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HUMAN-LEOPARD CONFLICT IN SELECTED TEA PLANTATION ECOSYSTEMS IN HILL COUNTRY OF SRI LANKA

K. Vinojkumar[1*] and C.S. Wijesundara[2]

[1]Postgraduate Institute of Science, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
[2]Department of Zoology, Faculty of Science, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka
[*]vinojkvk@gmail.com

Human-leopard conflict is a rising issue in the upcountry of Sri Lanka, especially where tea cultivations are the dominant vegetation type. The Sri Lankan Leopard (*Panthera pardus kotiya*) is an endangered species, and most of these conflicts result in human-caused deaths of leopards. Hence the objective of this research was to assess the human-leopard conflict in selected tea estates in the upcountry wet zone. The study was conducted from January 2016 to February 2019, focusing on 15 estates in the Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts. Data were collected through questionnaires and personal interviews from 225 respondents. Tea estate managers, employees, estate communities and school teachers were the target group. The data were analysed to generate information on trends and patterns of the conflict. The relationship between the frequency of attacks and distance to the nearest forest was analysed using regression analysis. Results indicate that the majority of respondents experienced the conflict, severity depending on study areas. Attacks on dogs were recorded in 13 estates. Attacks on humans were recorded from Panmoor, Hatton, Rosita and Kotagala estates. These happened unexpectedly and resulted in non-fatal injuries only. There was no significant correlation between the distance to the nearest forest and the frequency of attacks ($p > 0.05$). 80% of respondents ($n = 214$) indicated that the leopard killings were due to snares targeted at wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). Misidentification of leopards by estate communities leads to the unintentional killing of fishing cats (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), another endangered species. Most of the community (84%) had a negative attitude towards leopard conservation due to fear and lack of awareness of the role played by the leopard in the ecosystems. Awareness programs for the plantation community on the importance of wildlife conservation may help to conserve not only leopards but also fishing cats. They will help improve the sustainability of tea ecosystems which are required to obtain tea estate certifications such as Rainforest Alliance UTZ and Fair Trade. Avoiding deforestation and planting native trees in deforested areas will increase prey availability for leopards; thus, it may help in reducing conflict rates in the long run.

Keywords: Fishing cat, Human-Leopard conflict, Leopard, Panmoor, Rosita