

# Indian conservationist wins Whitley award for saving elephants via SMS

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Elephants have to negotiate a vast expanse of tea estates to reach distant rainforest fragments in the Western Ghats of India. Photograph: Ganesh Raghunathan/Whitley award

On the Valparai plateau in southern [India](#) people live in fear of unexpected encounters with giants in the dark.

As dusk settles, tea and coffee pickers collect rations from the townships run by the corporations that own the plantations and drift back towards their colonies. Buses drop workers on the roads and they make the precarious walk through the dark to their homes.

"They are scared. If I am there I am really scared," said conservationist Dr Ananda Kumar, who created an SMS warning system to help workers live safely among elephants. On Wednesday at a ceremony in London, his work won a £35,000 Whitley Award, dubbed a 'Green Oscar'.

"That's where the accidental encounters occurred. Most of the incidents. It's very difficult to make out elephants in the dark. It's a huge animal and looks like a rock and will be standing very still when they notice people."

On the Valparai, high in India's Western Ghats, tea and coffee companies have flattened 221 sq km of prime rainforest for their plantations. The cleared land is now home to 70,000 workers, who live surrounded on all sides by the rugged, deeply forested Anamalai (Tamil for 'elephant hills').

But the 2,000 elephants who inhabit those hills don't recognise the multinational companies' claim to the plateau. Every year around 100 elephants use the plantations as a pathway to get to other parts of the rainforest.



*Dr Ananda Kumar, winner of Whitley award 2015. Photograph: Ganesh Raghunathan/Whitley Awards*

"Elephants are strongly related to their ranges, this is scientifically established. It's a part of their home, which is lost to plantations because of historical exploitation," said Kumar, who has spent a decade working on a system of text messages, television alerts and warning lights that keep track of elephants as they move through the plantations.

The programme won the [Whitley award](#) for its novel and pragmatic approach to the elephant-human conflict, which kills 400 people and more than 100 elephants across India every year.

If they are startled or feel threatened, elephants can be very dangerous. In the small community of Valparai, 41 people have been killed since 1994. The problem, said Kumar, was that people simply did not realise elephants were nearby.

"Out of 41 deaths, 36 people did not know there were elephants. If these people had known about the elephants' location, all these people would have been alive," Kumar told the Guardian. "Human habitations will also get hit by elephants. They will break from the outside, towards the kitchen. Obviously they are looking for [food]. Suddenly the people will hear a sound in the middle of the night at the kitchen side. It's a very traumatic experience."

Even so, people want to learn to live with elephants rather than drive them away. "There is a gentle perception of elephants," Kumar said, because of their manifestation as the Hindu god Ganesh. "People are really tolerant."

#### *Ananda Kumar's project protects elephants and humans*

In a decade, Kumar's warning system has cut the rate of deaths from three per year to just one. It is seen as an exemplar in the efforts to tackle the India-wide conflict between elephants and humans.

A team of trackers, called the conflict response team, watches over elephants as they pass through the plateau, they are assisted by Tamil Nadu forestry department workers and local informants, who act as extra scouts for the programme. Information is relayed via a hotline, manned by Kumar's appropriately-named colleague Ganesh. The hotline receives over 1,000 calls each year, many of them not seeking information about elephant locations but providing word of elephant sightings to their neighbours.

When an elephant is spotted, alerts are sent via text message to all those who reside within a few kilometres of an elephant's location. At 5pm each night, local TV stations broadcast the locations of all elephants on the plateau. The warnings also go out to volunteer wardens in each colony, who operate red warning beacons that light up via text message. This allows people to plan their trips and let visiting friends know to beware.

"The local communities have adopted this. