



Indian wildlife amidst the COVID-19 crisis: An analysis of status of poaching and illegal wildlife trade

Saket Badola
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TRAFFIC REPORT

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The novel coronavirus SARS-COV-2 and the disease it causes in humans (COVID-19) has impacted humanity in a manner and magnitude that is unprecedented in the recent past. Humankind's much prided achievements including creating an increasingly inter-connected world and inventing faster modes of travel are now blamed as the prime reason for rapid spread of this virus to almost every corner of the globe. After infecting the first human towards the end of 2019, SARS-COV-2 has already reached 200 countries, with millions infected and thousands already dead. It has even reached the small island countries and penetrated the dense forests of the Amazon¹ to infected otherwise secluded indigenous communities. With no therapeutic or preventive measures currently available or in sight in the near future, the pandemic has impacted and continues to impact human life, health and businesses in ways for which no country had properly provisioned for.

To protect their citizens from this fast spreading virus and to break the chain of infection, the majority of governments have been compelled to impose partial or total lockdown across their countries, which has brought many human activities and businesses to a grinding halt. Urgent lockdown measures were rolled out in the form of immediate closure of industries and businesses; strict restrictions on social events; curtailment of vehicular movements etc. Although governments across the globe are making every possible effort to cope with this monumental crisis and support their citizens, the sheer scale and spread of the pandemic is making it difficult to simultaneously to address multiple issues arising out of this unprecedented crisis.

While a near halt in human activities across the globe appears to be having desirable changes on the global environment which is being manifested by perceivable improvement in ambient air and

freshwater quality and unrestricted movement of wild animals, the overall impact of these changed circumstances doesn't appear to be favourable for wildlife conservation.

Reports pouring in from different parts of the globe – from Africa² to Russian Far East³ and from Americas⁴ to South East Asia⁵ – demonstrate that the current situation of lockdown is having a significantly negative impact on wildlife conservation. Imposed restrictions on movement of law enforcement staff and their engagement in COVID-19 related duties has curtailed law enforcement activities which in turn appears to have emboldened the wildlife criminals. The abrupt halt to ecotourism and loss of associated revenues which are often the main source of funding for conservation activities in certain areas, is another cause of concern for wildlife managers. Increasing unemployment due to the shutting down of businesses and the resultant large-scale migration of jobless workers from urban and semi-urban areas to rural ones, is also increasing pressures on already stressed wildlife areas. These factors are manifested in increased pressure on forests for fuel and fodder, more cases of trespassing into restricted wildlife reserves and an increase in cases of wildlife poaching for food and trade during the lockdown period.

Just like in other parts of the world, in India also there are multiple reports on public forums about a widespread increase in wild animal poaching during the extended lockdown period.

To understand the extent and scale of this issue in depth in India, a rapid study was undertaken to assess and monitor poaching trends during the lockdown period vis a vis that of the period immediately preceding the lockdown.



Snapshot from social media

The data for the study was collected through detailed scanning of news reports published in the open source (print and web based) national media as well as those reported on common social media platforms, by individuals or organisations. Though every effort was made to collect all reports available in the public domain, it cannot be guaranteed that this analysis includes every such report that was published. Nevertheless, this quick assessment does provide a clear indication of the prevailing ground situation.

Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that these are media reports, and not from official sources.

2. Study design

India remained in complete country-wide lockdown from 24th March to 3rd May 2020, before it started easing out in phases. The present study extends over a 12-week period i.e. a 6-week period before the start of lockdown and six weeks during the lockdown.

In the present study, the pre-lockdown period extended from 10th February to 22nd March 2020, while the lockdown period extended from 23rd March to 3rd May 2020. The pre-lockdown period is taken as the background level of poaching in the country and is used as a baseline to compare any changes in trends of poaching and also to assess the choice of species targeted by the poachers in pre-lockdown and during lockdown periods. It is recognised that this however won't take into account any changes in media reporting practices during this extraordinary lockdown event.

In news articles where the number of animals poached has not been clearly mentioned, it was taken as just 1 animal of each reported species. In cases where the species was not being mentioned they are grouped under broad headers such as 'ungulates' or 'small mammals'.

