

NILGIRI TAHR CLIMB POPULATION CHARTS

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Tahr feeding on grass in the Nilgiris.M. SathyamoorthyThe Hindu

In a heartening development for conservationists, a recent census has revealed that the population of the Nilgiri tahr (an endangered mountain goat) at the Mukurthi National Park has grown by an impressive 18% in the last two years, from 480 to 568.

Tamil Nadu Forest Department officials said that a count conducted in 2016 had put the population in the national park at around 480, but a revised count in 2017 pegged it at 438. "Getting an exact figure each year is difficult, so there is always a small discrepancy in numbers. This year, however, there is a definite increase in the number of animals in the only pristine habitat left in the Nilgiris for the tahr," said a Forest Department official.

The population estimation exercise, completed in May, was conducted jointly by the Forest Department and the Department of Zoology and Wildlife Biology, Government Arts College, Udthagamandalam.

B. Ramakrishnan, assistant professor in the department, said that apart from the increase in numbers, the sex ratio, too, was encouraging. "From what we have recorded, there are two adult females for every male. This indicates a viable breeding population, and hints at further population growth," he said.

Several threats

If that is the good news, the bad news is that the population also faces several threats. Researchers point to the continuing spread of invasive species of flora, such as wattle and pine, and exotic weeds like scotch broom (*Cystisus scoparius*) and gorse, which end up diminishing grazing land.

"We don't know how the consumption of exotic weeds will affect the animals. So we need a large-scale project to remove exotic plants," said Mr. Ramakrishnan.

The rise in the animals' population has led to a few herds migrating out of the national park, into the erstwhile Nilgiris South Forest Division.

S. Senbagapriya, Deputy Director, Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and Mukurthi National Park, said that the Forest Department was stepping up efforts to remove exotics, with wattle eliminated in over 125 hectares of Shola grasslands. "We also have four anti-poaching camps there," she added.

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