

Of all Sri Lanka's conflicts, the one with elephants is the oldest

The fight between people and pachyderms is growing ever more intense

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AS TROPICAL DUSK turns to night outside Galgamuwa, fireflies are not the only points of light around Lalith's little rice paddy, the last field in the valley waiting to be harvested. On one side, bonfires are blazing in neighbours' fields. On the other, Lalith's nephew is shining a torch out of one of the impressive tree houses that dot this part of the country. And in the middle of his paddy, seated around embers that are boiling a kettle, Lalith and friends are playing a furious card game that resembles whist.

Two dozen men are helping in all: this is Lalith's watch against elephants emerging from the forest at night. Growing rice is like laying out dinner. A herd of cows and their calves can snaffle a year's livelihood in a matter of minutes.

Sri Lankans' relationship with wild elephants is as ancient as it is complex. Curiously biddable and formidable in war, the animals were of great value to Sinhalese kings, who used them to build imposing monuments. The Portuguese brought the first Sri Lankan elephant to Europe: fed on cake, it died of dyspepsia and lies buried in the Vatican Gardens. British settlers used elephants to clear forest for their tea plantations.

As John Gimlette, a writer on Sri Lanka, puts it, elephants have served as tractor, limousine, warhorse and executioner. Today very few remain enslaved, but 6,000-plus wild animals roam the countryside. There, "human-elephant conflict" has always been an issue. Humans have been chasing away elephants for as long they have been growing crops; elephants have long flattened both. So how to explain an alarming increase in human-elephant collisions in just the past couple of years? Until recently 200-250 elephants died at human hands every year. But in 2018 the toll climbed to 319, and to 386 last year. Over the same period, human fatalities have risen sharply, to 114 last year.

Prithviraj Fernando, who runs the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR), says it is the baneful consequence of a kind of arms race. Finding that increasingly fearless elephants could not be chased away with shouts or stones, villagers in recent years have used huge firecrackers, subsidised by the government, which sound like bombs going off. The elephants have learned to ignore them. They deal with electric fences by, for instance, uprooting trees and dropping them on the wires. Some law-breaking villagers pepper animals with shot, set snares to catch trunks or legs, or plant explosives in pumpkins that mangle animals' mouths and lead to horrific deaths by starvation.

Only last week, in another area near Galgamuwa, a villager rigged a fence to mains electricity, killing a bull. Meanwhile, under a recent minister, Sarath Fonseka, the Department of Wildlife Conservation began calling for more guns to drive away elephants. Field Marshal Fonseka found a similar approach effective against humans when he commanded the Sri Lankan army during the brutal civil war that ended in 2009.

Peppered, taunted and maimed, elephants have unsurprisingly grown more aggressive, readier to charge when threatened than to run away. Relocating peccant pachyderms to national parks, another strategy popular with politicians, is also ineffective. Elephants, as Mr Fernando puts it, do not recognise park boundaries. They will sometimes travel hundreds of kilometres to return to their home range.

Persecution has proven disastrous for both species. Clearly, something needs to be done. In just under half of Sri Lanka, elephants and people live near each other. Meanwhile, fragmentation of forests and development stand in the way of the *alimankada*, the elephantine pathways that criss-cross the island and that the animals insist on following.

Permanent electric fences around national parks and fields are of no help to man or beast. CCR's solution is to protect settlements but fence fields only during the growing season. After the harvest, the land is for the elephants. Around Galgamuwa, villagers have long been receptive to a more flexible approach, even if politicians do not see what is in it for them.

The animals seem to appreciate a kindly touch. In the middle of his paddy, Lalith and his neighbours demonstrate their technique, passed down for generations. They sing to the animals: "Go away, little babies, go away. But once we've gathered the harvest, anything we leave is yours." How on earth, Banyan asks, can that work? It just does, Lalith replies. After all, he adds, "We're still here, and so are the elephants."

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