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Exploring Human-Hog Deer (*Axis procinus*) Interaction in Agricultural Landscapes of Southwest Sri Lanka: Impetus for Conservation Planning

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Abstract

The Sri Lankan Hog Deer population (*Axis procinus*) is critically endangered and confined to a delimited region between the Bentota and Gin River basins at present. With their preferred natural habitats of riverine marshes shrinking rapidly due to anthropogenic pressure, this Hog Deer population predominantly occupies commercial croplands, mainly cinnamon and paddy fields. As a consequence, Hog Deer are increasingly coming into contact with humans, causing greater risks for this small population, which highlights the importance of immediate conservation actions. Therefore, a better understanding of the nature of human-Hog Deer interactions and current risks is vital for planning future conservation strategies. In the current study, a community survey was conducted in 24 villages within the Hog Deer distribution area using a scientifically prepared semi-structured questionnaire, to evaluate the community's perception of the species. Altogether 71 individuals were interviewed, and 80% of the respondents claimed that hog deer are causing minor crop damage. However, it is deemed inconsequential by 75% of the respondents, who do not categorize hog deer as an agricultural pest. Approximately 89% of the respondents recognize the most eminent threat to hog deer in these areas is hunting and poaching for bush meat. Snaring (43%, N=56), electrocution (38%), and shooting (13%) are the frequently used killing methods. Although instances of poaching exist, a predominant proportion of the local community maintains positive interactions with Hog Deer. Noteworthy, among such interactions are the rehabilitation and rearing of injured hog deer in captive or domestic settings. Interestingly, these rescued animals are easily tamed to live with people and adapted to any provided food including human comestibles. Further, it is evident that the majority of the local community is not aware of the species' critically endangered status, geographically restricted distribution, and rarity. Therefore, it is imperative to underscore the importance awareness programs about the species to implement effective conservation actions for Hog Deer in the southwest lowlands of Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Hog Deer, Community perception, Sri Lanka, Human-wildlife conflict, Agriculture with Wildlife