



This is the tip of the iceberg. In the last 4-5 years, hunting cases have increased in these areas. Problems of poaching are rampant in Mullaihanagiri, Attigundi and Bababudangiri areas and these ranges are open for hunters. Thousands of tourist vehicles come to this place and it is a boon to poachers as they can pretend to be innocent tourists. Attigundi village has lot of illegal guns coming in from outside and this is proving to be a disaster to the hill ranges and wildlife even in Bababudangiri where people come in with weapons. There is no proper monitoring by both police and forest department and this is just one of the cases detected.

G Veeresh, wildlife activist

Indian Sambar (Rusa unicolor) has been on the radar of poachers, hunters and wildlife traders.



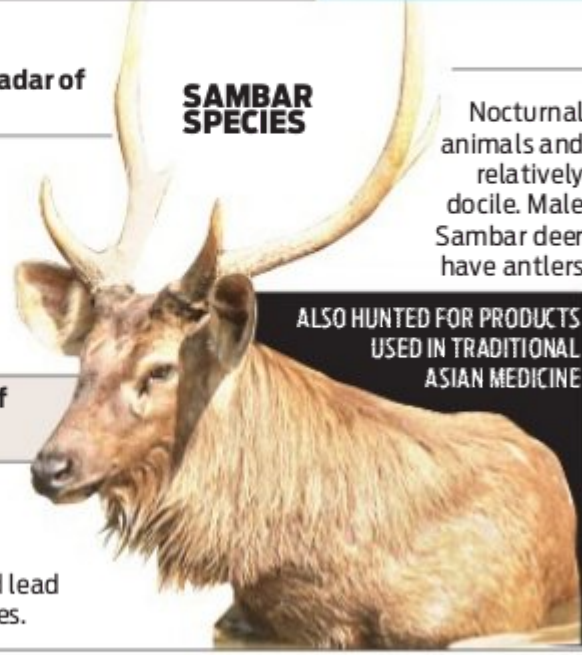
Recent surveys have shown that their abundance in the Western Ghats is on the decline

Sambar is hunted because of its large size. This means more meat per animal (adults sometimes weigh as much as 550 kg) and an impressive trophy.

On the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species

Recently, the Kerala government approached the Centre to bring in amendments to the Wildlife Protection Act so that the antlers could be used for medicinal purposes. Wildlife activists said this would lead to indiscriminate hunting of Sambar and other species.

SAMBAR SPECIES



Nocturnal animals and relatively docile. Male Sambar deer have antlers

ALSO HUNTED FOR PRODUCTS USED IN TRADITIONAL ASIAN MEDICINE

Main accused on the run; others said they were unaware that poaching was a heinous crime

THE DEER HUNTERS

The twelve involved were members of four families from Hassan, Bengaluru and Chikkamagaluru



Mohammed Sameer | Age: 29

Profession: A professional shooter and member of Karnataka State Rifle Association. Lives in Bengaluru. Native of Udayavara near Sakleshpur



Akhtar Ahmed | Age: 67

Profession: Owner of coffee estate in Udayavara near Sakleshpur



Rafiq Ahmed (prime accused & absconding) | Age: 44

Profession: Competitive shooter. Also a national-level medal winner in shooting. Lives in Bengaluru



Mohammed Rizwan | Age: 36

Profession: Owns a timber business, coffee planter. Native of Kodlipete village near Sakleshpur



Syed Ahmed | Age: 30



Meer Najib Ali | Age: 18

Profession: Environment engineer, Mysuru

Profession: PUC student in Jain College, Bengaluru



Meer Nayyar Ali | Age: 23



Meer Mudasar Ali | Age: 23

Profession: Employee in Global Travels Pvt Ltd, Bengaluru

Profession: Employee in an IT firm, Bengaluru



Arun (23)



Chethan (26)



Prasanna (18)



Harish (25)

Profession: Coffee estate workers. Natives of Attigundi Mahal, Chikkamagaluru

THEY HUNTED FOR FUN, MEAT AND 'TROPHY'

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @Bengaluru

A twelve-member group took its New Year's Eve celebrations to a heinous level by shooting two Sambar deer in the forest area. They did it for fun, meat and 'trophy', a forest official said. The trophy, according to sources, was the antlers of the deer, and the shooter would get the 'trophy'.

"Their plan was to kill the animal, clean it up with the help of locals, cut it into pieces and pack them in different covers. Those who had come from Bengaluru and Mysuru were about to carry a larger portion of meat to share it with their relatives as they consider the Sambar meat to be very delicious," the source added.

Official sources said, "The forest officials and local wildlife activists took more than three hours to track and nab them. The accused have confessed that they have killed wild animals in the past and did not know that it was considered to be a heinous crime.



Mohammed Sameer (right), a professional shooter, and Akhtar Ahmed (centre) are among the accused | EXPRESS

The accused were caught when they were allegedly tracking another Sambar deer in the area to hunt."

