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Kerala's Draft Wildlife Bill is a dangerous shortcut with far-reaching consequences

An attempt to decentralise authority on culling, downgrade protections, and fast-track local action could redefine the state's relationship with wildlife—at a grave ecological cost



A bonnet macaque. Photographer: Mano Chandra Dhas via iStock

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Kerala recently unveiled a draft law, the Wildlife Protection (Amendment) Bill, 2025, which seeks to fundamentally alter how conservation is practiced. The draft law's release comes even as human-wildlife conflicts have surged across Kerala's hills, forests, and farmlands, increasing anxieties in its rural households.

But, the new draft law, pitched as a response to mounting distress, has raised profound questions. Can Kerala secure its farmers without endangering its forests? Can it address immediate safety concerns without undermining national conservation frameworks painstakingly built over five decades? And crucially, does this bill represent bold pragmatism or dangerous expediency?

Shift towards decentralised lethality

At the heart of the draft lies a decisive push to decentralise authority for culling. The central Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 vests powers under Section 11 solely in the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) to permit the killing of animals that pose a threat to human life or property. Kerala now proposes to distribute this authority to Chief Conservators of Forests (CCFs) at the regional level, enabling faster, localised decisions.

Simultaneously, the bill empowers the CWLW himself/herself with extraordinary discretion: s/he may directly order the killing of any wild animal that enters a populated area and causes harm. This effectively normalises lethal force as a frontline response rather than a rare, carefully evaluated measure.

A second dramatic provision is the attempt to declare wild boar as vermin under Section 62 of the central act, thereby permitting mass culling without the legal safeguards that usually apply. Farmers, who see wild boar as the single largest source of crop damage, have long demanded such a measure. But ecologists warn that removing boars wholesale would destabilise local ecosystems, affecting predators such as tigers and leopards and triggering unforeseen ecological ripples.

Equally contentious is the proposal to downgrade the bonnet macaque from Schedule I—the highest category of protection where it was placed only in 2022—to Schedule II. This would make it easier for officials to capture, transport, or eliminate the species without requiring central clearance. Conservationists note that macaques play an essential role in seed dispersal and forest regeneration and warn that downgrading species based on human irritation sets a dangerous precedent.

Perhaps most radically, the draft also seeks to empower local self-governments, including panchayats, to act swiftly in tackling animal threats. While this reflects Kerala's celebrated tradition of decentralised governance, it risks opening the door to inconsistent, populist, and poorly regulated interventions that may privilege short-term convenience over ecological balance.

From help desks to solar fences

The draft is not only about legal authority. On August 31, 2025, Kerala launched an intensive one-year mission to tackle conflict on the ground. Help desks have been established in affected panchayats, offering farmers a direct channel to report wildlife threats.

Physical and electronic barriers form another pillar: the state is repairing old solar fences and installing new ones to deter elephants and other large animals from entering fields. Alongside this, there is an emphasis on habitat improvement within forests—restoring grasslands, building waterholes, and ensuring that animals find sufficient food and water without straying into human settlements.

The government also envisions a collective model of conflict management, involving youth clubs, farmers' collectives, licensed shooters, and local bodies. To reduce resentment, compensation and insurance schemes are being streamlined, promising quicker disbursement of ex-gratia payments for crop damage and human casualties.

Modernisation is another theme: solar fencing is to be upgraded with new technologies, and a monitoring system for forest pathways will be introduced to discourage human activities that attract animals to settlements. The state has also announced targeted action in identified hotspots, indicating a more aggressive and militarised response where conflicts are most intense.

Why centralisation mattered

To understand the significance of Kerala's draft, one must revisit the origins of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. This central law emerged at a time when India's wildlife was under severe threat

from hunting, habitat destruction, and unregulated exploitation. The framers of the act deliberately vested decision-making power in central and state wildlife wardens to prevent local political pressures from diluting protections. Centralisation was seen as a safeguard against populist demands for culling or commercial exploitation.

Over the decades, the act has been amended to reflect evolving ecological realities, including stronger protections for elephants, marine species, and birds. It is also the backbone of India's compliance with international conventions like CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species). Any attempt by a state to dilute protections risks undermining not just domestic law but India's international standing.