3. A few incidents and poaching trends during the lockdown period

- A group of poachers in Nagaland camped inside a Protected Area and killed several wild animals, which they proudly displayed on social media while declaring it be a celebration of a 'lockdown festival'. At least three Barking Deers *Muntiacus muntjak* and a Small Indian Civet *Viverricula indica* were killed by these revelers⁶.
- An endangered King Cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* was killed by villagers in Arunachal Pradesh and the meat was consumed⁷. The images were shared again on social media.
- Several endangered Indian gazelles or Chinkaras *Gazella bennettii*, a protected species under the Wildlife (Protection) Act (WPA), 1972 were reported to have been poached in the state of Rajasthan. A Chinkara poaching racket was also busted in Jaisalmer⁸.



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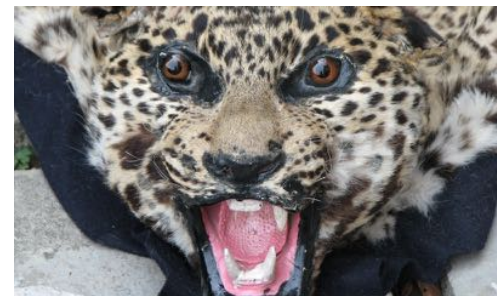


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- Pangolins, despite being linked to the COVID19 crisis, were targeted by poachers in various parts of the country. Live pangolins *Manis* spp. and their scales were seized from poachers in Uttarakhand, Karnataka and Odisha⁹.
- Reports of a Himalayan Black Bear *Ursus thibetanus* and Barking Deer¹⁰ poached by villagers in Meghalaya also came to light. (Although the Bear poaching was reported on 4th May and hence has not been included in the analysis).
- Common Leopards *Panthera pardus* have either been poached or their skins seized in Assam and UT of Jammu and Kashmir.
- Several Indian Peafowls *Pavo cristatus*, India's national bird, were poached in Rajasthan and Maharashtra. Several other species of local as well as migratory birds have been targeted in other parts of the country, mainly Tamil Nadu¹¹, Karnataka etc.
- Rare and endangered high mountain birds such as Himalayan Monal *Lophophorus impejanus* were snared by poachers in Himachal Pradesh¹².
- Similarly, protected Saras Cranes *Antigone antigone* were seized from bird traders in Bihar.
- The usual targets of poachers engaged in wild meat trade viz., Wild Boars *Sus scrofa*, Spotted Deer *Axis axis*, Sambar *Rusa unicolor*, Hispid Hares *Caprolagus hispidus* etc. were reported as hunted or their meat recovered from areas in Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Karnataka, West Bengal, Meghalaya etc.
- Even not so common species like Indian Giant Squirrel *Ratufa indica*¹³, monitor lizards *Varanus* spp.¹⁴, Porcupine *Hystrix indica*¹⁵ have been poached and seized in various places in Uttarakhand, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra during the lockdown period.



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Species group analysis

A species group comparison of reported cases pre-lockdown and during lockdown gives a clearer picture of poaching trends.

- The biggest increase in reported poaching was related to ungulates, where the percentage jumped from 22% of total reported cases during pre-lockdown, to 44% during the lockdown period. Since these species are targeted mainly for meat (for self-consumption or for local trade) the increase is presumably due to those poaching for self consumption or those who are trying to compensate their loss of income by making quick money through poaching.
- The second group of wild animals where a marked increase in poaching was noticed for the present study were 'small mammals', including hares, porcupines, pangolins, giant squirrels, civets, monkeys, smaller wild cats etc. Although some of these are in high demand in international markets, they are also hunted for meat or for local trade in India. Cases against this group rose from 17% to 25% between the pre-and lockdown periods.
- There was a slight decrease in the incidence of bird-related seizures, which came from 14% to 7% between the pre-lockdown and lockdown periods. During the pre-lockdown period, the consignments seized included a high proportion of birds used in the national and international pet trade (e.g. munias, starlings and parakeets). While during the lockdown period, the proportion of larger birds (e.g. peafowls) was found to be higher, presumably caught for its meat. Grey Francolins *Francolinus pondicerianus*, a popular game bird, continue to be poached in high numbers.
- Poaching incidences of big cats (Tiger *Panthera tigris* and Leopard *Panthera pardus*) remained at 20% as a percentage of total incidences reported. There was one suspected Tiger poaching case¹⁶ during lockdown compared to nil during the pre-lockdown period. Reported poisoning of two Tigers¹⁷ was found to be a case of retaliatory killing and not targeted poaching. However, as many as nine Leopards were reported to have been killed during the lockdown compared to four in the pre-lockdown period. Two were said to have been targeted due to retaliatory action. However, initial fear about a spurt in big cats poaching doesn't seem to have proved right, although this may be due to lack of transport required to send the products outside the country. Stockpiling might be perceived as high risk given the prevalent enforcement mechanisms and awareness of enforcement staff to counter poaching of these charismatic species. However, the current situation could quickly change and there is no reason for complacency by law enforcement agencies.



