

A Social Assessment:

'Coexistence bottom up: strengthening Asian Elephant conservation in human dominated landscapes'

Implemented by the Nature Conservation Foundation, in collaboration with The Shola Trust

Indigenous Communities in Gudalur Forest Division

The Gudalur region is home to four different indigenous communities, all of whom fall in the category of “Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PTGs)”- Paniyas, Kattunayakans, Bettakurumbas and Mullukurumbas. The mullukurumbas and Bettakurumbas however, are classified as the same 'Kurumba' tribe in the list of Scheduled Tribes. Each of these communities is unique in terms of its social structure, mode of subsistence, cultural and religious practices and interaction with forests.

- 1) **Paniyas** - The Paniyas constitute the highest population of indigenous communities in the region. The Paniyas have been bonded labourers for several generations on land owned by a non tribal community called the Chetties. Traditionally food gatherers, most of them work as wage labourers to earn an income.
- 2) **Kattunayakans** -The Kattunayakans were mainly hunters and gatherers of forest produce, especially honey with sporadic shifting cultivation around their settlements. They have been relatively furthest away from mainstream development interventions. A majority continue to live inside the forest, living on forest produce and a small amount of money which they earn by going for wage labour occasionally.
- 3) **Mullukurumbas** -The Mullukurumbas are known for their hunting and bird catching traditions. Among the indigenous communities, they are the most well off, often owning small tracts of land and practising settled agriculture. Over the years they have had the greatest access to government schemes and programmes. Today several Mullukurumbas are enrolled in higher study courses in Coimbatore and Bangalore.
- 4) **Bettakurumbas** -The Bettakurumbas are famous for their skills as elephant mahouts. They have often been employed by the forests department as their foot soldiers (Anti Poaching Watchers), since they know the ins and outs of the forest thoroughly. They were known to lead the khedda operations for erstwhile maharajas. Many were skilled ironmongers. Currently many are employed by the forest department in various capacities.

Project Impacts

The project was designed and developed largely as an alternative to more dominant 'expert formulated, top-down' approach projects that are implemented on local communities. It aims to take a more democratic approach – working with local communities, attempting to have their traditional co-existence mechanisms formulated into local policy. As such, almost by design, the project aims to have very little 'impact' on the community, as aimed at allowing local communities to have an impact on local policy.

The various interactions with indigenous people and the corresponding safeguards are listed below.

- Around 50 semi-structured and unstructured interviews to understand indigenous perspectives on what it means to live with elephants. All of this will be completely optional, based on free, prior informed consent, with the grievance redressal mechanisms clearly explained.
- A few villages will be short listed 6 months into the project, after a detailed mapping of elephant conflict and identifying villages with high conflict. One or two of these villages with regular elephant interaction or conflict will be chosen, and a more detailed 'coexistence plan' will be formulated. This will include detailed maps showing how the elephants move through the area, what the problem areas in the village are, and all the traditional coping mechanisms will be noted. At this stage, free, prior and informed consultations will be held with the villages to ensure their support, and the grievance redressal mechanism will be clearly explained, with the grievance redressal poster being put up in the village. Villages will also have the option of pulling out from the implementation of this plan at any time if their opinions change.

Community Consultation during Project Design

1. On the 28th of June one meeting was held with all the 8 panchayat elected representatives (including indigenous people), along with representatives from the forest and revenue departments. The meeting was planned by the Shola Trust in Collaboration with the Rotary Club of Gudalur and the Revenue Divisional Officer. During the meeting, all the proposed activities were explained (attached photographs). Three panchayats – Srimadurai, Cherambady and O'Valley – came forward asking for a second round of more detailed meetings to formulate plans for their panchayats. Official minutes from the Revenue Department are yet to be published, but the concept note for the meeting as well as summary notes from the meeting are attached (Annex 1).
2. On 7th July, during the monthly meeting of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) – an indigenous people's organisation – we had put forward the project plans to them and collect feedback/understand any possible problems or negative impacts on indigenous communities. The feedback was completely positive, and no negative impacts were foreseen. Attached is a letter from the secretary of the AMS (Annex 2).

Grievance Redressal Mechanism

Indigenous communities can raise a grievance arising from project activities at all times at through any one of the following for a:

- 1) Through the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam meetings which are held every month.
- 2) Through the Panchayat Meeting that are held every month.
- 3) At The Shola Trust Office in Gudalur.

On receipt of complaint from the affected individual(s) at any of the above fora, the concerned for a will respond to grievances in writing within 15 working days of receipt. A copy of the grievance will be provided to the CEPF Secretariat. The grievance redressal mechanism will be communicated to all concerned through village meetings. A grievance redressal poster (Annex 3) has been designed which will be put up in the local languages in villages where 'human-elephant coexistence plans' are being formulated.