Safety of Elephants

Mains (GS II & GS III) – Governance: Transparency & Accountability.

GS III – Environment and Conservation.

Why in news?

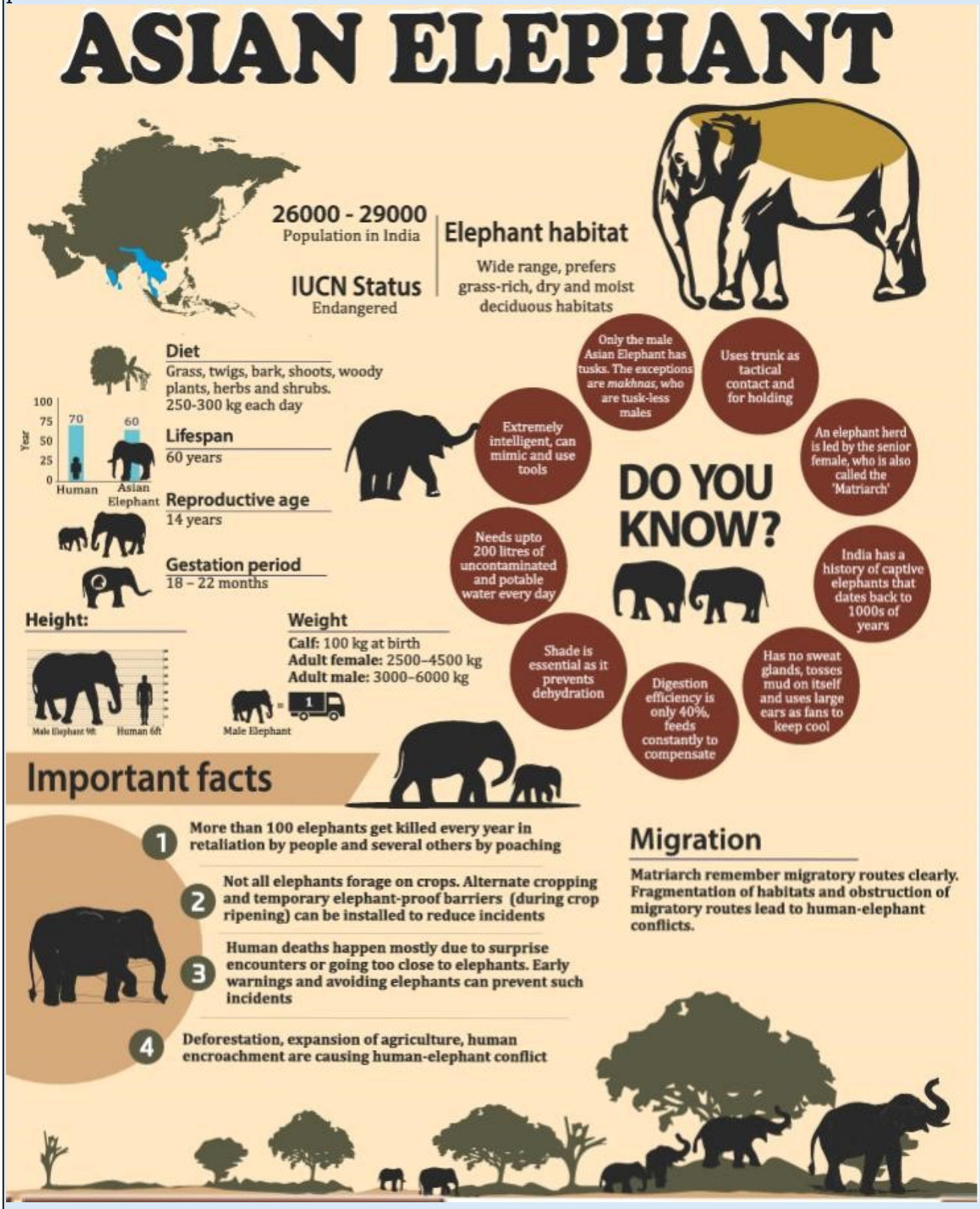
A recent poaching incident in Tamil Nadu's Dharmapuri district has revived fears about illegal trade in wildlife products.

What is the current status of Elephants poaching?

- **Poaching** – It is the *illegal hunting or capture of animals* that are not one's own.
- **Reason for poaching** - In many cases, poaching involves *killing animals* with the intent to acquire their meat, horns, scales, or other body parts.
- **Wildlife trafficking** - In other cases, poaching involves the *live capture of animals*, which are then trafficked for the illegal exotic pet trade, for use in entertainment or tourism, and for other exploitative purposes such as the extraction of bile from bears.
- Elephant poaching is usually driven by a *demand for their tusks*.
- Elephant tusks are *made out of ivory.*
    - Ivory is in high demand in various parts of the world, particularly in Asia, where it is used for *ornaments, jewellery, and traditional medicine.*
- **Status of poaching** - The Forest Department claims that *poaching no longer poses a serious threat* to the wild elephant population.
    - For instances, according to Tamil Nadu's (TN) Elephant Death Audit Framework, poaching accounted for less than 1% of all elephant deaths recorded in Tamil Nadu since 2010.
- **Resurge of population -** According to Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change, TN's elephant population dropped from over 4,000 (2012) to under 2,800 (2017), but rebounded to 3,000+ by 2024.
    - This indicates better management of poaching incidents.

Distribution of Elephants

• Elephant (Elephas maximus) is the largest terrestrial mammal of India.
• About 60% of the Asian elephant population is in India.
• It is disturbed across South India, North East, Odisha, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh.
• The requirement of food and water for elephants are very high and therefore their population can be supported only by forests that are under optimal conditions.
• **IUCN Status** – Endangered.
• Schedule I species under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, offering it the highest legal protection.

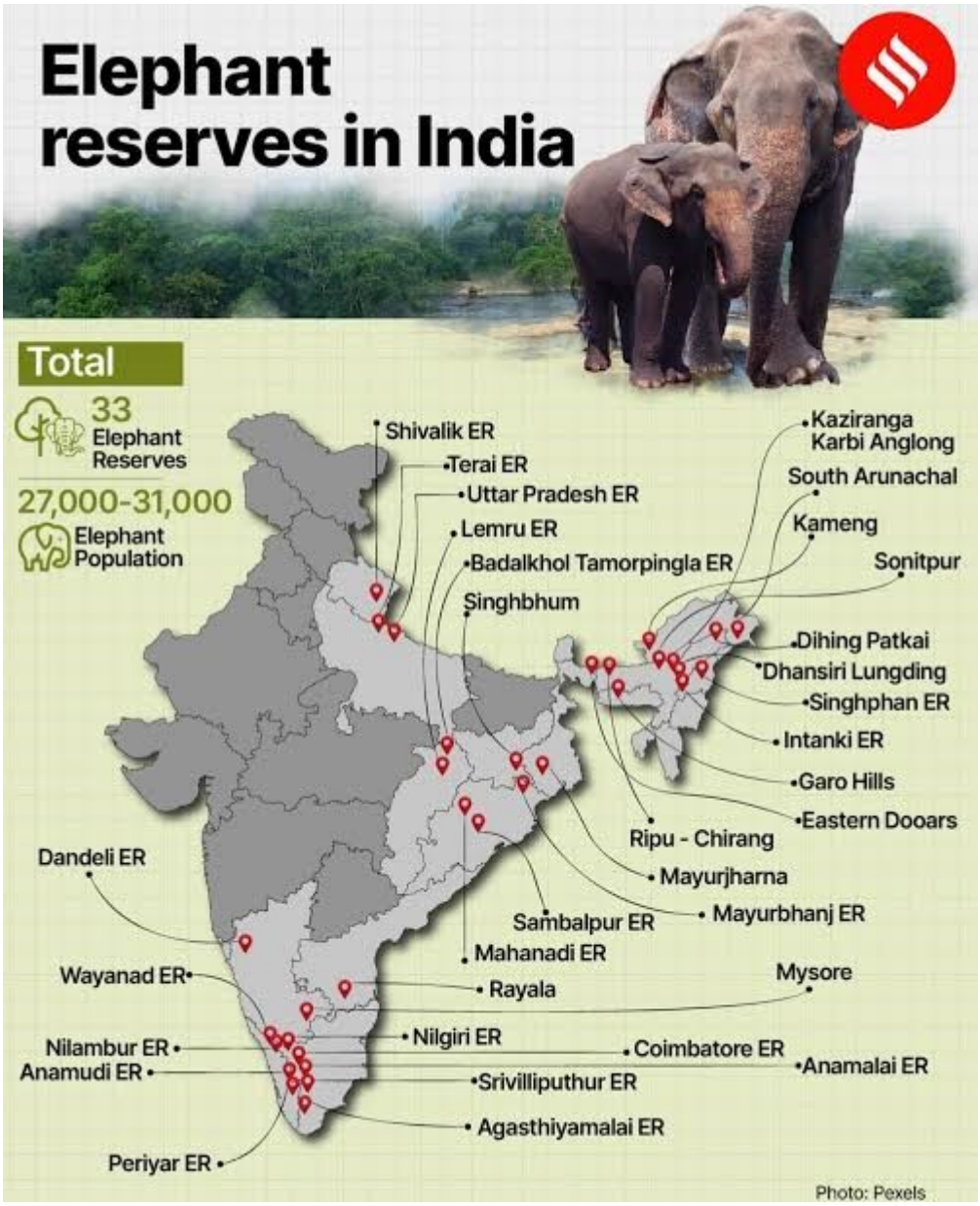


What are the concerns regarding elephants poaching?

- **Resurgence of poaching threat** – Recent killing of an elephant in Dharmapuri indicates that illegal wildlife trade is still active and dangerous.
    - There are fear that poaching gangs may become more active again as elephant populations recover.
- **Underreporting and Investigation Lapses** – Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (2019 report) pointed to failures in investigation of poaching cases in forest divisions.
- **Transparency and accountability** – Although poaching officially accounts for <1% of elephant deaths since 2010, it still forms 7.5% of unnatural deaths.
- **Habitat Vulnerability** - Poaching hotspots like Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve are ecologically sensitive due to their terrain and connectivity to multiple forest patches.

What are government initiatives to conserve wild Elephants?

- **Elephant Corridors -** Mapped across India to ensure safe migration and reduce human-elephant conflict.
- **Gaj Yatra -** Nationwide awareness campaign celebrating elephants and promoting coexistence.
- **MIKE Programme (CITES) -** Monitors trends in elephant poaching to inform global conservation efforts.
- **Project Elephant (1992) -** Flagship scheme for protection, habitat conservation, and conflict mitigation.
- **Elephant Reserves -** 33 notified reserves across India for long-term conservation.



What lies ahead?

- Encouraging *structural improvements* in the Forest Department could enhance transparency.
    - For example: establishing clear protocols for investigating wildlife deaths.
- *Gentle upskilling of field staff* may support better handling of cases.
- *Strengthening legal procedures* might help avoid undue pressure during investigations.
- *Continued coordination with neighbouring states* can aid in curbing poaching networks.
- Revisiting past cases thoughtfully may help build public confidence.
- Sustained conservation efforts and regular monitoring could further support elephant safety.

References

1. The Hindu | Safety of Elephants

2. Vikaspedia | Distribution of Elephants

