

# NINE MONTHS AFTER RELEASE, 'RIVALDO' THRIVES IN THE WILD

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Biodiversity, Ecology, and Wildlife Related Issues

Rivaldo, the iconic tusker from Sigur | Photo Credit: M. SATHYAMOORTHY

Almost a year since his release from captivity, "Rivaldo," the iconic tusker from the Sigur has ventured out of his home range in Mavanallah and has been crossing over into neighbouring Bandipur Tiger Reserve, possibly in search of a mate.

The tusker, who used to be a common sight near human habitations in Mavanallah, was captured and put inside a "kraal" or elephant shelter on May 5 last year, with plans to make him a captive elephant. After a concerted effort by renowned conservationists and animal rights activists, the elephant was released back into the wild in August 2021 after around 70 days in captivity.

The "reintroduction" process to ensure that the elephant did not return to human settlements in search of food was planned and executed by a team of top forest department and government officials, including Additional Chief Secretary Supriya Sahu and then Chief Wildlife Warden Shekhar Kumar Niraj. Rivaldo was also fitted with a radio-collar to monitor his movement.

Though the elephant travelled back to his home range in Vazhaithottam from the core area where he was released, a continuous monitoring mechanism involving forest department staff ensured that Rivaldo has not had any problematic interactions with humans, said the Nilgiris-based conservationist, N. Mohanraj, who is part of a team of experts monitoring the elephant's movements through his radio-collar.

Rivaldo is believed to move between Mudumalai, Bandipur and Wayanad during periods of "musth" and then returns to Mavanallah and Vazhaithottam after traversing different ranges for up to three months every year, said experts and forest department officials.

Deputy Director of Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR), P. Arunkumar, said over the last ten days, Rivaldo, who is in "musth"- characterised by a heightened level of testosterone in male elephants, first moved towards Theppakadu and then towards the Bandipur Tiger Reserve. Mr. Mohanraj said the successful effort to re-wild the elephant could help bolster elephant numbers in the region, where there is a distinctive lack of male elephants.

"Rivaldo is one of the biggest male tuskers inhabiting the region, and by establishing that he is able to move around the landscape and mate with females is a good sign that the efforts to release him were well worth it," said Mr. Mohanraj.

Mr. Arunkumar added that teams of forest staff were continuing to monitor the elephant from a distance to ensure that it does not stray close to human settlements. Conservation biologist Priya Davidar said Rivaldo's reintroduction to the wild was a good case study to understand how elephants that have become acclimatised to living in close proximity to humans can be successfully reintegrated back into their natural environment, even after a period in captivity.

Rivaldo is a very unique case in that he was unjustly kept in captivity due to conjecture of his inability to fend for himself as he had an injury to his trunk, said Nitin Sekar, National Lead for Elephant Conservation for World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-India). Mr. Sekar said one of the

lessons that could be learned from Rivaldo's capture and his eventual release was a comprehensive review of the process that leads to an elephant's capture.

"Rivaldo was captured based on rumour and poor process. What would have happened if we had put him in captivity was that a perfectly functional elephant would have been taken away from the wild. He would have been taking up more resources at the already crowded elephant camp and unnecessarily lost his freedom. So what we can learn from Rivaldo is that we need a very good process for deciding whether we should capture a wild elephant," he added.

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