

Sri Lanka's Human-Elephant Conflict: Press Pack

Firearm distribution, elephant mortality, habitat loss and drought risk, September 2024 to August 2026.

Published by Elephant Heritage Trust. For interviews, further data or source documents, contact katherineblanche@elephantheritagetrust.org.

About Elephant Heritage Trust

Elephant Heritage Trust is a conservation-focused initiative working to protect Sri Lanka's elephants and support the communities who live alongside them. Sri Lanka has one of the densest elephant populations in Asia, with most of its wild elephants living in human-use landscapes rather than inside protected areas. We work with evidence from Sri Lanka's own scientists, field researchers and civil-society organisations to bring international attention, including from the global rugby community, to a conflict that kills both elephants and people at a scale few outside Sri Lanka realise.

1. Executive Summary

Sri Lanka has one of the world's most severe human-elephant conflict records. Official figures cited in Parliament show that 3,484 wild elephants and 1,195 people died between 2015 and 2024. For 2024 alone, the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) figure reported publicly was approximately 386 to 388 elephant deaths and 155 human deaths. Media coverage marking World Elephant Day on 12 August 2026 put the elephant death toll for 2026 so far at approximately 180.

In 2020 the Government of Sri Lanka convened the country's leading scientists and specialists to develop a national response to the crisis. Their work led to the National Action Plan for the Mitigation of Human-Elephant Conflict, launched in 2023 as a science-based framework to protect rural communities while allowing elephants to survive within shared landscapes. Implementation of the Plan was halted after the change of government in September 2024, and policy shifted toward ministerial rhetoric, defence-led coordination, and ad hoc operational measures: elephant drives, relocation discussions, accelerated policing and fencing.

On 5 December 2024, Agriculture Minister K.D. Lankantha told Parliament that farmers faced no legal barriers to taking any action they considered necessary against wild elephants damaging crops on their own land: "There is something important I must tell our farmers at this moment. Farmers face no legal barriers to protecting their crops from these animals on their own land, just as they would handle any other crop damage. We tell them to take any action possible." Killing a wild elephant is a serious criminal offence under Sri Lankan law, carrying a penalty of up to ten years' imprisonment inside a protected area. The Minister's statement did not change the law, but it was widely understood as lowering farmers' perceived risk of prosecution.

By July 2025, media reports and environmental organisations put the number of firearms already held by or issued to farmers for crop protection at more than 13,000. No comprehensive official register detailing firearm types, dates of issue, recipients or licensing conditions has been made public. A further proposal to issue approximately 2,500 firearms drew legal objections from the Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ), which sent a letter of demand to the Ministry of Defence in July 2025. By December 2025 the Court of

Appeal was told that only 5,000 of the 13,207 distributed weapons had been formally licensed.

During 2025 the elephant-killing record combined statistically documented mortality with a run of high-profile tusker deaths, including the electrocution death of the tusker Deega Danthu in November 2024, the shooting death of the Minneriya tusker Unicorn in March 2025, and the gunshot-related death of the tusker Bathiya in July 2025. In late 2025 an elephant in Mihintale died after being tortured and set on fire. Mongabay's reporting, citing elephant biologist Prithiviraj Fernando, notes that fewer than 7% of Sri Lanka's male elephants have tusks, and that centuries of capturing and removing tuskers likely already shifted the island's tusk-gene frequency, making every confirmed tusker death disproportionately significant.

That number understates the damage. Research on Asian elephant demographics puts male sexual maturity at 8 to 13 years old, but in the wild bulls rarely breed successfully before their 30s, when they are finally large and experienced enough to compete with older males for access to females in oestrus, and full musth, the testosterone surge tied to successful breeding, typically arrives around the same age (Smithsonian's National Zoo; Zoo Biology, 2016). A tusker shot or electrocuted in his teens or twenties is removed from the breeding population before he ever gets the chance to pass on the tusked trait, on an island where fewer than 7% of males carry it at all.

Government responses through 2025 and 2026 increasingly ran through the Defence Ministry and the Presidential Secretariat, adding district-level committees, 5,000 Civil Security personnel, and plans for 800 kilometres of fencing. None of these statements has publicly supplied a comprehensive firearm inventory, a recipient register, or an island-wide compliance mechanism for crop-protection weapons.

Meanwhile, elephant habitat kept being fragmented or cleared. The most prominent case is the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve, gazetted in 2021 at approximately 25,740 hectares to provide connected habitat for elephants displaced by the Hambantota Port, Mattala Airport, roads, settlements, agriculture and other development. By early 2026, reports named 17 companies clearing land around the reserve's boundaries. Separate reports allege that more than 1,000 acres of scrub forest had been cleared or threatened for solar-energy development, including a proposed 150 MW solar park. Daily Mirror reporting from March 2025 described roughly 3,000 acres already cleared inside the Wandama-Demaliya-Kuda Oya Government Forest reserve in Monaragala, a key elephant corridor.

The courts are now deeply involved. CEJ's Supreme Court fundamental-rights case on the Hambantota reserve produced a November 2025 order requiring regulations to be gazetted. In April 2026 the Court of Appeal ordered the DWC to explain, in person, what measures it had taken on illegal electric fences.

2. Timeline of Key Events

2023 (full year). Approximately 488 elephant deaths and 187 human deaths, officially reported.

2024 (full year). An estimated 386 to 388 elephant deaths and 155 human deaths.

5 December 2024. Agriculture Minister K.D. Lakantha tells Parliament that farmers face no legal barriers to protecting crops from wildlife "by any action possible."

July 2025. Media reports put the number of firearms made available to or held by farmers for crop protection above 13,000. A DWC Right to Information response covering January to July 2025 reports 245 elephant deaths and 77 human deaths.

30 July 2025. The Centre for Environmental Justice sends a letter of demand to the Ministry of Defence opposing a proposed distribution of approximately 2,500 additional firearms.

7 October 2025. DWC data reports 314 elephant deaths and 113 human deaths for the first nine months of 2025.

November 2025. Preliminary findings from Sri Lanka's elephant census report a count of 7,451 elephants, including approximately 420 calves, with a decline in the proportion of calves compared with the previous census. Section 3 sets out why independent scientists dispute this count.

Mid-December 2025. Publicly reported DWC figures put elephant deaths at 397 for the year to date.

6 January 2026. CEJ publicises its Supreme Court fundamental-rights case over the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve, alleging severe habitat destruction and rising conflict.

March to April 2026. Environmental organisations allege extensive clearing around the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve for solar development, naming 17 companies and sites at Sanakkugala, Orukemgala and Kapapuwewa.

21 May 2026. Press coverage puts the 2026 elephant death toll at approximately 128 for the year to date.

11 August 2026. Sri Lankan broadcaster News 1st reports water being supplied to wildlife in national parks amid dry weather, under the headline "Water Supplied To Wildlife In National Parks Amid Dry Weather." This followed remarks by DWC Director General Ranjan Marasinghe downplaying the need for active drought intervention (Section 4).

12 August 2026, World Elephant Day. Press coverage puts the 2026 elephant death toll at approximately 180 for the year to date. New elephant corridors are officially gazetted the same day.

A confirmed, audited full-year total for 2025 has not been published by the DWC at the time of writing. Published estimates for calendar year 2025 range from the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka's Annual Report figure of approximately 438 elephant deaths and 158 human deaths, to lower provisional DWC figures reported mid-December. Journalists seeking a single authoritative figure should request the audited total directly from the DWC.

3. The Population Census: Why It's Being Challenged

A preliminary 2025 census put Sri Lanka's elephant population at 7,451. Independent scientists dispute this figure on methodological grounds.

Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando of the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR), who leads Sri Lanka's largest GPS-collaring programme, has said the country's national censuses are "completely unscientific" and that the true population "could be half of that, two times that, ten times that. Could be anything." The count relies on elephants arriving at waterholes, tanks, reservoirs, rivers and streams, that are typically watched by only one or two observation points along many kilometres of shoreline, so elephants are both missed and double-counted. Fernando notes that "the number of elephants counted is directly proportional to the number of observation points": add more monitoring stations and the count rises mechanically, whether or not the real population has changed.

The results also don't match known elephant biology. Asian elephant herds are made up mainly of adult females and young, with adult males largely solitary. Past count data has instead shown adult males and adult females in roughly equal numbers, which Fernando argues is consistent with wide-ranging males being recounted repeatedly at multiple waterholes, while forest-bound herds go undercounted. He cites a documented case where a direct sighting-based count of one area recorded 106 elephants; a subsequent elephant drive pushed 225 additional elephants into the same area, and more than 400 remained there afterward, showing the original count had missed most of the true population.

This isn't a single dissenting view. Mongabay's coverage of the census independently reports the same core critique from Fernando and adds a second named expert, Dr. Shanmugasundaram Wijeyamohan of the University of Vavuniya, who argues that population structure, meaning the male-to-female ratio and the number of calves, is more informative than the topline total. That coverage also raises a concern that a higher headline population estimate could be used to justify further elephant capture, translocation or removal. Sri Lanka's own National Action Plan, approved by Cabinet, had recommended that a formal trial compare multiple counting methods before any national census went ahead; there is no public evidence that validation trial took place before this census.