Two of the accused — Rafiq Ahmed and Mohammed Sameer — who are professional shooters, took the lead to shoot the animals. They even had a licensed rifle.

Sources said, "The locals — Arun, Chethan, Prasanna and Harish — confessed that they keep track of the animal movements

and help tourists to hunt animals. They told us that they did it for some paltry money, meat and alcohol, which the other accused had assured to provide."

A forest official, who was part of the operation, said, "The accused, who are all well-educated, should be ashamed of their act. They were well aware of the Wildlife Protection Act and knew that poaching and killing of animals was illegal."



The response of the forest department was fantastic. However, more needs to be done to protect wildlife in these ranges. There should be a rethink on the existing conservation and protection measures as hunters and poachers are thriving in the guise of tourists

D V Girish, Bhadra Wildlife Conservation Trust and Wildcat-C



LOSS OF WILDLIFE

Poaching in Bhadra reserve not new, locals too involved

KIRAN PARASHAR K M @Bengaluru

FOR anyone looking for a quick getaway from the city, there's a range of eco-tourism spots in the state. But the promotion of eco-tourism has come at a cost to wildlife and forest cover.

Sunday's incident where a group of 12 killed two Sambar deer in Tanegebailu Wildlife Range in the Bhadra Tiger Reserve shows the lack of monitoring in forests and how the number of people entering protected forests are increasing by the day.

A local who supports wildlife activists in the Bhadra Tiger Reserve said, "Killing of wild animals is not new here. This incident came to light as the accused were caught red-handed. Locals who keep track of animals round-the-year take tourists to core habitat zones for a paltry sum and alcohol."

Another local said, "After the promotion of eco-tourism, the tourist numbers have massively increased and forest covers are shrinking with plastic bottles and trash littered everywhere. Camp fires and alcohol consumption inside the forest have become a common phenomenon."

A forest official said, "Earlier, it was local coffee planters who would go on 'shikari', but the numbers were small. Now, several tourists from cities visit the forests and sometimes hunt animals. With the existing number of forest officials here, it is impossible to guard the forests from these invaders."

Veeresh, a wildlife activist in the region, said, "For the past five years, there have been several incidents of tourists creating havoc in the forest region. Mullayyanagiri and Bababudangiri have lost their charm as tourists have invaded wildlife habitats. Nobody keeps track of tourists."

Shiva Shankar, trustee of People Tree organisation in Mysuru that organises treks, said, "There should be rules which stipulate that entry into forests is allowed only with permission from forest department. It would be better if forest guards accompanied trekkers. People should be educated that we exist because of nature and we should respect it."

'Exemplary punishment must be ensured'

PRAVEEN BHARGAV

The shocking case of hunting of two Sambars within the Bhadra Tiger Reserve presents an excellent opportunity to ensure exemplary punishment to the accused who appear to be from wealthy, educated backgrounds. This case once again highlights the importance of constructive collaboration of active NGOs and the Forest Department through sharing of real-time information. Given the background of the accused and the obvious pressure that would be brought upon the investigating officer, it would be vital for senior officers to ensure he is effectively insulated.

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (WLP) contains strong provisions precisely to deal with such matters. This case involves violations of Sections 9, 27, 31, 39, 48A which prohibit hunting, trespassing into a sanctuary and with a weapon, acquiring and destroying a wild animal which is government property and transporting it without permission. Under Section 51(1-C), the penalty on conviction shall be imprisonment of not less than three years extending to seven years and fine of not less than ₹50,000 extending to ₹2 lakh. The WLP empowers any forest officer to arrest, search and seize without a warrant and the investigation shall be done by an officer not below the rank of an Assistant Conservator of Forests. On completion of the investigation, a complaint to the jurisdictional magistrate shall be made under Section 55(b).

Two other provisions of WLP Section 52 which prohibit abatement of an offence and Section 57

which specifies that the burden of proof lies on the accused must be applied in this case to make it stronger. This is because there appears to be strong suspicion that others were involved and those detained were found in possession of meat and uncured trophy of a schedule animal (Sambar).

It would be important for the investigation officer to ensure that all procedures as prescribed by the WLP and CrPC are properly complied with to thwart attempts by defence lawyers to seek acquittal based on technical defects. Ballistic examination of the weapon used for hunting along with forensic evidence must be collated to ensure all the dots are connected. It could well be the case that this may not be the first time these individuals have indulged in illegal hunting. A thorough cyber investigation of their social media accounts may reveal more information including such other networks that are operating. It would be relevant to recall that in 2015 a group of eight people, including four from Bengaluru, were caught after a Facebook post revealed they had hunted a black naped hare in Pushpagiri Sanctuary.

Finally, for effective prosecution, it would be important for the Forest Department to seek the services of a sharp public prosecutor who is well-versed with handling wildlife cases. It is also hoped that the magistrate, who has already acted firmly by denying bail and remanding the accused to 15 days judicial custody, will ensure the trial is fast-tracked and severe punishment as provided for under law is imposed quickly.

(The writer is a former member of National Board for Wildlife)



OPINION