



ABSTRACT

Forests – Setting up Project “The Nilgiri Tahr” – A new conservation initiative of Government of Tamil Nadu for the State Animal – Orders issued.

ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND FOREST (FR.5) DEPARTMENT

G.O.(Ms).No.222

Dated: 28.12.2022

சுபகிருது, மார்கழி -13

திருவள்ளூர்ஆண்டு- 2053

Read:

From the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden (FAC), Chennai-32 letter No.WL6/9455/2022, dated 13.07.2022, 10.08.2022 and 18.10.2022.

ORDER: -

"Nilgiri Tahr" is the state animal of Tamil Nadu. There are multiple references to the "Nilgiri Tahr" in Tamil Sangam literature that is known to have been written over 2000 years ago. Two of the five great epics of Tamil literature, viz., Cilappatikāram (சிலப்பதிகாரம்) and Cīvaka Cintāmaṇi (சீவகசிந்தாமணி), include descriptions of the Nilgiri Tahr and its habitat:-

வரையாடு வருடையும் மடமான் மறியும் (சிலம்பு. வஞ்சி. காட்சிக் காதை :51)

ஓங்கு மால்வரை வரையாடு உழக்கலின் உடைந்துகு பெருந்தேன் (சீவக.1559:1)

Moreover, in sangam literature such as, Natrinai, Aingurunooru, Paripadal, Pathitruppathuu, and Pattinapalai, Nilgiri Tahr is mentioned. The play, Thirukutrala kuravanji, (திருக்குற்றால குறவஞ்சி) written by Thirigudasapa Kavirayar also describes "Nilgiri Tahr" in a song under "Kurathi malaivalam kooral" (குறத்தி மலைவளம் கூறல்) as one of animals that indicates the richness of biodiversity in a region. The Late Mesolithic (10,000-4,000 BC), paintings speak about the age-old association between humans and Nilgiri Tahr, as well as the significance of Tahr in local folklore, culture, and Mesolithic life. Nilgiri Tahr has been designated as the State Animal of Tamil Nadu in recognition of its ecological and cultural significance to the State.

(P.T.O.)

2. While presenting the Budget 2022-2023, the Honourable Minister (Finance) made the following announcement, among others in the Legislative Assembly :

“For the conservation of Tamil Nadu’s State animal, expansion of its habitat and to spread awareness among the public, the Government will implement Project “The Nilgiri Tahr” with an initial allocation of Rs.10.00 Crore”.

3. Locally known as "Varaiaadu" (வரையாடு), the “Nilgiri Tahr” (*Nilgiritragus hylocrius*) is an endangered species of mountain. It is the sole Caprinae species found in the tropical mountains of southern India. At elevations between 300 m and 2,600 m above sea level, the Nilgiri Tahr inhabits meadows with steep cliffs. It is a gregarious animal that lives in mixed herds of adult females and juveniles. Males reach a maximum shoulder height of 100 cm and females of 80 cm. Adult males can weigh up to 100 kg, while adult females weigh approximately 50 kg. “Nilgiri Tahr” can live in the wild for about nine years. Despite this, its typical lifespan is approximately three years because of the high infant mortality rate. In captivity, however, its lifespan is estimated to be approximately 20 years. Leopards, wild dogs, and tigers are the primary predators of the Nilgiri Tahr. “Nilgiri Tahr” typically gives birth to only one lamb each year after a six-month gestation period.

4. It is estimated that there are 3,122 “Nilgiri Tahrs” in the wild, and the population are divided into five metapopulation blocks based on habitat connectivity. (Technical Report – Worldwide Fund for Nature 2015).

5. Historically, Nilgiri Tahr was known to inhabit a large portion of the Western Ghats, but today it remains restricted to a few scattered habitat patches in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Presently, it is confined to a small percentage of the Western Ghats, between the Nilgiri hills in the north and the Asambu highlands in the south.

6. There are currently a total of 123 habitat fragments ranging in area from 0.04 km² to 161.69 km² totaling to an area of 798.60 km² with confirmed occurrence of Nilgiri Tahr. This also facilitates a scope of extant of occurrence to be around 20,000 km² of area with about 1850 km² area available in the North of the Palghat gap and around 18,150 km² area available in the South of the Palghat gap. In the past few decades, Nilgiri Tahr has become locally extinct in around 14 percent of its traditional shola-grassland habitat.