4. El Niño and Dry-Zone Water Infrastructure

Sri Lanka is already in a strengthening El Niño event, not merely bracing for one. NOAA's Climate Prediction Center reported on 13 August 2026 that El Niño conditions are active and strengthening, with sea surface temperature anomalies already exceeding +2.0°C in the eastern equatorial Pacific, and forecasts put the event's peak intensity in the October–December 2026 window — with a better than 90% probability of a very strong El Niño through the Northern Hemisphere autumn and winter. Sri Lankan and international coverage has separately flagged November 2026 as when the event's on-the-ground impacts are expected to hit the island hardest, which is consistent with that peak window rather than a contradiction of it.

Most of the country's wild elephants live in the Dry Zone, where they compete with people for the same shrinking water sources during drought. The Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka identifies specific, fixable reasons the village tanks that supply this water keep failing: dams that were breached and never repaired, siltation that has cut their holding capacity, and invasive species clogging the water bodies and the inlets that feed them.

Environmentalist Palitha Wickramaratne has warned that animals in and around Yala National Park have already become extremely vulnerable to the prevailing heat as the El Niño event strengthens. In a comparable drought in 2016, wildlife officials responded by trucking water bowsers into parks and restoring small water bodies. Ahead of the 2026 event, DWC Director General Ranjan Marasinghe took a different public position, arguing for restraint rather than active water provision: “we also should consider the science behind it. Wild animals develop a ruggedness during drought conditions.”

On 11 August 2026, the day before World Elephant Day, Sri Lankan broadcaster News 1st reported that water was in fact being supplied to wildlife in national parks amid the dry weather. The contrast between the Director General's stated position in the run-up to the drought and the department's subsequent action is a legitimate and open question for the DWC to answer on the record.

5. Why the Containment Model Fails: an Insider's Account

Dr. Sumith Pilapitiya, a former Director General of the DWC, has given an on-record account of why Sri Lanka's core elephant policy keeps failing (Ceylon Today, 31 August 2024). Sri Lanka's approach to human-elephant conflict dates to a 1959 government committee, and in his words, "since 1959, for over 60 years, every government has been trying different modifications of the same model," which is to restrict elephants to protected areas. "For 65 years, if you have tried to restrict wild elephants to wildlife protected areas and we still have an increasing conflict, there's obviously something wrong with the model."

Drawing on DWC and CCR radio collar data, Pilapitiya independently confirms Fernando's finding that Sri Lankan elephants don't migrate long distances: "Over 150 elephants have been radio collared over the last 15 years. We have not seen long-distance migrations in any one of them." Herds typically range over 50 to 100 square kilometres, with males ranging more widely and expanding their range further during musth.

He explains why fences keep ending up on administrative rather than ecological boundaries, the arrangement that increases conflict by cutting elephant herds off from parts of their own established range. Communities near Forest Department land want to keep access to it for illegal slash-and-burn cultivation, so when the DWC tries to move a fence to the true ecological boundary, the affected community lobbies local politicians, who call the DWC and have the fence moved back. Pilapitiya describes offering two ministers a way to test their own confidence in that request: "I told two ministers I'm willing to relocate the fence to where you want, as long as you and the DWC sign the Memorandum of Understanding that against the recommendations of the [Wildlife Department] you want to erect the fence where you want to. So any HEC that arises out of that area is your problem, not ours." Both ministers backed off.

He also argues that driving elephants into parks doesn't work because Sri Lanka's protected areas are already at or near their ecological carrying capacity, and that food, not water, is the binding constraint on where elephants can live: an elephant needs 150 to 200 kg of food a day, and keeping reservoirs full year-round, popular with voters, actually submerges the nutrient-rich new grassland that draws elephants to sites like Minneriya and Kaudulla as water recedes in the dry season.

6. Key Questions for Government

Firearms

- Exactly how many lethal firearms have been issued to farmers or agricultural organisations, and of what type?
- On what dates were the weapons issued, under which legislation, and to which districts?
- What eligibility criteria and safety training applied to recipients?
- How many elephant shootings since December 2024 involved legally licensed agricultural firearms, and how many led to arrest, prosecution or conviction?

Ministerial statement and enforcement

- Did the Attorney General, Police, DWC or Ministry of Environment issue any clarification after the Minister of Agriculture's 5 December 2024 statement?
- Did reported shootings increase after that statement, or after firearm distribution began?

Elephant deaths and the census

- What is the audited, official elephant death toll for calendar year 2025, and why do DWC statements, parliamentary answers and media reports vary so widely on this figure?
- Was the National Action Plan's recommended methodology validation trial completed before the 2025 census, and if not, why not?
- Of the tusked elephants killed since December 2024, how many had reached breeding age? Wild elephants rarely breed successfully before their 30s, so a tusked elephant killed young is a reproductive loss for the tusked gene line, not only a death, and the government has not published age-at-death data that would let anyone answer this.

Habitat and land allocation

- What is the legally enforceable boundary of the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve, and which companies have received land within or adjoining it since September 2024?
- Were the DWC and Forest Department consulted, and were elephant movement routes mapped, before those approvals were granted?

