

Death of a Sri Lankan Icon Highlights Surge in Elephant Electrocutions

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He may have had short tusks, but at nearly 3 meters (10 feet) tall, [Revatha](#) was the dominant bull in his home range of Kalawewa in Sri Lanka’s North Central province.

Other bull elephants that challenged him for dominance found themselves no match for his might; some even died in their ground-rumbling jousts with Revatha.

On March 9, Revatha, aged 45, was killed. But it wasn’t another elephant that dealt the fatal blow. It was an electric fence that had been set up illegally around a cornfield.

Electric fences are commonly deployed across Sri Lanka; the country has the highest density of Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) and a correspondingly high rate of human-elephant conflict (HEC). Wildlife-deterring electric fences are meant to stun, not kill, an animal, much less an elephant. But this one, like many in Sri Lanka was wired up directly, and illegally, to the overhead power line, said [Sumith Pilapitiya](#), a former head of the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC). When Revatha brushed up against it, it would have been like grabbing onto a live wire strung between pylons, he added.

Revatha wasn’t the only one. The same week he died, four other elephants were electrocuted to death in the same region of North Central.

“All of them are fully grown males that would be carrying strong genes,” [Chandana Jayasinghe](#), the wildlife veterinary surgeon who conducted Revatha’s post-mortem exam, told Mongabay.



Revatha was one of five elephants killed by electrocution in the space of a week in North Central province. Image courtesy of Mahinda Prabath.

Surging trend

In the first three months of 2021 alone, 100 elephants were killed across Sri Lanka, 21 of them from electrocution, according to the Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWC). Eighteen died from eating explosive-packed bait known as *hakka patas* or “jaw exploders,” and 12 were shot dead. The cause of death for the remaining elephants wasn’t immediately known.

Annually, nearly 400 elephants and 50 people are killed in HEC incidents in Sri Lanka. But while *hakka patas* and shootings are typically the main cause of unnatural elephant deaths, the surge in electrocutions so far this year has led to calls to better regulate electric fences.

[Prithiviraj Fernando](#) from the [Centre for Conservation and Research](#) (CCRSL) called for the registration of private electric fences and conducting an awareness campaign that such fences are just as deadly to people as to animals.

According to the [Public Utilities Commission of Sri Lanka](#) (PUCSL), most human deaths due to electrocution in the country — [45 out of 103](#) in 2019 — occur when people attempt to rig up electric fences straight to power lines to keep wildlife out of their farms.

[M.K. Jayatissa](#), head of the Progressive Farmers Federation of Kaudulla in North Central province, told Mongabay that farmers do this because they can’t afford to lose their crops to raiding herds of elephants and other wildlife.

“But when an elephant dies of electrocution, it is a sad moment for farmers and they themselves weep and feel guilty about what they have done,” Jayatissa said.

‘High risk’ of death

The spread of agriculture into elephant habitat means the conflict between human and animal will only intensify, [Manori Gunawardena](#), a wildlife scientist and country representative for the U.K.-based [Born Free Foundation](#), told Mongabay.

“A bull elephant with a home range in a human modified fragmented landscape runs a high risk of HEC-related death,” Gunawardena said. “They navigate and turn increasingly hostile on home ground while adult bull elephants in these mixed landscapes raid crops.

“This tusker too, like many other adult bull elephants residing outside protected areas, faced this risk,” Gunawardena said of Revatha.



Revatha stood nearly 3 meters (10 feet) tall. While his tusks were short, their position was thought to give him an edge in fights with other males for territorial dominance. Image courtesy of Rajiv Welikala.

Seeking solutions

A solution to preventing crop-raiding by elephants is community-based seasonal electric fencing, according to the CCRSL. These are managed by a community rather than individual farmers, and pilot projects carried out by in several villages have been successful, according to the CCRSL.

A newly crafted national action plan for mitigating human-elephant conflict was presented to Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in December 2020. It recommends community-based fencing to protect villages and crops and to ensure villagers and farmers have access to standardized equipment that are safe and effective.

Fernando said electric fences are not cheap; lower-cost ones tend to be less effective. To be successful, community-based electric fencing would therefore need to be implemented through government agencies such as divisional secretariats and the Agrarian Services Department in a planned manner to find a lasting solution, he said.

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Featured image: Revatha, the dominant male in the Kalawewa herd in North Central province, Sri Lanka, Revatha sired many of this range's young elephants. Image courtesy of Rajiv Welikala.

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