

2025 mixed year for wildlife conservation amid rising conflicts, forest loss in Karnataka

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2025 has been a turbulent year for wildlife conservation. The Forest Department had to encounter three major problems – burgeoning Human-Wildlife Conflict (HWC), continued fragmentation of forests and inertia on voluntary resettlement projects. All three involve complex issues that need the application of good science, field knowledge and political will.

As one looks back at these issues that played out during the year, the fault lines become evident.

First, the aggravation of HWC in the Bandipur-Nagarahole landscape has primarily been caused by ecologically unnecessary habitat manipulations like grassland creation, construction of water holes, check dams and such other earth moving and civil works. Such lucrative civil works are enabled by big budgets that get sanctioned without independent ecological scrutiny. In 2024-25 the budget was a whopping 49.97 crores. The reality is that recoveries of tigers in Bandipur-Nagarahole areas happened in the past, on shoe-string budgets. Even today, these Reserves can be fully protected with around 10 crore rupees.

This year, both people and wildlife have suffered due to conflict. While four people have died, as many as 15 tigers have reportedly been trapped. When there are persistent attacks on humans, tigers that get pushed out of Reserves need to be captured or eliminated. However, the capture of a tiger in the Core Area of BRT Tiger Reserve and a mature bull elephant from inside the Kudremukh National Park during this year is illogical since such Protected Areas are meant for wild animals.

Second, the Forest Department is under immense pressure from elected representatives to approve diversion of forest land for both ill planned development projects and for encroachments. In 2025, the wildlife clearance process hit a new low, with conditional approval granted to the hugely destructive Sharavathy Pumped Storage project. More than 100 road, pipeline, powerline and other projects, proposed this year, deep inside Wildlife Reserves, are awaiting clearance. Many projects are based on ad-hoc demands of elected representatives. Several of them, tagged as necessary development projects, are in reality redundant, hugely detrimental to wildlife conservation and a drain on the exchequer as well.

As regards encroachment, official data shows that 1,87,217 acres of forests have been cumulatively lost. Such encroachments in bits and pieces, is a major cause of forest fragmentation, which is scientifically considered to be a serious threat. Social justice to landless people must be delivered. But doing so in a mindless manner, by regularizing encroachments in the middle of large forest blocks and identified corridors, aggravates the impact of fragmentation. Tackling such forest encroachments requires political will which is unfortunately lacking. But this year, there have been some credible interventions by the Forest Minister, especially in a major case of forest land grabbing that surfaced in November this year.

The third issue, intertwined with the above, is about the urgent need to fast track Voluntary Resettlement projects. In May this year around 25 families voluntarily relocated from Bhimgad Sanctuary. Other than this, there has been no progress on this hugely important activity, which is a win-win solution for both people and wildlife and helps in minimising human-wildlife conflict.

The Supreme Court in a major Judgment delivered on 17th November 2025, has clearly held that both Critical Tiger Habitats notified under the Wildlife Act and Critical Wildlife Habitats notified under the Forest Rights Act are to be treated equally and that Compensatory Afforestation Funds (CAMPA) should be earmarked for voluntary village relocation to ensure inviolate core/critical tiger habitat. It has also been held that such voluntary relocation should be financially assisted in areas of strategic ecological value.

In another important Order, the Supreme Court on 3rd February, 2025, directed that the Government, both Centre and States, shall not take any steps which will lead to reduction of forests unless compensatory land is provided. Further, on 15th May 2025, the Apex Court directed all States to reclaim forest land illegally allotted to individuals or institutions and form an SIT to inquire into such cases.

In conclusion, this year has been a mixed bag for forests and wildlife in the State with the silver lining being the major Orders of the Supreme Court that continue to strengthen conservation efforts.

(The author is a Trustee of Wildlife First and has served on the National Board for Wildlife)