

The Upper Palanis – 10 years after

by

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Introduction

I surveyed the Palani Hills in 1992-93 to assess the status of mammals, birds and human-wildlife conflicts. A decade has passed and a decision regarding the wildlife sanctuary is yet to be taken. I decided it would be a good idea to revisit the area and rapidly survey the area to assess how much has changed these last ten years.

Sampling

I focused on the Upper Palanis (UPalanis), because of their importance as the projected core area of the proposed sanctuary. Two major objectives of this survey were to reassess the status of:

1. Large mammals
2. Sholas, grasslands and commercial plantations

I collected data from three field trips:

- i. 29/7/03: 1 day through Kukkal shola, to the temple and $\frac{3}{4}$ the way to the caves.
- ii. 1-4/8/03: 3 days in the Berijam area
 - 1 day via the Engineering Road to the southern slopes
 - 1 day to 50 m below Vembadi Peak
- iii. 8-11/8/03: 4 days in the Ibex Peak, Ibex Cliff, Ullam Parai, Vandaravu area

Results

1. Large mammals

1.1. GAUR

Gaur were commonly seen in the UPalanis during 1992-93. It was understood then that the Palanis supported a high-density of this species.

Kukkal area

- Reaching the grasslands above the shola @ 9 a.m., we sighted a herd of gaur, and by the time we left five hours later, we sighted gaur on five more occasions.
- We observed over 30 gaur of two herds, grazing not far from each other, for nearly two hours.
- A herd of over 14 gaur was observed resting on their stomachs in open grassland from 1400 hrs (They were still resting when we left the area)

Note: All gaur were observed along the eastern slopes of the Manjampatti valley within Indira Gandhi WLS

Berijam area

- One adult male gaur (1430 hrs) besides the road while driving half way to Berijam.
 - Two adult males feeding in meadows around Forest Dept. residences (one male was seen in the same area on all four days that we at Berijam)
 - Madhu Ramnath and family, who were staying in Berijam while I was there, reported seeing a herd of 20 gaur 5 km from Berijam while driving to Mannavanur. Interestingly,
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a domestic cow was present with the herd and was observed feeding and moving with the herd.

- Gaur dung was abundant and common around Berijam Lake in most major habitats.

Vandaravu area

- I saw two gaur off the road during my bus ride back to Kodai from Kavunji, which was more than the lone adult male I saw during my entire four days in the area.
- Gaur dung was common, but less abundant than in the Berijam area.

1.2 OTHER SPECIES

- Wild boar: One observed feeding on eastern slopes of Manjampatti valley in IGWLS
- Tahr: pellets found close to Kukkal temple and Kundarai Malai of the Southern Slopes
- Sambar: pellets found near Kukkal temple
- Porcupine: droppings and quills found in all areas surveyed
- Feline/Canine species: scats found on all established roads and paths in the area
- Elephant: two dung piles found on Munnar road not far from watch-tower; dung found close to Kukkal caves

2. Grasslands, Sholas and commercial plantations

The Forest Department (F.D.) has halted harvesting timber and bark from the exotic wattle, eucalyptus and pine species in the UPalanis for over 5 years.

- The spread of these naturally propagating species has reached an alarming level.
- These exotic species are invading natural grasslands everywhere.
- Pine and eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*, *E. grandis*) plantation patches have little undergrowth except Eupatorium, an exotic weed, and offer practically no forage for most mammals and birds in the area.
- The uncontrolled invasion of wattle (*Acacia mearnsii*) continues at a furious pace and has occupied a lot of new ground (During walks along the Munnar road from Vandaravu, and walking to Vembadi, new dense stands of young wattle seem to have occupied much grassland and stolen previous views of the surrounding landscape).
- The percentage of land occupied by grasslands within a 2-km radius from Berijam appears to be as low as 10%; grasslands occupy a large percentage of the inner UPalanis.
- Sholas, viewed from the outside, do not seem to have been affected significantly.

Discussion

The low number of gaur sighted during my Rapid Survey of the inner UPalanis, were similar to results from a 3-day trip to the same area by Ian Lockwood and team in July 2003. In comparison to data from 1992-93: a day's hike to Vembadi peak yielded 37 gaur, and 3 days in the Vandaravu area, 14 gaur. These results together suggest that gaur are now scarce in the inner UPalanis, from being common a decade earlier. Two reasons for this change could be, a) reduction in the gaur population (due to one, or a combination, of any of the following - disease, poaching, increased natural predation and habitat reduction); and/or b) an emigration of gaur from the inner UPalanis (Note: The high number observed in IGWLS indicate that gaur are doing well in the greater Kukkal area).

Many of the potential reasons for reduction in numbers are related to people. The Forest Department took positive steps towards reducing the presence of people by stopping

unsustainable commercial plantations and tourism. These steps together with the fact that over 200 sq. km. of Reserved Forests in the UPalanis have no permanent human settlement, would lead us to assume that there exists an insignificant impact by people in the region (a situation that would also favor gaur not to emigrate). However, after meeting four groups of eucalyptus oil harvesters, and identifying two suspicious forest camps, I am inclined to understand the area is being detrimentally impacted by illegal human activities.

To address the impact by people in the UPalanis, there is a need for further active Forest Department intervention. Currently, however, the F.D. is severely handicapped to function effectively. Time has shown that the disuse of the Munnar Road past Berijam, an appropriate move taken to stop unsustainable tourism in the past, has negatively impacted the functioning of the F.D. The impassable road has managed to stop 4-wheel tourism in the area, but has also ended motored access to the inner UPalanis for the F.D. To be an active effective protection and management force, the F.D. needs motorable routes of access, especially to distant regions. An example of roads used for efficient protection and management in a protected area, Nagarahole: the National Park reputed to have the largest density of large mammals in Asia has a paved road running through its core (This road is a part of daily State bus routes and is only one of many in an extensive network of roads within Nagarahole). It is important to note that the F.D., besides being handicapped with no motorable roads for access to remote areas, has no structure with a roof to serve as accommodation west of Marian Shola. This current situation offers few necessities and little incentive for Department personnel to effectively function in areas west of Berijam.

Motorable roads will definitely aid in management of the area, but ironically they will also be needed to transport the inevitable final harvest of exotic timber from the UPalanis. This highlights the biggest issue facing long-term management of the UPalanis as wildlife habitat, “What should be done with an area in excess of 10,000 ha. occupied by self-propagating exotic mono-culture plantations that provide little habitat for few wild species.” Simply put, plantations negatively impact the quality of the watershed and provide insignificant wildlife habitat, two of the most important roles of the UPalanis ecosystem. It is now difficult to argue in favor of prolonging the lives of these plantations.

Conclusions

- Gaur appear to be scarce in the inner UPalanis, a change from being abundant a decade ago.
- The spread of exotics tree species remains uncontrolled and has reached an alarming level.
- Land occupied by grassland has significantly decreased.
- Exotic species plantations offer little habitat for few wild species.
- Immediate active management to reduce area occupied by abandoned exotic plantations, and increasing the area occupied by grasslands, holds the key to improving quality of UPalanis as a better watershed and wildlife refuge.
- Forest Department needs urgent support to build infrastructure to be an effective protection force. An appropriate step in this direction would be to reestablish the Munnar road (Managing any resumption in tourism should not be a problem for the F.D. based on its current success in efficiently managing daily tourism to Berijam).
- UPalanis can potentially provide quality habitat to support abundant wildlife, but urgently needs active management and protection of its landscape. This would be best achieved by immediately declaring this area a Wildlife Sanctuary.