Water and drought response

- What is the DWC's official policy on active water provision to national parks during drought, and how does that reconcile with the Director General's public comments in July 2026 and the department's own action in August 2026?

Policy implementation

- Which recommendations of the National Action Plan for Human-Elephant Conflict Mitigation have actually been funded and implemented, more than three years after Cabinet approval?
- How much of the community and village-boundary fencing built or funded under the 2020 National Action Plan is still standing and functional in 2025 and 2026, and has the government assessed what role that surviving fencing has played in the 2024–2025 death-toll trend, separate from the effect of resumed firearms distribution and elephant drives?

7. Recent Developments (August 2026)

This section covers what has been reported since World Elephant Day (12 August 2026), the cut-off for Sections 1–6 above. It brings the press pack current to 22 August 2026.

The government's new National Action Plan process

5 August 2026. A parliamentary monitoring committee on human-elephant conflict met, chaired by Minister of Environment Dr. Dhammika Patabendi with Deputy Minister Anton Jayakody, and attended by MPs from affected districts, district and divisional secretaries, and officials from the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Department of Forest Conservation. The committee's stated agenda: a community-based human-elephant conflict management programme, "clearing elephant corridors," and establishing "elephant enrichment zones" through a programme called Wanaspathi. The committee's rationale for starting a new plan rather than updating the 2020 National Action Plan was that migration patterns, forest cover and agricultural expansion have shifted since 2020. Neither Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando, who chaired the original 2020 plan, nor the Wildlife and Nature Protection Society of Sri Lanka is named among the officials reported at this meeting.

Following that meeting. The Cabinet of Ministers approved a proposal to draft a new National Action Plan for human-elephant conflict management (Daily Mirror). Separately, the Government confirmed it is establishing two further bodies: a Multi-Stakeholder Committee tasked with developing comprehensive national policy on human-elephant conflict, and an Expert Committee for Elephant Conservation and Research, which includes a plan to transform the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage into a research and conservation centre (Daily FT). A separate management committee is also being set up for the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve, following regulations gazetted on 30 January 2026.

17 August 2026. Two further items of note. First, a coexistence-oriented proposal began circulating for discussion "in the coming weeks," covering restoration of elephant migratory corridors, early-warning systems, farmer compensation and a review of existing deterrents such as electric fencing and trenches; public comment on the reporting was openly skeptical, citing years of proposals with no ground-level change (Lanka Newspapers). Second, environmental advocate Ananda Dissanayake publicly urged early-warning systems and tracking technology, citing a toll of "more than 400 elephants and nearly 200 people" dying each year and warning that conventional management is insufficient (Lanka Newspapers).

Elephant corridors and World Elephant Day

New elephant corridors were officially gazetted on 12 August 2026, World Elephant Day, the same day press coverage put the 2026 elephant death toll at approximately 180 for the year to date. It is not yet clear from public reporting how these newly gazetted corridors relate to the "corridor clearing" work the 5 August committee describes as already under way — a distinction worth pressing officials on directly, given Avinash Krishnan's caution below about what "clearing corridors" can mean in practice.

Hambantota reserve: the solar allegations remain unresolved

Reporting on the 150 MW solar development bordering the Hambantota Managed Elephant Reserve has continued since our original March–April 2026 sourcing. Sri Lanka Mirror (13 May 2026), citing the Land and Agrarian Reform Movement and environmentalist Sanjeewa Chamikara, reported that the project operates through a cluster of interlinked companies sharing directors, including Palavinnage Charana Mitsuka Kumaranatunga and a named Chinese investor, Liu Kai, and alleged that two of those companies, Elektrolite and Circleline, were not properly registered. The companies publicly rejected this (16 May

2026), stating both are legally registered, that using multiple companies followed a Ministry rule capping any single company at 10 MW, that the site sits entirely outside the Reserve's gazetted boundary within a designated solar park, and that environmental-assessment requirements are the Central Environmental Authority's call, not theirs. Neither side's account has been independently verified in public reporting we have located, and the underlying legal case before the Court of Appeal, referenced in Section 1, remains the one to watch for a resolution.

The rugby window

Northampton Saints and the Asia Pacific Lions are touring Sri Lanka this week, 22–28 August 2026, the first Sri Lankan tour in British Premiership rugby history and a government-backed fixture. The marquee match kicks off at 4:00pm on 28 August at the Racecourse International Stadium, Colombo, with DASA Group UK as title sponsor. This is the same week the government's monitoring committee is actively shaping the new National Action Plan, and it is the attention window Elephant Heritage Trust's own campaign (see "Home Ground") is built around: a large, engaged global rugby audience already watching Sri Lanka, for reasons unrelated to elephants, at the exact moment this policy decision is live.