Snapshot from social media

4. Results and discussion

Analysis of the data collected during the study period indicates a *significant increase* in overall poaching of wild animals in the country during the lockdown period which was not restricted to any geographical region or state or to any specific wildlife area. Cases have been reported from forests located in human dominated landscapes and also from declared Protected Areas such as designated Tiger Reserves, National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Bird Sanctuaries and others.

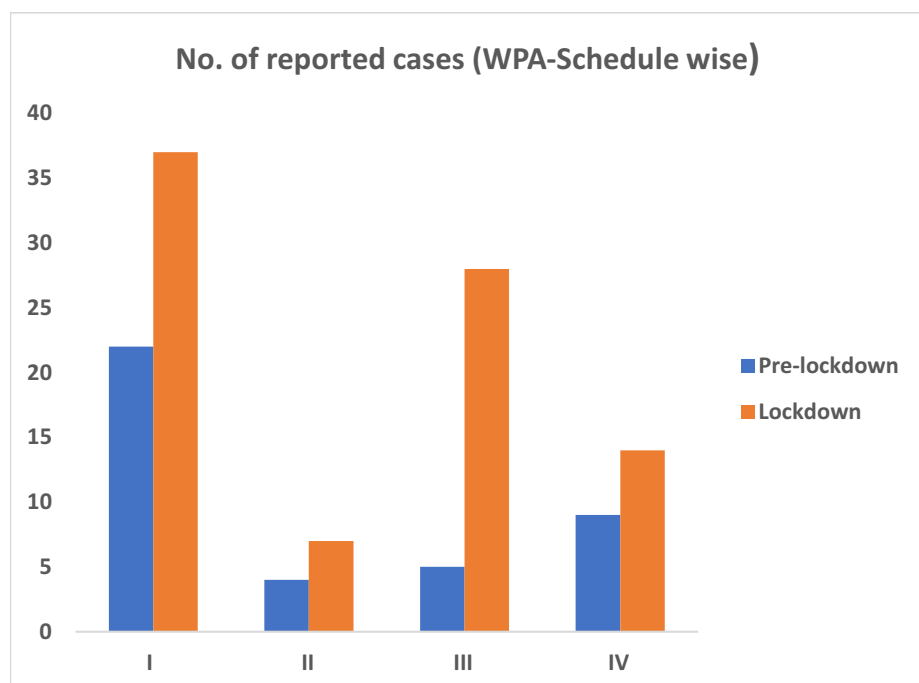
During the lockdown period, 88 poaching cases were reported in open source media which was significantly higher than the 35 poaching incidences reported during the pre-lockdown period.

During the lockdown period, a total of 35 different wild animal species were reported as targeted by the poachers, of which 15 are listed in Schedule I of the WPA, 1972 of India. Any crime against such species attracts a maximum punishment of 7 years imprisonment or a fine of INR50,000 or both under the Act.

In terms of number of cases, listed species under Schedule I of WPA were found in 37 cases, Schedule II (7 cases), Schedule III (28 cases) and Schedule IV (14 cases)*.

Even when the pre-lockdown and during lockdown period cases were compared as per the Schedules of WPA, cases under each Schedule were significantly higher during the lockdown period than those during the pre-lockdown period (Graph: I) indicating that the poaching has seen a more widespread increase.

* In some cases, the species involved was not clearly reported, so they have not been included here.

