

A WORLDWIDE CAMPAIGN BY THE FISHING CAT CONSERVATION ALLIANCE TO PROTECT THE FELINE

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In search of home Habitat loss and conflict with humans are some of the reasons behind the dwindling numbers of fishing cats; Murthy Kantimahanti at an awareness camp.

The highly elusive fishing cat, a lesser-known feline species, is facing several threats due to its depleting habitat. Listed as 'vulnerable' on International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, the species has a high probability of becoming endangered unless circumstances threatening its survival and reproduction improve.

Fishing cats have a patchy distribution along the Eastern Ghats. They abound in estuarine floodplains, tidal mangrove forests and also inland freshwater habitats. Apart from Sundarbans in West Bengal and Bangladesh, fishing cats inhabit the Chilika lagoon and surrounding wetlands in Odisha, Coringa and Krishna mangroves in Andhra Pradesh.

"Our team also reported the presence of the species for the first time in a completely inland freshwater riverine habitat in Srikakulam a couple of years ago. The conservation threats to fishing cats in the Eastern Ghats are mainly habitat loss [wetland degradation and conversion for aquaculture and other commercial projects], sand mining along river banks, agricultural intensification resulting in loss of riverine buffer and conflict with humans in certain areas resulting in targeted hunting and retaliatory killings," says Murthy Kantimahanti, a part of Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance and founder of Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society, India.

The Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance is a team of conservationists, researchers and enthusiasts across the world working to achieve a single dream — a world with functioning floodplains and coastal ecosystems that ensure survival of the fishing cat and all species with which it shares a home. With its regional group of conservationists and researchers, it has initiated an understanding of the bio-geographical distribution of the fishing cat in the unprotected and human-dominated landscapes of the northeastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh. The project will use techniques like ecological niche modelling, camera trapping, signs and tracks survey, interviews with locals and documentation of historical records.

Major shifts in land use management like agricultural intensification in prime fishing cat habitats and wetland degradation are the main factors that can influence the population distribution of these cats in the Eastern Ghats. "We know nothing about their population dynamics, and very little about their ecology and habits in the wild. Therefore, it's very difficult to say the impact without such data. Although fishing cats are predominantly associated with wetlands, these highly elusive cats are adaptable to live even in human dominated landscapes and relatively drier habitats," Murthy adds.

Another major component is promoting awareness among people living near fishing cat habitats. "This is to engage them in conservation efforts by capacity-building measures not only to monitor its population but also to document any threats to their survival in unprotected/unclassified forest areas. The goal is to ensure healthy populations of fishing cats living in close harmony with humans in these areas," says Murthy.

The Alliance will kick-start a worldwide month-long campaign in February to raise awareness and garner support across the globe. The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (a non-profit

dedicated to the advancement of zoos and aquariums in the areas of conservation, education, science, and recreation) and Fishing Cat Species Survival Plan in conjunction with the Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance will be sharing their expertise via cartoons, videos and other material.

In doing so, the Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance hopes to inspire in both children and adults the necessity to act on behalf of such an incredible small wild cat, to join hands as a passionate community of fishing cat enthusiasts, and to in turn protect wetland ecosystems and all species they support.

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