Kerala's attempt to carve out a parallel framework, therefore, is unprecedented. While states like Bihar and Himachal Pradesh have sought temporary vermin declarations for nilgai or monkeys, they did so through the central government's authorisation under Section 62. Kerala, by contrast, is seeking legislative authority at the state level itself—a move that may trigger constitutional challenges.

Kerala's legacy of coexistence

The irony is that Kerala has historically been a model for people-wildlife coexistence. With one of the highest population densities in India, it has nonetheless managed to conserve vast tracts of forest and sustain iconic species like elephants, tigers, and lion-tailed macaques. Protected areas such as Periyar, Silent Valley, and Wayanad have become symbols of conservation success, often achieved through grassroots mobilisation.

Kerala's famed decentralised panchayat system has also been a source of strength in managing natural resources. But the proposed bill risks turning that participatory model into a decentralised trigger for lethal force. Instead of empowering communities to protect habitats and innovate coexistence strategies, it may encourage them to sanction killings as the first resort.

Socio-economic pressures

None of this is to deny the real suffering of rural households. In districts like Wayanad and Palakkad, crop losses from wild boars, elephant raids, and monkey incursions can devastate small farmers already struggling with debt and volatile markets. Human casualties from elephant or tiger attacks fuel deep resentment. Political leaders, faced with agitated crowds and relentless media coverage, are under immense pressure to act.

It is in this atmosphere of urgency that the draft bill has been shaped. Yet critics argue that by promising quick fixes—authorising culling, downgrading protections, and delegating authority—it risks fuelling a cycle where structural causes remain unaddressed.

Ecological consequences of shortcuts

Declaring wild boar as vermin may seem like a farmer's victory, but it carries cascading ecological risks. Wild boar are key prey for carnivores; their removal could push tigers and leopards towards livestock and humans. Similarly, downgrading bonnet macaques could lead to indiscriminate capture and killing, ignoring their vital ecological role in seed dispersal.

Empowering officials to shoot animals that stray into populated areas may reduce immediate danger but hardens public attitudes against wildlife. Animals become framed as intruders or enemies rather than co-inhabitants. Once this perception takes root, conservation itself loses legitimacy.

The federal and constitutional question

Wildlife is a subject under the Concurrent List of the Indian Constitution. This means both Parliament and state legislatures can pass laws. But where a state law conflicts with a central one, the President's assent is required. Kerala's draft, by altering powers under Sections 11 and 62 and by downgrading species, clearly enters contested territory.

If the assembly passes it, the bill will go to the Governor, who may reserve it for the President's consideration. The Centre, wary of dilution, may advise withholding assent. This could turn Kerala's

experiment into a flashpoint of Centre-state tensions, with implications for federalism and conservation alike.

A more balanced approach

Kerala's challenge is real: human lives and livelihoods must be protected. But solutions exist beyond shortcuts. Investment in non-lethal deterrents, such as chilli-rope fences, beehive barriers, and acoustic devices, has shown promise in parts of Africa and Asia. Expanding community-based conservation models, where local people are compensated not only for losses but rewarded for protecting habitats, could reduce hostility.

Strengthening scientific monitoring, restoring wildlife corridors, and addressing the ecological damage of quarries and monocultures are essential long-term measures. Equally, transparent and timely compensation can reduce anger and prevent vigilante killings. Kerala's famed local governance could be harnessed not for sanctioning culls but for fostering coexistence through participatory conservation.

Comment C.R. Bjjoy (September 15, 2025)

Please note that the **Forest and Wildlife Department is no longer the only statutory authority to protect wildlife within forest lands**. Their jurisdiction is limited to the forest areas other than what has been recognised and vested to the Gram Sabhas under Forest Rights Act 2006 whether claimed, and titled or not. Section 5 (a) protect the wild life, forest and biodiversity of Forest Rights Act 2006 overrides Wildlife Protection Act 1972. Therefore, check whether the draft Bill is compatible with this provision. Any forest officer including the Conservator of Forests who is proposed to be given the power to cull wildlife, in the case of forest lands under the jurisdiction of the Gram Sabhas have to be approved by the concerned Gram Sabha (a parallel provision with reference to forest diversion under Forest Conservation Act 1980 requires Gram Sabha consent for all forest diversion for non-forest activities) . Perhaps this should be included in the DTE article