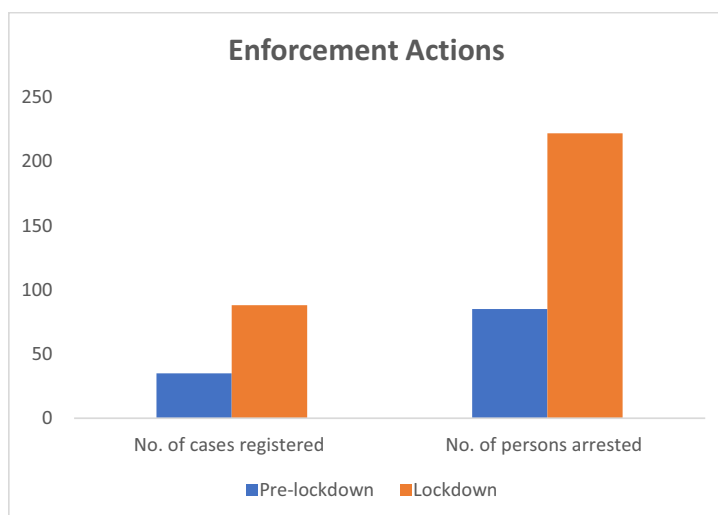


GRAPH: I

Wildlife law enforcement situation

A significant increase in reported poaching incidences during the lockdown phase shouldn't lead us to the conclusion that wildlife law enforcement agencies are unaware of the current situation or are not taking necessary steps to manage it.

In fact, rightly assessing the possibility of emergence of such problem, the Central Government took a proactive step to classify forest and wildlife protection as 'essential activities' during country-wide lockdown, so that the routine work of wildlife law enforcement agencies should remain largely unaffected.



GRAPH: IV

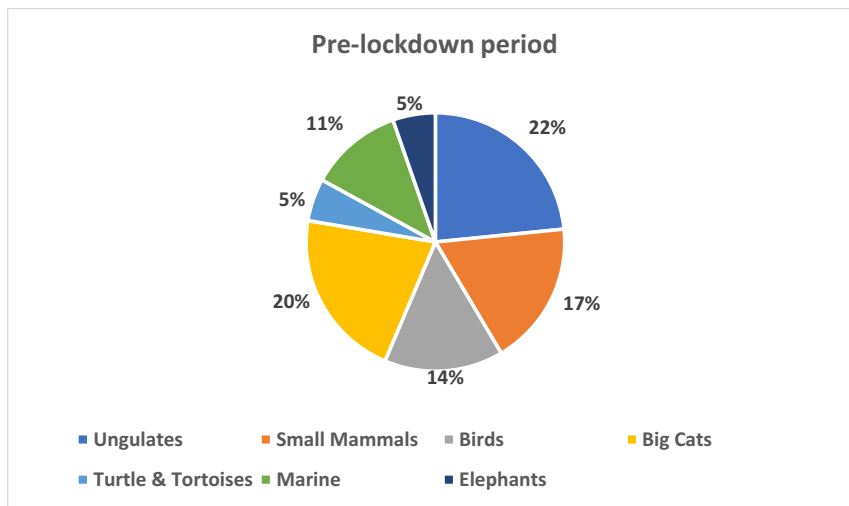
Similarly, the Forest Department, the main agency responsible for preventing poaching in the country has been maintaining extra vigilance during lockdown to combat poaching, despite being engaged in other departmental activities such as forest fire control and increased incidences of human-wildlife conflict, in addition to their engagement in COVID-19 related duties. This is evident from the large number of cases registered and criminals arrested during the lockdown period. In the majority of the cases covered in this study, legal actions have already been taken or have been initiated.

A total of 222 persons were arrested in poaching related cases by various law enforcement agencies during the lockdown period, which is significantly higher than the 85 suspects who were arrested during the pre-lockdown phase.

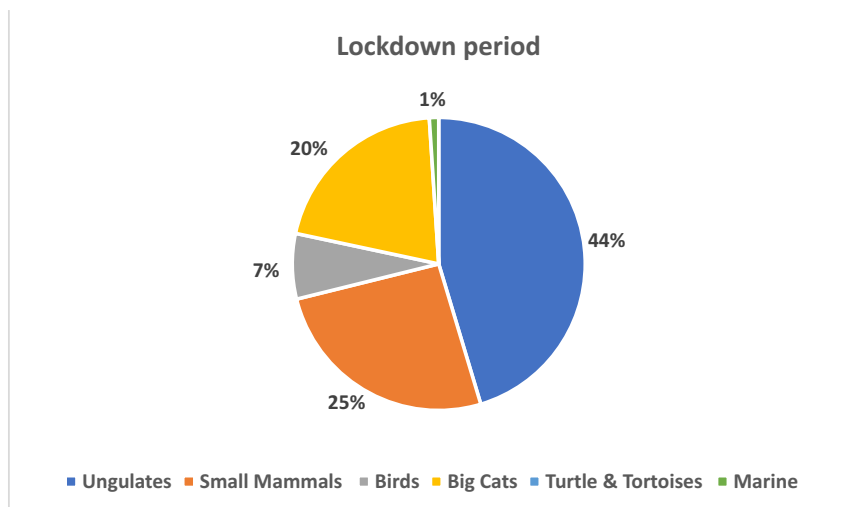
In addition to routine patrolling, wildlife law enforcement agencies were also monitoring social media closely for collecting any evidence of wildlife crime being reported there. Such cyber monitoring has assisted authorities in tracking several cases during the lockdown period.

