Man-Elephant Conflict in Kerala

Why in news?

Recently in Wayanad, an elderly man lost his life after being attacked by a radio collared wild elephant.

Kerala- Hotspot of human animal conflict
• **Forest coverage**- Around 30% of the State's geographical area is forest. • **Small State**- Kerala is relatively a small State with an average width of just around 70km and a population more than 3.46 crore. • **Dense population**- The human settlements are located close to protected forest regions. • **Agriculture-** A large number of agricultural plantations too lie near wildlife habitats. This is especially true in the case of hilly reaches, which includes most of the heavily forested eastern part of the State. • **Worst hit districts-** Wayanad, Kannur, Palakkad and Idukki. • **Wayanad**- It has a forest cover of 36.48%, has lost 41 lives to elephant attacks and 7 to tiger attacks over the last decade majorly due to its geographical location. • **Forest areas in Wayanad**- It comprises of Nagarhole Tiger Reserve, Bandipur National Park, and Biligiri Ranganatha Swamy Temple Tiger Reserve in Karnataka, and Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Sathyamangalam Forest in Tamil Nadu. • Wild animals, especially elephants and tigers, traverse state borders in search for food. • **Government data for 2022-23-** It recorded 8,873 wild animal attacks, of which, 4193 were by wild elephants, 1524 by wild boars, 193 by tigers, 244 by leopards, and 32 by bison. Of 98 reported deaths, 27 were due to elephant attacks. • **Impact on agriculture sector**- Beyond posing risk to humans, these attacks also devastated Kerala's agriculture sector. • From 2017 to 2023, there were 20,957 incidents of crop loss due to wild animal raids which also killed 1,559 domestic animals, mainly cattle.

What are the reasons for man animal conflict?

- **Impact of alien plants**- Due to cultivation of alien plants like acacia, mangium and eucalyptus in forest tracts for commercial purposes led to decline in the quality of forest habitats.
- **Deprive natural habitat-**The animals are deprived of their natural habitat and food sources due to cultivation of alien plants, these water-guzzling species also strain the forest's natural water resources. Elephants are among the worst affected species due to this.
- **Impact of invasive species**- Species like lantana, milkania and senna planted by forest department over decades, have also hindered growth of natural vegitation in forests.
- **Slow eco-restoration process**- The State has banned the cultivation of acacia and eucalyptus in forest tracts in 2018, the process of regenerating natural forests, such that animals do not face shortage of food and water will take time.

- **Changed agriculture practices**- Practices such as leaving farmland unattended and growing crops like bananas and pineapples, have lured animals out of forests.
- **Target domesticated animals**- The increase in wildlife attacks has also pushed people to safer settlements, leaving more farms vulnerable to raids by tigers and other carnivores especially older animals less capable of hunting in the wild.
- **Anthropogenic activities**- Waste disposal near forested areas, fragmentation of animal habitats due to wanton construction, and increased human presence in and around animal habitat.
- **Increase in bull elephants**- It is due to recovery of the sex-ratio after the ivory poaching in the past and degradation of the forest habitats by invasive weeds.

Palakkad Tusker-7 (PT-7), Arikomban, Padayappa, Chakka Komban and Kabali are bull elephants which are named after their traits.

What are the steps taken by Kerala to tackle human animal conflict?

- **Physical barriers-** Construction of elephant proof trenches, elephant proof stone walls and solar powered electric fencing, it is implemented to prevent wild animals, especially elephants, from entering human settlements and causing damage or harm
- **Eco-restoration measures**- Kerala forest department is aiming to plant suitable indigenous plants like wild mango, wild gooseberry, and wild jackfruit in the forest to ensure wild animals' food security and dissuade them from entering agricultural lands.
- **Land acquisition scheme**- It pays farmers to relocate from their farms near the forest areas and convert them into forest land.
- **Rapid Response Teams -**It has established by Kerala in areas that see the highest incidence of human-animal conflict, they are supposed to deal with wildlife attacks and rescue operations in a timely and effective manner.

What lies ahead?

- Physical barriers must be installed in all human animal conflict prone areas, the people must be made aware of the barriers so that they don't break to let their cattle into the forest for grazing.
- The measures must be supplemented by creating early warning systems that can track the movement of elephants and other dangerous animals using drones and watchers, so that people can avoid going to locations where they have been spotted.
- The Centre should allot fund to devise innovative measures to tackle human animal conflict

References

1. Indian Express- Understanding man animal conflict in Kerala
2. Indian Express- Wayanad elephant kills man



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