7. The ecological integrity of this unique ecosystem is essential for the survival of rich flora and fauna. It is one of the most endangered ecosystems in the World. The shola-grassland ecosystem, which occurs between 1400 and 2700 metres in elevation, has distinctive vegetation formations consisting of grasslands on slopes and short, dense canopy trees in valleys. These shola-grasslands are also referred to as climax communities because of absence of evolutionary change over the past several hundred years. Shola-grassland regions support a rich diversity of endemism-rich species.

Challenges in the conservation of Nilgiri Tahr

(i) Fragmented population prone to local extinctions

The current habitat of Nilgiri Tahr is highly fragmented. Except for large herds in the Nilgiris and Anamalai Hills, other populations are fairly small (less than 100 individuals) and isolated. Many of these habitats exist outside protected areas and have been getting further fragmented due to linear infrastructure, plantations and the spread of exotic plant species.

(ii) Plantations and Exotic Invasive species

Exotic Invasive plants further exacerbate threat of fragmentation of the Nilgiri Tahr habitat. This, along with the monoculture plantations has been considerably reducing the Nilgiri Tahr habitat for past few centuries.

(iii) Forest Fires

Forest fires are prevalent across the entire range of Tahr habitat. While forest fires can be part of the natural cycle of ecosystems, especially the grasslands, high intensity and frequent fires could result in a change in plant species composition.

(iv) Other anthropogenic pressures

Over exploitation of forest resources can pose a threat to Nilgiri Tahr. To address these, there is a need to secure the support of local communities and stakeholders for Nilgiri Tahr conservation. Extensive outreach to instill pride in the state animal and livelihood opportunities would be undertaken such as eco-tourism to strengthen this support.

(v) Lack of ecological data and understanding for conservation planning

Even though there have been multiple studies over the past few decades to understand these species to a greater extent, there is still a lack of ecological data and understanding for conservation planning on Nilgiri Tahr.

Government of Tamil Nadu shall implement Project “The Nilgiri Tahr” with the following objectives

I. Developing a better understanding of Nilgiri Tahr population, distribution and ecology

- (i) Synchronized surveys using standardized methods across the Tahr range;

(P.T.O.)

- (ii) Radio – telemetry studies of a few Tahr individuals to understand their movement patterns, habitat use and behavior through radio collaring etc.,
- (iii) Population and Habitat viability assessment for conservation planning;

II. Re-introduction of Nilgiri Tahr to their historic habitats

It is proposed to choose historic habitats with less biotic pressure for re-introduction of Nilgiri Tahr.

III. Addressing proximate threat to Nilgiri Tahr

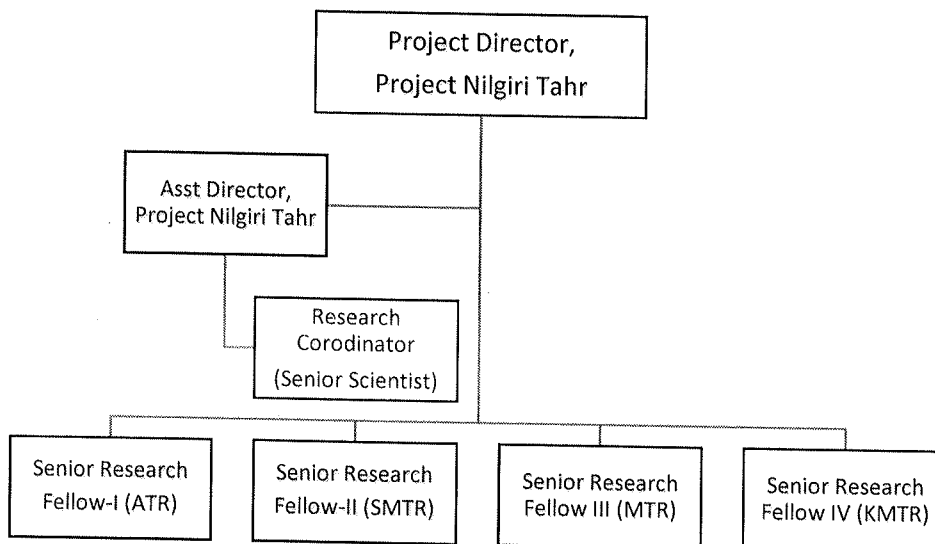
- (i) Diagnosis and treatment (if needed) for Nilgiri Tahr individuals affected by tumors;
- (ii) Restoration of grassland habitats affected by Invasive plants;
- (iii) Building the capacity of forest staff to patrol and conserve Tahr habitats effectively;

IV. Increasing awareness among public about the “Nilgiri Tahr” species

- (i) Nilgiri Tahr Day – October 7th will be celebrated as the Nilgiri Tahr Day in honour of Dr. E.R.C. Davidar whose Birthday falls on this day. Dr. Davidar was responsible for pioneering one of the first studies on Nilgiri Tahr in 1975.
- (ii) Developing “Nilgiri Tahr” based eco-tourism activities at selected sites
- (iii) Develop educational material for school children.

