

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.

ASIAN ELEPHANT



26000 - 29000
Population in India

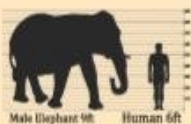
IUCN Status
Endangered

Elephant habitat

Wide range, prefers grass-rich, dry and moist deciduous habitats



Height:



Weight

Calf: 100 kg at birth
Adult female: 2500-4500 kg
Adult male: 3000-6000 kg



Extremely intelligent, can mimic and use tools

Needs upto 200 litres of uncontaminated and potable water every day

Shade is essential as it prevents dehydration

Only the male Asian Elephant has tusks. The exceptions are *makhnos*, who are tusk-less males

Uses trunk as tactical contact and for holding

An elephant herd is led by the senior female, who is also called the 'Matriarch'

DO YOU KNOW?



India has a history of captive elephants that dates back to 1000s of years

Digestion efficiency is only 40%, feeds constantly to compensate

Has no sweat glands, tosses mud on itself and uses large ears as fans to keep cool

Important facts



- 1 More than 100 elephants get killed every year in retaliation by people and several others by poaching
- 2 Not all elephants forage on crops. Alternate cropping and temporary elephant-proof barriers (during crop ripening) can be installed to reduce incidents
- 3 Human deaths happen mostly due to surprise encounters or going too close to elephants. Early warnings and avoiding elephants can prevent such incidents
- 4 Deforestation, expansion of agriculture, human encroachment are causing human-elephant conflict



Migration

Matriarch remember migratory routes clearly. Fragmentation of habitats and obstruction of migratory routes lead to human-elephant conflicts.



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](#)

