

Four-day Music Festival in Sri Lanka Elephant Territory Set to Continue Despite Protests

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Asia-Pacific Research, February 21, 2023

[Mongabay](#) 17 February 2023

Region: [South Asia](#)

Theme: [Environment](#)

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As a four-day reggae, rock and hip hop music fiesta got underway Feb. 17, putting many wild animals inhabiting a forest reserve in Habarana in Sri Lanka's North Central province at risk, authorities have chosen to look the other way.

The [Deep Jungle Music and Cultural Festival 2023](#) is organized by a company named [Deep Jungle Entertainment \(Pvt\) Ltd](#) and will be held Feb. 17-20 on privately owned land in Habarana, a nearly four-hour drive from the commercial capital, Colombo.

The entire area surrounding the site of the event is forested land and is a habitat for many animals including the Sri Lankan elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*).

[Sumith Pilapitiya](#), an environmental scientist, elephant ethologist and a former director of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, said that elephants from Minneriya — which is located east of the event site — are now in the forests of the Gal Oya Forest Reserve and Hurulu Eco Park, after spending “a stressful dry season due to inadequate grazing grounds.”

“The planned event is taking place just a couple of hundred meters from the Gal Oya Forest Reserve and Hurulu Eco Park,” he said.

Tickets for the event were sold in advance for \$50, \$60, or \$70, with a gate ticket for each visitor being priced at \$83. At least 50 artists, both local and foreign — including three from Russia and one each from Brazil and Australia — are scheduled to perform at the event.

“Our aim is to promote sustainable tourism locations and activities in Sri Lanka,” Deep Jungle Entertainment said in a notice on its website to promote the event. But multiple concerns have arisen on the event's sustainability, given the negative impact it is bound to have on the surrounding habitat.



The map depicts the location at which the Deep Jungle Music and Cultural Festival is being held, a venue surrounded by forestland. Image courtesy of Deep Jungle Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.

Key concerns

The issues relating to the festival, which will have more than 100 hours of nonstop music, are primarily the sound and light emissions that can disturb wildlife in a highly sensitive environment.

Although the event is being held on privately owned land, all quarters including the organizers have acknowledged that the surrounding area is a natural forest reserve inhabited by elephants.

“Habarana is a popular tourist destination for its rich wildlife and safaris, as two popular elephant sanctuaries are situated in the area,” Deep Jungle Entertainment has said on its website.

In a letter dated Feb. 2, and seen by Mongabay, the divisional forest office in Polonnaruwa had granted conditional approval for the event, stating that it was to take place in an area inhabited by wild elephants and other animals.

“Steps must be taken to limit the emission of sounds through devices such as loudspeakers, only to the area in which the event is taking place,” the divisional forest office said in a letter to the director of Deep Jungle Entertainment.

Environmental groups are skeptical about assurances granted by the organizers stating they will adhere to the sound limits.

“We will be using the latest array sound system during the festival in keeping with the guidelines. If anyone doubts that, they can clear their suspicion by visiting us when the event is taking place,” the organizers added in another statement.



The location where the music festival will take place with 100 hours of nonstop music. Image courtesy of Deep Jungle Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.

Panchali Panapitiya, the founder and executive director of [RARE Sri Lanka](#), an animal conservation group, noted that animals are extremely sensitive to sounds and lighting and respond differently to such situations.

“When there is massive lighting from the event, the birds might assume that it is daytime and then crash on trees when flying in a disoriented way. This will lead to their possible death,” Panapitiya told Mongabay. “Since this is a four-day carnival, the situation will be worse.”

“Similarly, elephants are creatures that are terrified of sound. If they can’t cross this area peacefully, then they will explore alternative routes, which might transverse through villages. This will create serious risks to both humans and elephants.”

According to research papers seen by Mongabay, elephants are among the wild animals that are extremely sensitive to sounds.

“Elephants can hear sounds in the frequency range of 1-20.000 Hz with a distance of 10 km of hearing,” according to [research](#) published in the Conference Series of the *Journal of Physics*. “Absolutely, increasing of human activity around elephant habitat causes noise effects that result in a decrease of quality and quantity of elephant habitat that can be impacted to population decline,” the report states.

Meanwhile, Spencer Manuelpillai, a general committee member of the [Wildlife and Nature Protection Society](#) (WNPS) told Mongabay that the surrounding habitat is not just home to

wild elephants but also other species of animals, so the greatest possible care must be taken.

According to WNPS, birds such as the black eagle, Eurasian hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) and rufous woodpecker (*Micropternus brachyurus*) and animals like the grey slender loris (*Loris lydekkerianus*), fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), Indian pangolin (*Manis crassicaudata*), sloth bear (*Melursus ursinus*), chevrotain (*Tragulidae* family) and sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*) inhabit the area.

Use of public sound systems

Sri Lanka's [Police Ordinance](#) clearly lays out the regulations relating to the use of loudspeakers.

Under Section 80 of the legislation, no person can use a loudspeaker or any other device that amplifies noise in a public area without a permit issued by the officer in charge of the police station in the respective area.

The law states that the permit has to be obtained to use a sound amplification device even if the event is to be held at any other place, if the sound reaches a public place.

In addition to the ordinance, in 2007, Sri Lanka's police chief issued a circular prohibiting the use of sound amplification equipment from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. in public areas.

According to the circular, permits for using loudspeakers or other sound amplifying devices during this period can be issued by the police only after consulting the land owners in the vicinity and with the approval of the magistrate's court.



Lights have been fixed close to the forest reserve. Image courtesy of the Center for Environmental Justice.

"The organizers have not obtained permission from us," a senior police officer at the

Habarana police station who requested anonymity as he is not authorized to speak to the media, told Mongabay. He declined to offer further details.

Mongabay tried contacting Deep Jungle Entertainment to ask why it had not obtained approval to use the sound amplification systems. Calls and messages sent to the organizers went unanswered.

Hemantha Withanage, the director of the [Centre for Environmental Justice](#) (CEJ), pointed out that if such a permit is not obtained, the police could take legal action against the organizers.

“But the authorities are not willing to take corrective action,” he told Mongabay.

The CEJ has said it will take legal action against the organizers, the police, the Department of Wildlife and Conservation, and the Department of Forest Conservation for organizing the event in violation of existing laws and regulations. On Feb. 17, the Hingurakgoda magistrate court [ordered](#) electronic/technological silence from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.



Despite mounting protests, organizers have decided to go ahead with the event. Image courtesy of the Center for Environmental Justice.

Withdrawal of approval

In the face of public outrage, the divisional forest office in Polonnaruwa, in a letter dated Feb. 13, informed the organizers it would withdraw its approval granted for the event.

“The organizers did not have to obtain permission from us since the event is taking place on private land and not in the forest reserve,” a senior official speaking to Mongabay on the basis of anonymity at the forest office told Mongabay.

“We gave them approval previously, only because they asked for it from us.”

When Mongabay questioned whether the divisional forest office has no responsibility even if the event negatively impacts a forest reserve under its purview, the officer said he could not comment on that.

Multiple attempts by Mongabay to reach the conservator general of forests for comment proved futile.



The poster published by the organizers for the Deep Jungle Music and Cultural Festival that is to run across four days. Image courtesy of Deep Jungle Entertainment Pvt. Ltd.

Chandana Sooriyabandara, the director general of the [Department of Wildlife Conservation](#), said his institution has informed the organizers that the event should be held in a way that does not harm animals.

“We cannot forecast what action we would take if they violate the laws. If animals are affected by this, then we can decide at that time. That depends on the evidence that is available,” Sooriyabandara told Mongabay.

The [Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau](#) has “strongly recommended” canceling the event if the organizers have not obtained the relevant approval and clearances from the environmental, forest and wildlife agencies.

Despite the divisional forest office reversing its approval and the police not permitting the use of sound amplification devices, Deep Jungle Entertainment on Feb. 15 posted a message on its official Facebook page stating the event will go ahead as planned. “Forcing the company to cancel the event just 03 days before the festival is not practical!!” the organizers said.

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Abdulla et al. (2020) “The effect of anthropogenic noise on Sumatran Elephant’s anti-

predator behavior in the Elephant Conservation Center," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* [Preprint] Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/20/1/591/htm>

Featured image: Elephants near the Huruluwewa reservoir. Image courtesy of Namal Kamalgoda.

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