8. The project “The Nilgiri Tahr” shall be headed by a Project Director who will be assisted by an Assistant Director. The Team will include senior scientists, research fellows and field staff. The setup is represented as below:-

Proposed Institutional setup



9. Based on the Budget announcement 2022-23, the Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden has sent a proposal to implement the Project "The Nilgiri Tahr" over a period of five years i.e. 2022 to 2027.

10. The Government, after careful examination accord sanction for implementation of the Project "The Nilgiri Tahr", Tamil Nadu's State Animal, at a cost of Rs.25.14 Crore with the following nine components:

- 1) Administrative setup for the "Project Nilgiri Tahr".
- 2) Bi-annual Synchronized surveys across the divisions
- 3) Tranquilization, collaring and monitoring of Tahr Individuals
- 4) Re-introduction and monitoring of Nilgiri Tahr
- 5) Diagnosis and treatment for affected individuals
- 6) Field gear and training support to staff
- 7) Shola Grassland restoration pilot in Upper Bhavani.
- 8) Implementation of eco-tourism programmes
- 9) Communication and outreach

Details of allocation of funds for the period 2022-2027 is as detailed below:-

Rs in lakhs

Sl. No.	Components	2022-2023	2023-2024	2024-2025	2025-2026	2026-2027	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
1	Administrative setup for the Project "The Nilgiri Tahr"	16.89	34.76	37.74	40.72	43.70	173.81
2	Bi-annual Synchronized surveys across the divisions	20	20	20	20	20	100.00

(P.T.O.)

3	Tranquilization collaring and monitoring of Tahr Individuals	60	30	30	30	30	180.00
4	Re-introduction and monitoring of Nilgiri Tahr	50	100	50	50	50	300.00
5	Diagnosis and treatment for affected individuals	20	20	20	20	20	100.00
6	Field gear and training support to staff	-	-	-	-	-	-
7	Shola-Grassland restoration pilot in Upper Bhavani.	-	200	100	100	100	500.00
8	Implementation of eco-tourism programmes	-	1000	-	-	-	1000.00
9	Communication and outreach	35	35	30	30	30	160.00
	Grand Total	201.89	1439.76	287.74	90.72	293.70	2513.81

Necessary funds will be provided by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board towards implementation of Project "The Nilgiri Tahr".

11. The Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board is permitted to release 50% of the funds (i.e., Rs.1.01 Crore) required for the current year (2022-2023) in advance to Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden. Based on Utilization Certification and work progress necessary funds shall be released as approved. The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden is directed to keep the funds received from Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board in an exclusive bank account and shall be used only for the approved project expenditure.

12. This order issues with the concurrence of Finance (E,CC&F) Department vide its U.O.No.530/ADS(GKT)/2022, dated 09.11.2022.

(BY ORDER OF THE GOVERNOR)

SUPRIYA SAHU
ADDITIONAL CHIEF SECRETARY TO GOVERNMENT

To

The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and Chief Wildlife Warden, Chennai-32.

The Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Head of Forest Force), Chennai-32.

The Chairman, Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, Chennai – 32.

Copy to:-

The Member Secretary, Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, Chennai – 32.

The P.S to Secretary IV to Hon'ble Chief Minister,

The Special P.A to Hon'ble Chief Minister,

Chief Minister's Office, Chennai-9.

The Special Personal Assistant to Hon'ble Minister (Forests), Chennai-9.

The Special Personal Assistant to Hon'ble Minister (ECC), Chennai-9.

The Special Personal Assistant to Hon'ble Minister(Finance & HRM), Chennai-9.

The P.S. to Chief Secretary, Chennai-9.

The Finance(E,CC&F) Department, Chennai – 9.

The Private Secretary to Additional Chief Secretary,

Environment, Climate Change and Forest Department, Chennai-9.

SF/SC.

//FORWARDED BY ORDER//

P. Sahu
28/12/22

SECTION OFFICER

28/12/22

