

Elephant Encounters: Living With Wildlife in Times of Extinction

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My current research is situated in the fragmented forest landscape of Wayanad, South India, which has become a last refuge for globally endangered megafauna such as the elephant and the tiger. My work asks what it means for humans and other animals to survive and live together at the forest boundary in times of rapid biodiversity loss and species extinction. As conservation measures have intensified in the last decade, violent clashes between wildlife and people living and working at the fringes of Wayanad's protected forests have become an important part of everyday life. Fatal attacks by tigers and elephants as well as crop raids by numerous other animals have repeatedly triggered riots and anti-wildlife agitations against the emerging conservation regime in the region. Forest officials report increasing incidences of arson, sightings of poisoned elephant bait, cases of electrocution of wild animals with self-made high-voltage fences, and the shooting of small-shot charges against elephants.

Combining approaches from political ecology, science and technology studies and multispecies ethnography, my work explores critical encounters between wildlife (most importantly elephants) and people (scientists, forest workers, state officials and farmers) in close vicinity of the sanctuary. I argue that "the age of human disturbance" (Tsing 2012), a time of anthropogenic environmental crisis and extinction, calls for an ethnographic and historical sensibility to the ways in which human sociality, life, and loss are deeply entangled with other life forms, in this case elephants. My project proposes a more-than-human ethnography of situated multispecies encounters at a significant Indian wildlife refuge. My work aims to move environmental anthropology beyond the binaries of human versus animal, nature versus culture and wilderness versus domestication.