

# ARTIFICIAL WATER SOURCES IN NATIONAL PARKS MAY BE KEEPING ELEPHANTS OFF KABINI, SAY ACTIVISTS

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An elephant herd at the Kabini backwaters in Karnataka's Mysuru district. | Photo Credit: M.A. Sriram

Is there a decline in the number of elephants congregating at Kabini Backwaters during summer due to artificial replenishment of water holes and ensuring adequate supply during peak summer inside Bandipur and Nagarahole national parks ?

That is the question doing rounds among a section of conservationists and even officials who aver that the number of elephants congregating at Kabini was on a decline since the last 10 or 15 years.

"The decline commenced more than 10 years ago about the same period when Forest Department took up interventions with emphasis on drilling and replenishing water source. This has ensured adequate water within the forests and hence elephant herds may find no reason to congregate at Kabini backwaters anymore," according to activists.

Today, not only are the number of herds less but even the size of a herd is small unlike in the past when a single herd alone would have about 30 to 40 or more elephants at Kabini, according to an official who did not wish to be quoted.

However, Ramesh Kumar, Director, Bandipur Tiger Reserve, said one could not come to such a conclusion without a scientific study and added that it was only a matter of perception based on a one-off visit. He said a similar view had emerged a few years ago that the gaurs are on a decline in Bandipur but their numbers are healthy.

But D.Rajkumar of Wildlife Conservation Foundation, Mysuru, seconded the view that the herd size and numbers were less at Kabini in recent years and said the perceptions are based on long-term observations.

He said the dam backwaters was not only a source of water for elephants but they used to feed on fresh sprout of green grass on the dry river bed.

"The congregation of elephants used to synchronise with depleting water level in the Kabini reservoir during mid-March and elephants used to stay on till the onset of monsoon. But over the years, the dam does not drain out fully even during summer as rains tend to lash the region even as late as December or January. This, coupled with availability of water inside the forests due to artificial replenishment, may have upset the migration pattern," he added.

In Bandipur alone, there are 373 water holes which are natural sources and most used to dry up during summer. But more than 30 solar-powered pumps ensure that the bigger ones are full throughout the year. Similar initiatives have been taken in other national parks including Nagarhole to make available copious water during summer.

Wildlife biologists had also cautioned of unintended consequences of artificial water replenishment as it would prevent natural regulation of animal population by the process of weaning off the weak. Whether the recent spurt in human animal conflict in the forest periphery could be attributed to such interventions is a matter of conjecture at present.

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