Nevertheless, a more than doubling of reported poaching cases between pre-lockdown and during lockdown is doubtlessly placing additional burdens on wildlife law enforcement agencies, who are already suffering from inherent constraints such as chronic staff shortages, a lack of capacity, insufficient patrolling infrastructure, and shortage of funds, among others. In Assam alone, which holds more than 70% of the global population of One-horned Rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis*, at least six rhino poaching attempts were successfully thwarted during lockdown by wildlife law enforcement agencies, although poaching of three leopards in the state couldn't be prevented¹⁸.

- Another group showing a remarkable decrease in reported poaching cases was that of tortoises and freshwater turtles, with zero reported cases during the lockdown period compared to 5% of overall reported cases during the pre-lockdown period. Historically, turtles are collected in north India, mainly from the Gangetic plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar which are then transported towards West Bengal where they are either consumed locally or traded onwards, mainly to other countries. The cessation of interstate transportation during lockdown is possibly what has curtailed this trade. There were also no new seizures of species such as Star Tortoises *Geochelone elegans*, Tent Turtles *Pangshura tentoria* and Black Spotted Turtles *Geoclemys hamiltonii*, which are in demand in the illegal international pet trade.
- Seizures of marine species also showed a marked decline, from 11% in the pre-lockdown phase to 1% during lockdown. This is presumably owing to a near complete ban on fishing activities during lockdown



GRAPH: II



GRAPH: III

5. Conclusion

The outcome of this study indicates that despite efforts by law enforcement agencies, wild animal populations in India are being subjected to additional threats during the lockdown period.

Though stockpiling of wildlife products for future trade as reported elsewhere¹⁹ was not reported in the country, poaching incidences for consumption and for local trade had more than doubled during this period. Illegal hunting has increased mainly of ungulates and small animals, which has doubtless links to the increased demand for wild meat during the lockdown period.

If left unchecked the poaching of ungulates and small animals may lead to a depletion of the prey base for big cats like Tigers and Leopards, causing an increase in human-carnivore conflict. On a slightly longer term, this also has the potential to undermine significant successes that India has achieved to date in the field of wildlife conservation.

This is hence an appropriate time for governments, conservation organisations, local communities, religious leaders, environmentally conscientious corporates and other stakeholders to unite and pool their expertise and resources to strengthen efforts to protect India's wildlife. The country should not let the current pandemic shift attention away from efforts to protect its wildlife and to combat wildlife crime.



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- ¹⁹ <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/traders-are-stockpiling-ivory-rhino-horns-sea?>

Annex 1: Example news reports

LOCKDOWN'S HUNTERS

NAGALAND HAS encountered an unusual problem during the lockdown – protecting its wildlife. Last month, the state Wildlife Department arrested four people for allegedly hunting, includ-

Spurt in poaching amid lockdown, 50kg bush meat seized in Allapalli

लॉकडाउन: हिरण के शिकार का विडियो वायरल, तीन के खिलाफ मामला दर्ज, खाल बरामद

हिरणों का झुंड भटककर बिहार के दियारा थाना क्षेत्र में पहुंच गया। इस झुंड में कई हिरण घायल थे। लोगों ने उनको पकड़कर उनकी मरहम पट्टी की। बताया जा रहा है कि ये हिरण वाल्मीकि टाइगर रिजर्व से भटक कर कई जगह पहुंच गए हैं।

MAN AGAINST WILD

Himachal witnesses spike in hunting as villagers take out their weapons amid lockdown

एक लाख रुपए किलो में चकलोन बेच रहे हैं तस्कर

भास्कर खुलासा | खेतों और जंगलों से पकड़कर कोटा और आसपास के इलाकों में हो रही तस्करी, भास्कर संवाददाता ने खरीदार बनकर की तस्करी से बातचीत

June 2020

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