

Full Length Article

Imposing connectivity: Privileging an elephant corridor over ecotourism in the Sigur Plateau, South India

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ABSTRACT

A substantial body of critical scholarship has examined how conservation territories are expanded beyond protected area boundaries through territorialisation. This involves specific strategies such as regulating access, enforcing boundaries, and delineating spatial domains to secure control. More recently, wildlife corridors have emerged as a key mechanism for this expansion, justified by their role in maintaining connectivity between fragmented habitats. While much of the literature focuses on how conservation is prioritised over other land uses, an important question arises: what happens when a corridor is imposed on a landscape where ecotourism is already established? This article examines such a situation by analysing the case of the Sigur elephant corridor, in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, officially notified by the state administration and the judiciary in 2010. As part of this notification, resorts located within the corridor were ordered to close and their buildings demolished. This not only had an immediate impact on these establishments but also triggered a chain of effects on the lives and livelihoods of people living within the landscape, and further exacerbated contestations between the Forest Department and other actors. I demonstrate how the discursive power of the ecological idea of the corridor was used to territorialise this landscape, signalling a decisive governance turn whereby the political geography of the landscape is increasingly dominated by a conservation logic. This conclusion has important implications for how political ecology should understand the changing role of conservation in Indian society and beyond.

1. Introduction

As you exit through the southern gate of Mudumalai National Park and Tiger Reserve (NP & TR), you are almost immediately met by jeep drivers lining the narrow single carriageway, loudly calling out “safari, safari” to attract visitors. Their vehicles, parked on both sides of the road, are adorned with stickers bearing phrases such as ‘nature safari’ and ‘tiger trail,’ designed to capture the attention of passers-by. Venturing beyond this lively scene, you enter Masinagudi, a vibrant village described on the Tamil Nadu state tourism website as “an experience no wildlife enthusiast should ever miss”,¹ a reference to its strategic location near Mudumalai (NP & TR). Driving on towards Bokkapuram, a neighbouring village renowned for its cluster of resorts that have contributed to the area’s fame, the road winds through a stretch of land characterized by grassy patches and short savannah trees, identified as one of the four corridors in the plateau. After the village of Thottalingi, you come across a property marked by crumbling gateposts and rusting gates now reclaimed by vegetation, alongside abandoned

buildings missing door and window frames – a poignant reminder of a once-thriving establishment. This is just one of 38 resorts in the Sigur plateau in the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu that was ordered to be closed down in a landmark judgement passed by the Madras High court in 2011 and later upheld by the Supreme Court of India in 2020.

This protracted legal battle began in 2008 when an advocate, ‘Elephant’ G. Rajendran, filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL),² urging the courts to direct the government to safeguard elephant movement that was being impeded by the proliferation of resorts and encroachments. Early studies mapping elephant movements and home ranges in the landscape identified several smaller, distinct corridors within the plateau. However, as I will show below, the PIL set in motion a series of processes in which the smaller individual corridors were ultimately expanded into a single large one that was officially notified. These interventions to protect elephant movement resulted in the intentional closure of numerous ecotourism establishments situated within the designated corridor, despite ecotourism and conservation being mutually supportive logics. This reconfiguration of the landscape through the

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¹ <https://www.tamilnadutourism.tn.gov.in/destinations/masinagudi>.

² In Defence of Environment and Animals v. Chief Conservator of Forests and Ors., WP 10098/2008.

closure of resorts had significant impacts on the lives and livelihoods of hundreds of people who depended on tourism-related activities either directly or indirectly.

Conservation interventions impinging on people's lives and livelihoods are not a recent phenomenon. Landscapes in what are today's protected areas (PAs) have long been reconfigured and governed through the imposition of specific visions and administrative logics. Far from being "unspoiled benchmarks", PAs have been established on lands with deep histories of habitation and use by local communities (Neumann, 1998). Induced and forced relocations, along with the curtailment of resource use and access, have remained defining features of PAs, often leading to significant disruptions to lives and livelihoods (Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009; Torri, 2011). This reflects a broader pattern of conservation policies that have marginalized indigenous and local communities in the name of protection. While such ideas and governance models have historically been imposed within PA boundaries, this logic is increasingly extending into surrounding landscapes through various zonation exercises including buffer areas and eco-sensitive zones. Rather than displacement, a complex set of regulations are slowly introduced to control land use and curtail activities deemed harmful to wildlife, often without considering the effects these restrictions would have on people in these landscapes.

This process of governing human populations for the benefit of wildlife can be seen as a form of territorialisation, where various actors seek to regulate human populations, their livelihoods, and practices by redefining conservation boundaries (Bluwstein and Lund, 2018; Corson, 2011; Rasmussen and Lund, 2018; Vanderveest, 1996; Vanderveest and Peluso, 1995). More recently, this process has also been expanded beyond protected area boundaries to include tracts of land deemed important for connectivity through corridors (Bluwstein and Lund, 2018). Building on this literature, I demonstrate how the discursive power of the ecological idea of the corridor lent the state and the judiciary significant power to reconfigure the landscape. In doing so, it triggered a chain of effects that extended beyond the immediate impact on these establishments. It led to the reconfiguration of the landscape's political geography, further affecting the lives and livelihoods of its people who were already experiencing growing restrictions and interventions stemming from a long history of conservation measures.

The article first engages with the literature on territorialisation and its control strategies, then examines the discursive power of the corridor and its unfolding through double territorialisation. It then turns to ecotourism's role in conservation expansion and shows how the corridor's imposition undermined it. The ecological arguments in favour of the corridor were legitimised by epistemic communities ensuring that its realization was a foregone conclusion. I illustrate this through the case of the Sigur elephant corridor, beginning with its description, followed by an overview of the judicial process that reconfigured and rearticulated the landscape. I then examine the impact this has had on the tourism sector and beyond, and the reactions to the judicial process from various actors. Following this, I reflect on how and why the elephant corridor disrupted win-win narratives and undermined spaces of capital accumulation. Central in this reflection is the idea that corridors act as a mechanism to territorialise landscapes beyond PAs through the spread of a conservation logic. The conclusion theorises this conservation logic that underlies both incremental and sudden shifts that complicate tenurial regimes and people's livelihood prospects.

This article is based on empirical data collected between July and November 2022 in and around six villages in the Sigur plateau – Masinagudi, Bokkapuram, Kurumbapallam, Mavinahalla, Vazhaithottam and Chemmanatham. Interviews were carried out with owners of seven tourism establishments within and outside the notified corridor. 40 interviews were also conducted with people directly employed by tourism and those who indirectly benefitted from it, including *adivasis* (indigenous communities), jeep drivers, and shopkeepers. Five additional interviews were conducted with key informants and those associated with the judicial process in July and August 2024. Prior to interviews, verbal

informed consent was sought from all respondents. In addition to the interviews, this article is informed by the analysis of legal documents associated with the judicial proceedings, government documents, scientific and other publications on the corridor(s), and media reports. Due to the contested nature of the issue and the ongoing judicial process, representatives of the Forest Department, Revenue Department and other arms of the state declined to speak when approached saying the matter was sub judice.

2. When conservation territorialisation meets ecotourism

The expansion of conservation into surrounding landscapes occurs through the process of territorialisation, wherein mechanisms of resource control such as jurisdictions, authorities, rights, and spatial representations, are strategically deployed to assert and maintain control over these areas (Rasmussen and Lund, 2018). Early work emphasized how modern states employed territorial strategies, referred to as 'internal territorialisation', to regulate people's activities and restrict their access to and use of local resources within national boundaries (Vanderveest and Peluso, 1995). In the same vein, territorialisation has been described as a "process by which states attempt to control people and their actions by drawing boundaries around a geographic space" (Vanderveest, 1996, p. 159). Since then, scholars have explored how non-state actors and organisations not only possess and exercise territorialising power themselves but also often leverage the state as a means to extend their control (Corson, 2011; Lund & Rachman, 2018; Neumann, 1997; Peluso, 2005).

The process of territorialisation often involves specific strategies aimed at securing control, such as regulating access, enforcing boundaries, and delineating spatial domains. Corson (2011) identifies three key components of this process: mapping boundaries, establishing and enforcing new rights, and determining acceptable resource uses. Similarly, Rasmussen and Lund (2018) highlight four governmental techniques of establishing territorial control and claiming space: political authority, boundaries and maps, law and bureaucracy, and enforcement. All of the above reflect dynamics characteristic of the neoliberal era of environmental and wildlife conservation, where territorialisation often serves the interests of private actors and facilitates various forms of capital accumulation. The creation of wildlife corridors can be seen as a form of territorialisation, a strategy of resource control (Vanderveest & Peluso, 1995), wherein particular areas are classified to facilitate the regulation of both people and resources (Sack, 1986), thereby generating new configurations of power.

While the components and techniques of territorialisation have been outlined above, corridors – despite their growing prominence in contemporary conservation policy and professional discourse (Worboys et al., 2010; Hilty et al., 2020) – continue to face two persistent issues. The first involves debates over its definition and the methods used to study connectivity (see Bennett, 2003; Anderson and Jenkins, 2006),³ a concern reiterated more recently in the Indian context (Puyravaud et al., 2024). In an effort to articulate a more holistic definition that responds to earlier critiques, the IUCN's Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group frames connectivity not merely as structural linkages among habitat patches but as the "ability of plants or animals to move freely through a landscape, seascape, or freshwater environment" (as cited in Thatte et al., 2021). Second, although questions remain about whether this simplified approach genuinely enhances connectivity, corridors continue to be regarded as essential components of contemporary large-scale landscape conservation efforts (Goldman, 2009). In the case of the Sigur elephant corridor, although the legal proceedings defined a

³ Similarly, in India, the legal definition of "forest" has evolved, with the 1996 Godavarman judgment affirming its dictionary definition, a view that is still widely cited. A detailed discussion of this debate lies beyond this paper's scope.

corridor as a narrow strip of habitat that allows a target species to move between two larger habitat areas, this paper does not engage with broader definitional debates.

Globally, elephants are positioned as a conduit for connectivity (Barua, 2014), helping to amplify the discursive power of corridors as they unfold across landscapes, both figuratively and literally (Green and Sandbrook, 2021). This is characteristic of what Bluwstein and Lund (2018: 453) term as “double territorialisation – of landscape and of mind.” It creates durable spatial orders which include mapping and boundary making where certain features are made more legible while others are edited out, and “power relations are written on the land” (Peluso and Lund, 2011, p. 673). The simplified corridor thinking, Bluwstein and Lund point out, not only possesses the discursive power to rally diverse groups around the idea of linking protected areas, it can also result in claims for conservation that are resilient against counter-claims to the same land for non-conservation purposes (Bluwstein and Lund, 2018), including from ecotourism as I will highlight.

Emerging in the late 1970s, ecotourism was promoted as a way to generate revenue for conservation and sustainable development, centred on experiencing ‘wilderness’ in supposedly pristine, people-free landscapes (Sharpley, 2006; Stronza et al., 2019; West and Carrier, 2004). Ecotourism has come to be seen as a primary source of financial support for PAs, justifying nature conservation by leveraging its market value through tourism (Duffy, 2006; Hall, 2016; Honey, 2008). This neoliberal approach to conservation has been described as “the paradoxical idea that capitalist markets are the answer to their own ecological contradictions,” (Büscher, 2012, p. 29). This logic promises to channel new resources to biodiversity efforts, especially in poorer regions with limited state capacity, while enhancing democracy, protecting rural communities, securing property rights, and supporting conservation-based businesses (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). As a result, ecotourism comes to embody the ideal of protecting wildlife while promoting local development, enabling one, as Grandia (2007: 480) aptly puts it, to “eat one’s conservation cake and get a development dessert too.”

This model has extended beyond PA boundaries as well by aligning with the shift from a PA centric approach to one focused on landscapes. In Africa, for example, this has manifested through Transfrontier Conservation Areas (TCFAs) and African Heartlands proposed by the Peace Parks Foundation and the African Wildlife Foundation respectively. Both initiatives aim at fostering international cooperation, encouraging political integration and economic development through cross-border tourism, and improving wildlife connectivity between ecosystems (NOE, 2015). There is a clear trend here. Instead of acknowledging and addressing the failure of earlier win-win interventions, *even* more wins were layered on to sustain legitimacy (Büscher, 2013), thus aligning with neoliberal conservation’s shift beyond win-win solutions to a world of “win-win-win-win-win-win” or win⁷ narratives (Igoe and Brockington, 2007). This mode of thought has faced sustained critique from political ecologists, who have challenged both the commodification of landscapes through market-based mechanisms and the purported benefits of ecotourism for protected areas and local communities (Igoe and Croucher, 2007; McAfee, 1999; West & Carrier, 2004). However, despite these critiques and the major vulnerabilities exposed by the COVID-19 crisis in relying on tourism income (Stone et al., 2021), ecotourism continues to be promoted by national governments and other actors, including in India where this study is based.

Despite being considered as a vital component of the thriving ecotourism sector in some contexts (Bollig, 2024), why then is ecotourism viewed as an obstacle to corridors in others? As discussed earlier, corridors possess increasing discursive power. This is rooted in ecological arguments advanced in their favour: they facilitate dispersal, enable genetic exchange to prevent isolation, are deemed crucial in the face of climate change, and also considered important in reducing human-wildlife conflict. The persistent emphasis on extinction risks

associated with the lack of connectivity in the corridor literature further amplifies the urgency to secure them, presenting corridors as a near silver-bullet solution.

These ideas gain further legitimacy through ‘epistemic communities’, networks of knowledge-based experts who articulate complex cause-and-effect relationships, help states identify their interests, shape issues for collective debate, propose specific policies, and identify key points for negotiation (Haas, 1992). In this context, the ability to control knowledge and information constitutes a crucial aspect of power. This contributes to ‘epistemic territorialisation’, where “knowledge claims organize and consolidate geographic, epistemic, and virtual communities into territories within a controlled space and bounded system” (Brandon, 2025, p. 300). This method of governing and controlling resources, Brandon argues, constructs a hegemonic sphere of influence. The ecological idea of the corridor is one such idea that exerts dominant influence, helping to shape agendas and guide how actors think and operate within a particular space.

In the following sections, I will demonstrate how the reliance on the ecological idea of the corridor facilitated the closure of ecotourism establishments, which was brought to the forefront through the filing of a PIL. This resulted in repercussions that extended beyond the immediate impact on these establishments. Before delving into this, I will first provide an overview of the legal case and the judicial proceedings.

3. Situating the Sigur plateau, its ecotourism and corridors

The Sigur plateau in Tamil Nadu is a part of the larger Nilgiris Biosphere Reserve (NBR) which spans over 5520 km². The NBR comprises of a network of protected areas managed by the forest departments of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala, alongside settlements and areas of human use. Bounded by the Nilgiris hills to the south, the Moyar River to the north, reserved forests and estates to the west, and the Sigur Reserve Forests to the east, the plateau connects to the Sathyamangalam Tiger Reserve through the Moyar Valley. Conservationists maintain that the geography of the plateau, with a gorge on one side and the hills on the other, restricts the movement of elephants and other wildlife in an east-west direction and vice versa. The plateau itself is a patchwork of reserved forests and revenue lands, the latter of which includes human settlements, agricultural areas, tourism resort properties, Tamil Nadu Electricity Board land, tea and coffee estates, privately owned forests, and forested areas managed by the Revenue Department.

Multiple laws regulating land use in the area were cited during the judicial proceedings to identify properties that violated their provisions. They are: the Tamil Nadu Forest Act (TNFA) of 1882, the Tamil Nadu Preservation of Private Forests Act (TNPPFA) of 1949, the Tamil Nadu Town and Country Planning Act (TTCPA) of 1971, and the Forest Conservation Act (FCA) of 1980. Throughout the hearings and rulings, particular emphasis was placed on violations of the TNPPFA, an act that empowers the Forest Department to regulate land use on private lands designated as forests, without affecting land ownership. The law also prohibits the use of land for non-forest activities, and any sale requires prior approval from the district-level committee. Although this act has no relation to elephant corridors, the judiciary used certain provisions in it to declare most resorts in the notified corridor as illegal.

Although the legal case was the earliest to trigger a series of interventions on the ground for elephant movement, multiple studies and publications over the past five decades had identified and mapped multiple corridors passing between the various settlements in the landscape (Baskaran and Desai, 1996; Davidar et al., 2012; Desai, 1991; Menon, 2005; 2017; Ramkumar et al., 2002; Sivaganesan and Sukumar 2000). As early as the 1980s, there was a proposal to expand the neighbouring Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary⁴ by 250 square kilometres

⁴ Which itself had been expanded from 62 sqkm when it was formed in 1940 to the current area of 321 sqkm.

to include parts of the adjoining Singara, Sigur, and Anaikatti Reserve Forests (Rodgers and Panwar, 1988, p. 219). The aim was to create a migratory corridor for elephants to move towards the Eastern Ghats and the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary in Karnataka. However, this proposal did not translate into changes on the ground. More recently, it has been argued that connectivity through a corridor network rather than individual corridors in the landscape must be prioritised (Puvravaud et al., 2017). Despite these differences in approach, the similarities lie in the intention to impose the ecological idea of the corridor. As the following sections will show, the main actors driving the conservation territorialisation through corridors include the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, non-state conservation actors and experts, and the judiciary.

The Sigur plateau is one in which land was rendered 'touristifiable', not by locals establishing tourist ventures themselves but as a result of their absence (Pandya et al., 2023) and the gradual entry of the tourism industry. The Badagas, a community that settled in various parts of the Nilgiris, owned land on the plateau. However, due to crop damage caused by elephants and other wild animals, many were unable to continue cultivating their land. As a result, starting from the late 1970s, a significant number of Badagas sold their lands, some of which were acquired by individuals who now operate tourist establishments. Until the late 1990s, only a few resorts and lodges existed, but their numbers rose sharply, from 9 to over 100 by some estimates⁵. Early concerns by conservationists and a research and advocacy organization focused on tourism and development highlighted the sector's environmental impact—pollution, groundwater depletion, and increasing urbanisation—as well as its effects on wildlife due to unpermitted night safaris, hunting, and trekking (EQUATIONS, 2004, Puvravaud & Davidar, 2013). As tourist infrastructure expanded, apprehension about its impact on elephants and their movement through the landscape deepened.

4. Judicial activism and the elephant corridor⁶

In 2006, prompted by a directive from the central government to notify and take appropriate measures to safeguard elephant corridors, the Tamil Nadu government appointed a committee to investigate the matter. To this end, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and the Chief Wildlife Warden of the state proposed the acquisition of private lands in the Sigur landscape, adjoining the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve (Shaji, 2021). In the following two years, the Tamil Nadu Forest Department expanded the required land acquisition from just over 200 acres to more than 500 acres.

In 2008, in response to the proliferation of resorts and encroachments in the landscape, an advocate, 'Elephant' G. Rajendran, filed a PIL urging the courts to instruct the government to protect elephant movement. This case was combined with other cases pertaining to the landscape, including one about the lack of implementation of the Forest Right Act (FRA)⁷ of 2006 in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and Tiger Reserve. In the beginning of 2009, an interim direction was passed by

⁵ The exact number is not known since some homestays were not registered with the local administration.

⁶ Unless otherwise specified, information presented in this section was sourced from the following court documents: (a) In Defence of Environment and Animals v. Chief Conservator of Forests and Ors., WP 10098/2008; (b) Report of the expert committee formed in pursuance of the direction of the hon'ble high court in W.P.no.10098/2008, 2762 & 2839 of 2009; (c) In the Supreme court of India civil appellate jurisdiction civil appeal nos.3438-3439 of 2020 (Arising out of S.L.P. (C) Nos.17313-17314 of 2011) (d) Before the honourable Segur plateau elephant corridor enquiry committee constituted by the honourable Supreme Court of India civil appellate Nos. 3438-3439 of 2020 (Arising out of S.L.P. (C) Nos. 17313-17314 of 2011. Case no. 144/2021.

⁷ An act which grants adivasis the right to live in and use the forest for various customary purposes, provided they claim and are awarded these rights.

the state high court to the District Collector of Nilgiris to file a report on steps taken to remove encroachers⁸ from lands within the elephant corridor. During this period, a map depicting an elephant corridor was discussed by District Forest Officers (DFO) of the region and conservationists. An ecologist interviewed who was involved in the process noted that while conservationists favoured designating smaller corridors between settlements, the DFOs insisted on a larger corridor to protect it from future threats. This, despite the former pointing out the size outlined in earlier studies and acknowledging that securing a larger area might pose challenges for both the state and central governments. After accepting the reasoning for a single larger corridor, a map was presented to the court during hearings. However, this was opposed by resort and private land owners. This prompted the court to constitute an expert committee tasked with identifying the elephant corridor and submitting a report after reviewing past studies.

During a two-day visit to the area in 2009, the expert committee, consisting of five Forest Department officials, interviewed various experts (researchers and scientists), former Forest Department officials, local conservation organisations and representatives of local tribal groups. Ironically, many of the experts interviewed were not only the authors of the very studies on corridors in the region that the expert committee relied on but also played a pivotal role in deciding the size of the elephant corridor described earlier. As their individual statements to the expert committee unsurprisingly endorsed the corridors, these were incorporated into the final report. This report was compiled by an individual on deputation from the Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) to the Tamil Nadu Forest Department. It is worth noting that WTI also published two compilations on the elephant corridors of India (Menon, 2005; 2017), four corridors of which are situated in this landscape.

The expert committee's report was submitted to the court five days after the visit and included a corridor significantly larger than the individual corridors previously identified between existing settlements in earlier studies. The final map depicted one that was 1 km wide and 22 km long, covering an area of 7000 acres made up of revenue lands, private land holdings and reserved forests (Fig. 1). The court raised concerns about the significant expansion of the corridor area when the map was presented. The experts explained that the corridor boundaries were based on elephant movement data, showing that elephants could move freely through the area if unimpeded. According to an interviewee who was a part of the judicial process, this reasoning was enough to convince the judges, who proceeded to instruct the state government to choose between the map prepared by the expert committee and the four smaller corridors identified by Menon. (2005). The former was chosen and notified in 2010, and all 642 objections received against it were rejected (Pandian, 2020). All occupants, were to be evicted from about 1500 acres owned by over 270 people, with holdings ranging from 0.005 to 115 acres, except scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers protected under the FRA (Thekaekara, 2019). The order passed underscored the ecological power of the corridor while also revealing how its size had been significantly expanded based on data that was nearly 15 years old.

In 2010, the High Court's order was challenged in the Supreme Court by the Hospitality Association of Mudumalai and several other local landowners, leading to its temporary stay. After public hearings, objections, writ petitions, and accusations by the hospitality association that an "artificial corridor" had been created, countered by the courts' assertion that the resorts lacked the necessary permissions, the High Court issued its final order in 2011. This order directed resort and other private landowners to vacate and surrender their land to the District Collector within three months. Tribals and other forest dwellers were exempt from this under the provisions of the FRA. If evicted, they were

⁸ While the court did not explicitly define who encroachers were, it is understood as those who encroached on land belonging to the Revenue or Forest Departments.

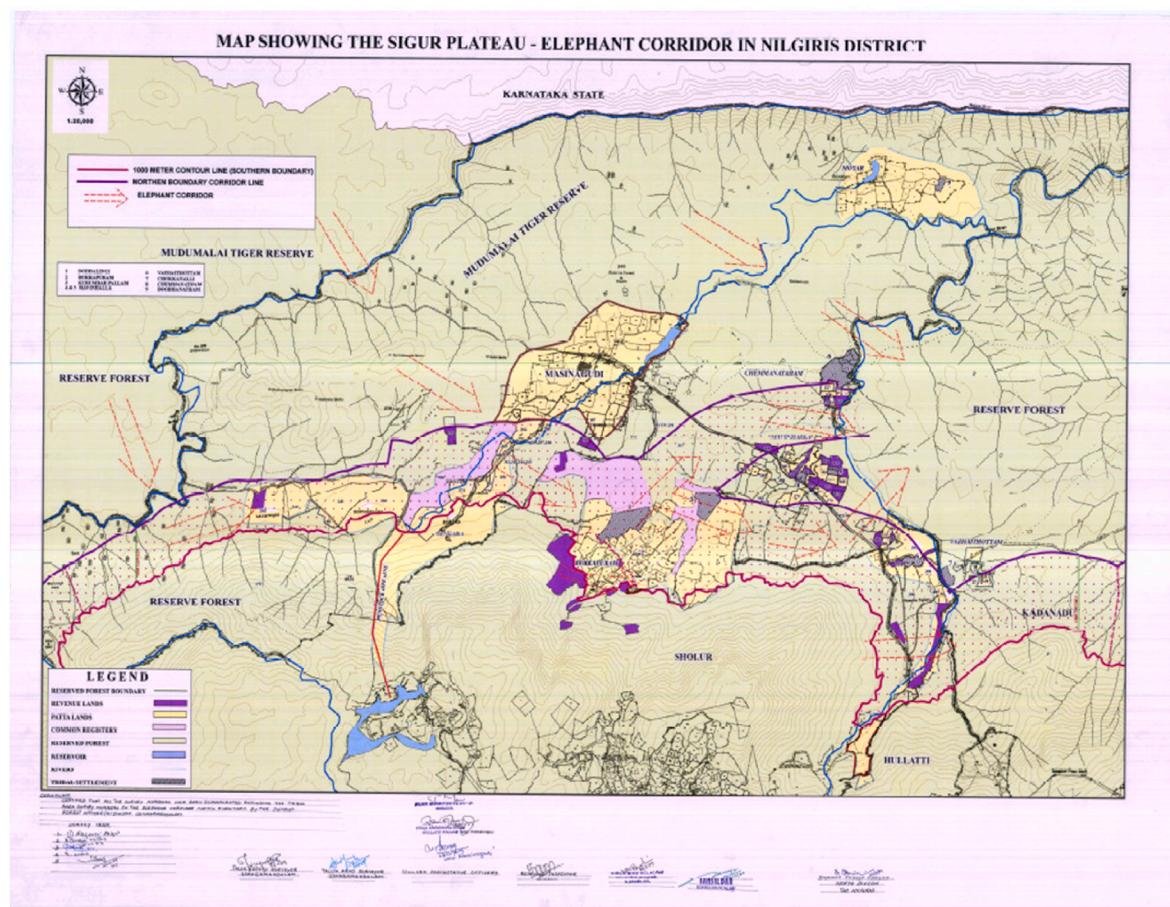


Fig. 1. Official map of the notified corridor which depicts the outer boundaries (purple line on top and pink line on the bottom) as well as the reserved forests and Mudumalai Tiger Reserve in green, revenue land in purple, and private lands in yellow.

Source: https://www.conservationindia.org/wp-content/files_mf/WP_Corridor_TNFD.pdf Accessed on: 12-11-22

to receive compensation or alternative accommodation in accordance with the act's stipulations. However, in 2017, roughly 60 huts in Vazhaithottam belonging to the Jenu Kurumbar and Irula tribal communities were demolished by the then District Collector, disregarding the very act that was supposed to protect their rights. The justification provided was that the huts were on encroached government land, that had also been notified as an elephant corridor, and therefore the land had to be reclaimed (Arasu, 2017).

With appeals in this case pending, in 2018, following reports of large-scale construction in the elephant corridor, the Supreme Court instructed the District Collector to submit a report on developments in the landscape. A report listing 39 resorts with 309 buildings, 390 houses, 9 estates/plantations, 77 cultivation fields and other public infrastructure was filed. The District Collector stated that all 39 resorts were operating illegally; 27 had obtained approvals solely for residential purposes, while 12 had no approvals at all. A number of the properties were also adjudged not to have taken the requisite permission during the initial acquisition of land, and to have contravened rules on the extent of built-up property allowed. Following a process where approval documents for their functioning were sought, 38 resorts were shut down and the buildings sealed, with only one having the necessary documentation. In addition, the Forest Department instructed the resorts to remove the electric fences along their boundaries to allow the free movement of elephants. It was noted that electric fences combined with land use change severely restricted the movement of elephants and caused an increase in incidents of human-elephant conflict. Wildlife activists concurred with the court's decision regarding the necessity to demolish the buildings. A noted wildlife biologist added "All the resorts and

buildings in the Sigur corridor should be demolished soon in the wake of the Supreme Court order. If those buildings are not demolished, they will create further problems as they can turn hideouts for poachers and anti-social elements" (Premkumar and Thomas, 2020).

During this time, several other residents and resort owners whose properties were included in the expanded notified corridor impleaded themselves in the case. They argued that their land lay outside the scientifically recognized elephant corridors, referring to publications by Menon, (2005, 2007) and others, and that an excessively large area was designated. The resort owners also added that their establishments were environmentally compatible, provided employment to people from the local community and helped tourists be close to nature and sensitive towards animals and the environment, characteristic of the win-win narrative. Following additional arguments about the scientific accuracy of the map by the expert committee compared with those by scientific publications among others, the Supreme Court appointed a 3-member enquiry committee to verify the accuracy of the objections raised. In passing the judgement, the then Chief Justice of India said the "elephant is a gentleman" and "is big and powerful, but fragile" (Vaidyanathan, 2020) adding that "... the will of men must give way to elephants" (Pandian, 2020). The committee initially consisted of a former judge of the Madras High Court and two wildlife conservationists, one of whom was a consultant to the World Wide Fund for Nature and an author of one of the publications on corridors in the plateau, and the other a former member of the National Board for Wildlife. Following the passing of one committee member in 2020, a conservation social scientist was appointed as their replacement.

The mandate of this committee was to listen to the individual

objections of the appellants, establish their veracity by inspecting properties, and pass orders by adjudging whether those who raised objections were violating provisions of the TNFA, the TNPPFA, the FCA and the TTCPA. The hearings, site visits and the process involved in listening to objections and adjudicating their veracity was described by a member of the enquiry committee as a “pandora’s box” due to the number of laws involved and the complexity in applying them to each individual case.

In 2023, the enquiry committee published a report after going through various objections raised. It concluded that for many of those who contested the judgements, including tourism establishments, private habitations and agricultural lands, the earlier orders would hold. It noted that most were illegal under relevant laws or were encroaching on forest land, while other objections lay beyond the committee’s jurisdiction or purview. It also refrained from issuing eviction orders, stating this was beyond its mandate. The committee acknowledged the government’s right to act against violators but expressed openness to rehabilitating long-term occupants. The report stated that those households categorised as being below the poverty line could be engaged in conservation activities, anti-poaching operations and, ironically, ecotourism, despite a large number of tourist establishments being closed down.

In August 2024, officers from two *panchayats* [village council] issued demolition notices to 35 resorts, labelling them as unauthorized constructions (Chaitanya, 2024). These buildings, reportedly built in violation of the TTCPA were ordered to be demolished within 15 days as a part of ‘Operation Sigur’. In response, a few resort owners filed a writ petition in the High Court contesting the demolition orders and arguing that the inquiry committee had exceeded its authority. Following interim relief granted by the Madras High Court, in September 2025, it ruled that while the demolition of illegal constructions did “not require interference … the direction to hand over the possession of the property to the Government alone cannot be sustained in the eye of law.”⁹ It added that landowners using their purchased land for agriculture were permitted to keep it, as long as they managed it in an eco-friendly way that does not disturb elephants or include artificial barriers such as electric or solar fences.

5. The fallout of the legal case

Catalysed by the need to protect the elephant corridor, the summary of the judicial proceedings above illustrates that the ecotourism establishments’ violation of the TNPPF guidelines led to a clear and straightforward judgment by the courts. That the high court passed this judgement, which was upheld by the Supreme Court, is consistent with Indian courts instructing authorities across all levels to comply with environmental laws (Divan & Rosencranz, 2022; Shrotria, 2012). The courts’ disregard for the tourism sector’s win-win rhetoric, evident in interviews, masked other disputes about the corridor, namely questions about the scientific credibility of the designated corridor area and contentions over the nuances in the legality of land use.

The main contention of resort owners and private land owners was that publications by Ajay Desai and Menon et al. (see Desai, 1991; Menon, 2005; 2017) had identified smaller corridors in the region, whereas the government and judiciary had, in their view, arbitrarily expanded the corridor boundaries. A person who has been fighting for the rights of the landowners in the area remarked angrily¹⁰ “Scientific publications have identified small corridors in the area. Why then has a corridor covering thousands of acres been notified?” This frustration is heightened by the fact that the High Court-appointed expert committee’s report itself defined a corridor as a relatively narrow strip of habitat, contradicting what ultimately unfolded on the ground.

The owner of a resort whose establishment was shut down added: “We are on *patta* [revenue] land, not forest land as people have been made to believe. We have been paying our taxes and paid to take the necessary permissions. How can we be illegal? Now they are turning around and saying we took permissions from the wrong people. Why did they wait 30 years to point this out?”¹¹ Another resort owner added, “It is all because of these environmentalists who don’t live here and WWF that have a twisted logic. They think we don’t care for the wildlife, not realising that our business runs on it.”¹² Reflecting on the often-used criticism of tourism in the area being unregulated, the owner of a resort added, “Tourism here was a winner for the government from all angles. They did not regulate it. If they truly wanted to bring about change, they should have come out with a tourism policy and regulations, not close everything down.”

Members of both court-appointed committees acknowledged the absence of a proper tourism policy or zonation in the area but agreed that tourism should not be pursued blindly based solely on its perceived benefits to conservation and livelihoods. A member of the Supreme Court-appointed expert committee noted that many tourism establishments were closed for violating land use regulations. The member stated, “Nobody is arguing that they are not contributing to conservation. But they have violated the rules so they are guilty.”¹³ Furthermore, the cost at which tourism was being carried out was concerning to the member who pointed out that the elephants were bearing the brunt of this model. A wildlife conservationist said: “The elephant is the biggest loser in all of this.”¹⁴ While a middle ground may have been the ideal scenario, the number of violations by tourism establishments in terms of land use were too many, according to another conservationist.

Although the tourism establishments and other property owners were penalized for violating laws, an interviewee involved in the judicial process pointed out that the administration and government agencies were equally responsible. “They [the resorts] should have been informed of the various permissions necessary by the panchayat. The panchayat and the revenue department need to be pulled up since they are also stakeholders in this entire thing.”¹⁵ The individual also expressed concerns about the lack of transparency in preparing the corridor map and possible collusion between the Revenue Department and some tourist establishments.

Recommendations from the expert committee on tourism and residential properties must now be implemented by the Revenue and Forest Department, though the expert committee member expects further appeals from aggrieved parties, potentially prolonging land use disputes. Consequently, this issue is unlikely to reach a resolution, at least in the short term since “there is so much to do and undo” said the member, while adding:

Irrespective of whether you are in the corridor or not, you are still governed by the [TNPPF] act. A lot of people think that, because they are in the identified corridor, they have to adhere by these rules. That’s not the case. The corridor is very much part of the landscape which is under the purview of the [TNPPF] act. Even if you are outside the corridor, you still have to comply. The hearings were only meant for people in the corridor.

Only time will tell if the administration will apply this approach across the entire plateau and beyond, imposing similar penalties on violators. However, extending it to the broader Nilgiris landscape would impact thousands of people. Reflecting on the process of the enquiry committee, the member said: “Our only worry is that, if the government doesn’t act on it, it is a complete negation of this exercise.”

¹¹ Interviewed on 23/07/2022.

¹² Interviewed on 08/08/2022.

¹³ Interviewed on 30/07/2024.

¹⁴ Interviewed on 09/08/2022.

¹⁵ Interviewed on 02/08/2024.

⁹ <https://indiankanoon.org/doc/174408282/>.

¹⁰ Interviewed on 12/09/2022.

The imposition of the ecological idea of the corridor was key in prioritizing conservation over ecotourism. However, as I will demonstrate in the next section, the closure of the resorts triggered a chain of effects that extended beyond the immediate impact on these establishments.

6. The cascading impact of tourism establishment closures

The growth of resorts and homestays and their subsequent closure following the court ruling changed the dynamics of employment in the region. In the 1990s and early 2000s, as resorts multiplied, many small farmers shifted from agriculture to working in the tourism sector. A farmer who made the switch said: "Earlier we had to struggle day and night to protect our crops from wildlife. When elephants or wild pigs came, whatever we were growing was affected. Working in the resorts, we were at least guaranteed a stable income and did not have to stay up at night."¹⁶ The employment benefitted women as well, some of whom are still employed in resorts that have been allowed to stay open. "I have worked now in the same place for fifteen years. With the fixed timings, I am able to earn a livelihood and take care of my family. I don't have to do agricultural work, which many women are forced to do", said a lady from Bokkapuram.

Following the court ruling, the closure of resorts compelled many of the affected to search for other jobs. Many now make the daily 60 km commute to Ooty, a town in the upper plateau, to work in agriculture or construction. Reflecting on the hardship that he and others from Thottalingi now face, an Adivasi and a former employee at a resort said, "At least 40 people from this village were employed in resorts that were closed. We all do daily wage labour now. Traveling every day is not easy but we have to do it. We have no other choice. There is no work here. Even the work that we do is not guaranteed."¹⁷ The campaigner for the rights of the landowners emphasized the large number of people who have been let go from their jobs at the resorts. "Approximately 400–500 people here were employed in some way by the resorts. Most of them were let go after the court orders. What are they supposed to do in this situation?" Many among the younger generation have moved to nearby cities such as Coimbatore and Bangalore in search of work. Reflecting on the declining job opportunities and the increasing number of people migrating out of the area, he lamented: "If this continues, very few people will remain here."

While tourism establishments provided direct employment benefits to people, others benefitted in indirect ways. Some livestock herders in the landscape, especially those who reared goats, often sold meat directly to resorts. "We benefitted from having the resorts here because we could sell our goats directly to them, especially when we needed some money urgently. Now we are reliant only on traders from outside,"¹⁸ said a farmer who owns livestock to supplement his income. Jeep owners and drivers, who derived a large part of their income from tourists, also say they have been financially hit. "When the number of resorts grew, I leased my land and bought a jeep. It was good then because I made a lot of money taking tourists for safaris. I was able to put my son and daughter through college. But after the case, my income dropped a lot and I have returned to farming," said a former jeep driver who still owns a jeep and occasionally takes people on safari. Although jeep safaris continue to operate, drivers report a sharp decline in tourists staying locally owing to the closure of many establishments, making them increasingly reliant on visitors passing through en route to Ooty.

Contestations surrounding the elephant corridor have exacerbated many pre-existing conflicts in the area between residents of the landscape and the forest department, stemming from various conservation regulations and interventions that in the process have expanded the

conservation logic and mode of governance into surrounding landscapes. Increasing restrictions have been placed on livestock herders over the past two decades stemming from concerns about overgrazing, one of the early noted threats to corridors (Shekhar Silori and Kumar Mishra, 2001). Second, restrictions have also been placed on the use of jeeps for safaris in the plateau, arising out of concerns about illegal night safaris and the harassment of wildlife, which in 2022 led to another round of protests.¹⁹ Third, in 2007, Mudumalai and sections of the Masinagudi panchayats were declared as a Critical Tiger Habitat under the Wild Life (Protection) Amendment Act (WLPA) of 2006 which also led to widespread resistance (Karthik and Menon, 2016). Finally, the dual notifications of the buffer area of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and its eco-sensitive zone (ESZ), which regulate land use in the notified area, both of which encompasses the Sigur plateau and all the villages within and outside the notified elephant corridor has led to protests in Masinagudi as well as the neighbouring *taluks*²⁰ of Gudalur and Pandalur. Residents and business owners in the landscape feared that the notification would threaten their livelihoods.²¹

Over time, increasing conservation restrictions, recently heightened by the notification of the elephant corridor, have significantly affected people's lives and livelihoods, sparking a variety of responses ranging from legal challenges and protests to the migration of people from the landscape. These restrictions, both incremental and sudden, have gradually come to limit and dominate people's lives and complicate tenurial regimes. Those who remain engaged in agriculture or who returned to it after the closure of resorts continue to face familiar challenges of precarity inherent in the agrarian sector, compounded by additional pressures from conservation. Around the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, Siddhartha (2025) describes how shifts in the agrarian landscape combined with conservation restrictions left farmers with little choice but to sell their land to facilitate the strengthening of an elephant corridor. While a similar outcome may be inconceivable in the short to medium term, one wonders how the landscape will evolve given the various pressures.

7. Reactions to the case and beyond

Responses to different stages of the judicial process and its real-world implications have been mixed, involving a range of actors including conservationists, members of the judiciary, and state representatives. In a column in a leading newspaper, a journalist stated that the high court judgement in 2010 will "remain a milestone in environmental jurisprudence in India."²² Going one step further, a member of the Supreme Court appointed expert committee added that the ruling would set a precedent for similar future cases. This is particularly significant given that corridors lack legal protection under any specific legislation. Instead, ESZs, a provision under the Environment Protection Act of 1986 have been used, alongside proposals to apply relevant sections of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, and the Biodiversity Act of 2002. The notification of an ESZ in 2012 around the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, across the Moyar gorge from Sigur, enabled the state to cancel the permission given to homestays,²³ and to order their closure as well as the demolition of illegal constructions in the elephant corridor where

¹⁹ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/tamil-nadu/2022/Aug/30/masinagudi-residents-oppose-curbs-on-safari-2492812.html> (accessed on 30/12/2022).

²⁰ An administrative sub-division of a district.

²¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Coimbatore/masinagudi-residents-plan-protest-against-forest-department-over-enforcement-of-sc-verdict-on-eco-sensitive-zone/article65821572.ece>.

²² <https://frontline.thehindu.com/environment/the-elephant-in-the-room/article5389669.ece>.

²³ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/bandipur-licences-of-3-homestays-revoked/article31739572.ece>.

¹⁶ Interviewed on 01/10/2022.

¹⁷ Interviewed on 14/10/2022.

¹⁸ Interviewed on 17/10/2022.

a similar legal battle ensued with a tourism establishment.²⁴ A consequence of this was that it halted speculative land pricing. “In a sense, connectivity that was important ecologically on both sides of the Moyar gorge, was upheld in completely different ways”, said a conservationist who was critical of the developments in the Sigur case.

In 2020, following what was widely considered a landmark judgement in which the Supreme Court upheld the 2011 Madras High Court order notifying the Sigur elephant corridor, a lawyer representing an environmental organisation in the Nilgiris said:

“The State and Central governments have been consistently in favour of declaring the corridor for the last 12 years. The verdict of the Supreme Court reinforces the faith of conservationists in the judiciary and proves yet again that the courts in India are custodians of forests and wildlife. In line with this judgment, a comprehensive legislation should be enacted to secure all the elephant corridors across the country.”²⁵

The following year, the then Chief Justice of India echoed this sentiment when he emphasized that it was the state’s responsibility to safeguard “keystone species” like elephants, which are immensely important to the environment.²⁶ These statements clearly underscore the importance accorded to corridors in protecting elephants and the environment, while also highlighting the role of the conservation state and the judiciary in this process.

There have, however, been others who have been more critical about how this process has unfolded. That corridors do not have “legal teeth”, as one conservationist emphasized, meant that their translation as an ecological idea into legal terms have added an interpretive layer. The conservationist contended that this was problematic since different groups of people have different views on what enables a corridor, what threatens it and what undermines it. Regardless of the differences however, “it was clear [that] the court liked the idea [of a corridor] and it was conservationists and the forest department seizing the opportunity and ramrodding it and getting as much area included in the corridor as possible. That part is pretty arbitrary and I think the reason is because the demarcation came first and the rationalization followed.”²⁷ He also added that there was no set process to demarcate and set aside land for a corridor, especially if evictions were to be considered.

The use of science during early stages, especially during the mapping exercise, was also a bone of contention between different actors. A conservationist who supported the idea of the corridor said: “Without basic science, it would have been very difficult to win the case.”²⁸ However, others more critical of the process maintained that science was employed in a very selective manner. “There are things invoked in science which are openly ambiguous. My problem is the way in which it has been largely leveraged. Partly, I think, pushing the idea of corridors is extending the historical impulse, the annexationist impulse of the Forest Department to try and add more space,” said a conservationist, adding that “the legal intervention weaponised an ecological idea” which also ensured that political intervention was not possible to stop the process.

Frustrated at the manner in which the process unfolded and the way it affected people on the ground, a conservationist suggested that if the government was serious about protecting the corridor, it could have extended the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary under the WLPA, which had clearly defined steps to do so. However, this would mean a transfer

of ownership of land from individuals and entities to the forest department, which was not considered an ideal model since it would impinge on people’s livelihoods and food security, and would therefore be unjust. Enabling elephant movement, he added, would not require a change in ownership but just needed the absence of physical obstructions and access.

The impact of conservation policy on marginalized communities is extensively documented in India (Kabra, 2009; Lasgorceix and Kothari, 2009; Rai et al., 2019). Yet, as one conservationist noted, in this case those in power found themselves on the receiving end. “Conservation has not had the courage to stand up to people who had social capital, access to their networks of power. In this case, there was some truth to the fact that there were a lot of people whose ownership and use rights were in question, just like it had been for generations for *adivasis*.”

Others, including those within the conservation community said that the whole case could have been handled in a more delicate manner. An ecologist familiar with the landscape said “You cannot demarcate a corridor with arbitrary lines. It is a piecemeal approach.”²⁹ One of the editors of the Right of Passage document (Menon, 2005; 2017), which noted the existence of four smaller corridors, said: “No conservation is possible through just exercising bureaucratic or judicial powers and antagonising the local communities.”³⁰ Such a statement would suggest that there might exist a certain amount of reflexivity in terms of how conservation works. Unfortunately, there continue to be many examples of communities living in and near forests being dispossessed by the conservation apparatus.

In April 2024, a year after the enquiry committee appointed by the Supreme Court published its report, the Tamil Nadu government constituted an Elephant Corridor Committee comprised of officers from the state Forest Department, scientific experts and conservation organisations to reassess elephant corridors in the state. After consultations, the committee released a draft report in which it identified 42 elephant corridors,³¹ up from earlier publications that identified between 18 and 25 (Sivaganesan and Sukumar 2000, Menon, 2017; Project Elephant Division, MoEF&CC, Government of India, 2023). While some conservationists welcomed the report as a crucial first step and a sign of the state’s commitment to protecting corridors, others warned that further work was needed before officially notifying them. “Nobody has tried to map out elephant use over various seasons. Why can’t we do that? If you are this serious about it, give it two years and collect the data necessary,” said a conservationist who stated that after these data were collected, it should be taken to communities living near these areas so that a collective decision could be made.

These diverse responses underscore the complexity that arises when a corridor is imposed on a landscape, impacting a wide range of people. While the issue was primarily framed as a conflict between ecotourism and conservation, its repercussions extended much further.

8. Reflection and conclusion

The case of the Sigur corridor presented in this article shows that, contrary to the existing literature portraying ecotourism and conservation, and more recently wildlife corridors as mutually supportive logics (Rathore et al., 2008; Van Gruisen and Chundawat, 2020; Bollig, 2024), conservation may also undermine ecotourism. The discursive power of the corridor, rooted in its ecological justification and legitimised by epistemic communities, granted the state and the judiciary significant power. Aided in part by tenurial ambiguity, this provided the necessary impetus to territorialise the landscape and transform its political

²⁴ <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/bangalore/bandipur-tiger-reserve-esz-illegal-cottages-8936878/>.

²⁵ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/protecting-pachyderm-pathways/article32885452.ece>.

²⁶ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/conservationist-joins-sc-pane-on-elephant-corridor-case/article33678554.ece>.

²⁷ Interviewed on 10/08/2024.

²⁸ Interviewed on 13/08/2024.

²⁹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/govt-has-taken-a-piecemeal-approach-on-elephant-corridor/articleshow/102933823.cms>.

³⁰ <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/whose-corridor-is-it-38297>.

³¹ <https://www.forests.tn.gov.in/tn-forest-dept-publications> (accessed on 30/4/2024).

geography. The idea proved so influential that debates over the corridor's scale, from smaller, individual corridors to its significant expansion into a single large one, were debated and ultimately accepted, reflecting similar scaling processes seen elsewhere, such as in the case of the rhino (Bersaglio & Enns, 2024), albeit on a different scale for now.

Knowledge about the effects of the closure of tourism establishments on the lives and livelihoods of local residents has largely remained confined to the immediate area and has not really spread beyond the Nilgiris landscape. Details of these ramifications were also not mentioned in the various judicial reports, with only the steps to curtail the use of resources from the corridor area finding mention. Ironically, the Supreme Court-appointed enquiry committee suggested that individuals classified as Below the Poverty Line and having resided in the area for an extended period could be involved in ecotourism, anti-poaching, and other conservation activities. As demonstrated, the intensity of conflicts arising from conservation efforts has fluctuated over time, peaking most recently with the notification of the corridor. However, the steady increase in restrictions and its consequent territorialisation has continuously affected local livelihoods in some form. Although the developments in this corridor differ significantly from the abrupt eviction of indigenous communities for a wildlife corridor in Uganda (Colchester, 1994), they share commonalities, particularly in the intent to restrict human use in biodiversity-rich regions.

The application of the TNPPFA did not result in land being usurped, nor did it alter its legal status or ownership, and the proposed acquisition ultimately did not take place. Instead, this act was used to regulate land use, and the ESZ norms will serve the same purpose once implemented. In doing so, a few acceptable uses of land will continue to be allowed. With increasing restrictions, agriculture not being financially viable in the long term, crop depredation leading to losses and the younger generation moving away from the sector, one wonders how long it would take before a large number of agricultural holdings are left fallow, making land grabbable (Weldemichel, 2022) and allowing the conservation frontier to expand. Furthermore, although accumulation through ecotourism has been halted in the notified corridor, it is possible that there could be a delay or even obscurity in the commodification of land or resources in and around the corridor, through offsetting schemes for example, which allows states, conservationists and other actors to demarcate areas for conservation and for the 'common good' (Kelly, 2013). The introduction of these, if they materialise, will likely create new win-win narratives while continuing to fail forward (Fletcher, 2023).

The spatial expansion of conservation through corridors reflects a broader trend driven by a conservation, wherein a consistent discourse and series of interventions gradually dominates other land uses. This occurs not through outright enclosures or displacement, but through the extension of power and regulatory control over land under various tenurial regimes. A step-by-step process is followed here, where incremental restrictions are placed and regulations added that govern land, people and resources. This conservation-driven territoriality establishes new institutional frameworks, incorporating diverse governance tools such as conservation-focused regulations, scientific legitimacy to support these efforts, and the endorsement of both state and non-state actors. This slow but decisive turn, whereby landscapes are increasingly dominated by a conservation logic, shifts the place of conservation in society more broadly. In India and beyond, this could lead to increasing contestations and perhaps more examples of the expansion of the conservation frontier and the accompanying territorialisation. This not only challenges prevailing narratives that associate conservation with market-based approaches but also contributes to the broader political ecology literature by demonstrating how conservation logic becomes dominant in practice.

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