **Geography** - Forest covers nearly 30% of the State’s geographical area.
- Numerous densely populated human settlements are located close to protected forest regions.
- **Agriculture** - Kerala has a history of settler-agriculture since pre-Independence days, and state policy continues to allow such migration.
- Changes in agricultural practices in cropland adjoining forests also attract elephants into conflict.
- **Habitat depletion** - Elephants are far-ranging animals and fragmentation of habitats due to changes in land use squeeze the jumbos.
- **Invasive species** - Exotic invasive weeds such as Lantana and Senna have reduced the availability of food and water.
- **Monoculture** - Monoculture of species such as eucalypts and acacia has also adversely affected plant biodiversity.
- **Conflict tourism** - People blow horns impatiently, try to drive the animal away and even approach the elephant on foot for selfies.
- **Bull elephants** - The chances of coming across a rogue animal increase with the number of bull elephants roaming outside the forest whose number is on the rise in Kerala.

What efforts were taken by the State to reduce the conflict?

- **Trenches** - Elephant-proof trenches used in Kerala, are considered largely effective, provided they are properly maintained.
- **Hanging power fences** - In an Rs.620-crore masterplan to address the issue, the

Forest department recommends hanging power fences that will be out of reach of elephants.

- **Indigenous plants** - As a part of Kerala's new eco-restoration policy, the Forest department aims to plant indigenous plants (wild mango,wild jackfruit) in the forest to ensure wild animals' food security and dissuade them from entering agricultural lands.
- **ESZ Norms** - Kerala's legislative assembly unanimously passed a resolution in 2022 urging the Centre to exempt the State from the Eco-Sensitive Zones (ESZ) norm.

What is the need of the hour?

- **Early warning systems** can be created to track the movement of elephants, so that people can avoid going to locations where they have been spotted.
- **Elephant sensors** can be fitted along treacherous rail routes that cut through the reserve forest to avoid accidents involving elephants.

References

1. The Indian Express | Understanding Kerala's man-elephant conflict
2. The Hindu | Kerala's escalating human-wildlife conflicts

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering