



Domestic Asian elephants in India are often used to do work, such as give rides to tourists or herd wild elephants. Sometimes wild elephants that cause problems for humans are domesticated rather than relocated.

PHOTOGRAPH BY STEVE WINTER, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

#### WILDLIFE WATCH

## Wild Indian Elephant Dies Trying to Escape Captivity

Maharaj died trying to break free, illustrating how Indian officials are often ill-equipped to deal with crop-raiding elephants.

BY NICOLA PAYNE



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From almost the moment Maharaj had been locked in, he beat his head and trunk against the sides of his small wooden cage. Using his body as a wrecking ball, the Asian elephant succeeded in cracking two of its logs.

Other than stopping to eat a bit of sugarcane and coconut leaves, his violent attempts to free himself were constant, people present at the elephant camp in India's Anamalai Tiger Reserve [told the Hindu](#).

Then around 4:10 p.m. on June 21, Maharaj slammed himself into the wooden structure one last time and collapsed. Within five minutes, he was dead.

He'd been in captivity for 46 hours.

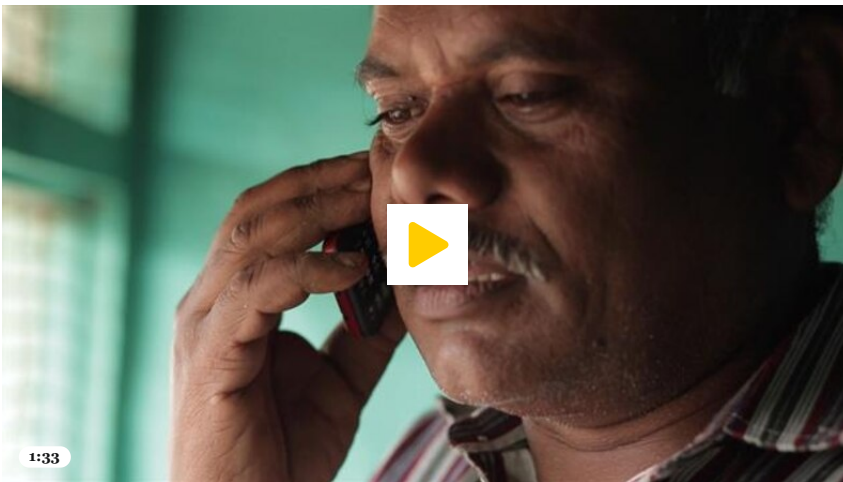
A postmortem examination concluded that Maharaj died from multiple fractures on the front of his skull and a torn muscle on his forehead. His tusks were shattered, and he had additional injuries to his eyes and legs.

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“That Maharaj died as a result of what humans did to him is beyond doubt,” says elephant expert Joyce Poole, co-founder of ElephantVoices, a research group in Kenya.

Villagers in the town of Madukkurai had logged many complaints with the Tamil Nadu forest department about Maharaj’s crop trampling prior to his capture. However, his ordeal shows how ill-equipped state forest department authorities are to deal with cases of human-elephant conflict.

Many times, critics say, officials resort to capturing and taming a “rogue” elephant without having real cause to do so, as the law requires. The decision to keep an animal in captivity rather than relocate it not only flouts the law, says [Prakash Sasha of the Elsa Foundation](#), an NGO dedicated to removing wild elephants from captivity, it is also unethical and inhumane. The process by which an Asian elephant is domesticated involves regular beatings, deprivation of food and water, and long periods of confinement, something that’s especially harmful to animals used to roaming up to 30 miles (48 kilometers) a day in the wild.



#### **A 1-800 NUMBER THAT HELPS ANIMALS AND HUMANS COEXIST**

India’s government will help people recoup damages caused by elephants, but the process can be long and complicated. WildSeve is a program that helps people document the damage and fill out the necessary paperwork.

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Maharaj is just one of several wild elephants who have suffered after being forced into domesticity under arguably unnecessary circumstances. Domesticated elephants in India work in the tourist industry, [in religious festivals as temple elephants](#), or as *kumkis*, trained elephants who assist in the captures of wild elephants. Two years ago, a pregnant elephant was captured from the wild and gave birth in a kraal, a small space intended to confine a captured wild elephant until it submits to its handler. The calf was premature and died three days later. The death was a result of forestry officials’ negligence, a contempt petition filed to the Madras High Court [claimed](#) at the time.

Both elephants were captured after causing problems for villages. Conflict with humans is the greatest threat facing Asian elephants, says Nilanga Jayasinghe of the World Wildlife Fund. There are fewer than 50,000 Asian elephants in the wild, and about 70 percent of them live outside government protected areas, meaning they regularly pass through human settlements. And as humans continue to develop land and encroach on elephant territories, these encounters will only increase.

A single elephant can eat up to 1,000 pounds (454 kilograms) of food and make quick work of more than two acres (0.8 hectares) of crops in a single day, so villagers aren't always inclined to treat them with compassion. State forest officials, who are responsible for handling these clashes, often choose to capture and domesticate elephants that interfere with villagers. Doing so ensures that the complaints about the animal will stop, **Sasha** says.

## **What Happened to Maharaj?**

For a year, locals in Madukkarai, a village in the city of Coimbatore in the southeastern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, had been reporting to the forest department that the tusker was traveling up to four miles into their farmlands at night and destroying property and crops already depleted by drought.

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## **In the ensuing chaos, Maharaj trampled and killed a 53-year-old forest department guard.**

Madukkarai is located in an elephant corridor that has been used by migrating pachyderms for thousands of years. Up to 20 people a year are typically killed by elephants in Coimbatore, according to Ajay Desai, an Asian elephant expert based in India. In turn, there's been an uptick in retaliatory (and illegal) elephant killings using poison and electrocution.

The forest department tried a number of times to push Maharaj out of the area. In an attempt last September, officials tracked down the nearly four-ton elephant known to wildlife enthusiasts as the "Gentle Giant" and set off firecrackers in his vicinity, hoping to scare him away. In the ensuing chaos, Maharaj trampled and killed a 53-year-old forest department guard instead.

By this point, "public anger was high," Desai said. Authorities formed a committee and consulted experts, including Desai, on how to move forward.

At the beginning of June, V.K. Melkani, the chief wildlife warden of the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, ordered a major operation to capture Maharaj. More than 50 forest staff, police, veterinarians, and anti-poaching guards were brought on to assist in the effort.

The entire maneuver took about 10 hours. The team used tranquilizer darts to slow him down and four kumkis to herd Maharaj onto the transport truck. He was tied with ropes and driven three hours from a forest in Madakkurai to the Varagliyar elephant camp in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, according to the *New Indian Express*. The reserve is a 42-square-mile (109-square-kilometer) protected area and tourist destination where the state forest department keeps about 20 captive elephants.

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An elephant in Samburu National Reserve in Kenya stands tall among her herd.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL NICHOLS, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Villagers expected it to be a translocation operation: Maharaj would be captured and moved away from Madakkurai. But Desai says the idea for a translocation was rejected by the forest department because there was nowhere feasible to move Maharaj that would ensure he wouldn't return—only the Indian states of Karnataka and Kerala have suitable relocation options.

Soon the press began reporting that the forest authorities intended to keep Maharaj in captivity indefinitely. Right after his capture, an anonymous forest official told the *New Indian Express* that they planned to turn Maharaj into a kumki.

Maharaj had months of brutal training in his near future, to be followed by a lifetime of chains and long days in the kumki elephant camp.

## When Can a Wild Elephant Be Domesticated?

India has all but banned elephant captivity in order to protect its dwindling wild populations. An Indian law, the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972, states that “no such captured animal shall be kept in captivity unless the Chief Wildlife Warden is satisfied that such animal cannot be rehabilitated in the wild and the reasons for the same are recorded in writing.”

Critics argue that deciding that an individual elephant can't be rehabilitated and released back into the wild is a cheap-fix solution that does nothing to address the much bigger problem of human-elephant conflict at its roots. Regardless, not much can be done to fight the warden's decision unless a concerned person files a Public Interest Litigation petition with the Madras High Court.

Prema Veeraraghavan, **Sasha's Elsa Foundation** co-founder, did just that. She filed a petition on Friday, June 17, urging the court to make sure Maharaj wouldn't be domesticated. A hearing was scheduled for Monday.

But the day before the hearing, Operation Madukkarai Maharaj went into action and Maharaj was captured.

“

**We regret your demise. We wanted you to leave  
our woods; but we never thought that you  
would leave the world.**

MOURNERS' POSTER, MADAKKURAI, INDIA

When the hearing took place on June 20, the forest department claimed they were still open to relocating Maharaj and that their intention was never to keep Maharaj in captivity.

Their actions suggest otherwise, though. Manilal Valliyate of PETA India says that an elephant that's being translocated would not be held in captivity between capture and relocation, especially not at a camp where wild elephants are domesticated and put to work.

Neither the Tamil Nadu Forest Department nor the chief wildlife warden responded to National Geographic's requests for comment.

The High Court took the forest department's word that they would transport Maharaj under the supervision of the Animal Welfare Board of India, a government advisory body. After a brief deliberation, the court issued its decree: "We are, thus, of the view that no further directions are required and the writ of petition stands, accordingly, closed."

The next day, Maharaj died in his cage from self-inflicted injuries.

## Mourning Maharaj

Not even the villagers wished for such an end. They publicly grieved for Maharaj, who was buried in the elephant camp where he died.

In Madukkurai, they put up posters and banners addressed to Maharaj: "We regret your demise. We wanted you to leave our woods; but we never thought that you would leave the world. We will always live with your memory."

Meanwhile, some activists are using Maharaj's death to push for changes in how complaints about wild elephants are handled.

"The biggest lesson is that wild animals should not be captured in the future without a comprehensive plan for tranquilization, transport, and translocation to an identified natural habitat, with all measures taken to minimize the trauma to the animal," Valliyate says. "In other words, the law, which is to protect the wildlife, must be implemented in letter and spirit."

*Nicola Payne has worked for Outside magazine and Save the Elephants, a nonprofit dedicated to elephant research and conservation.*

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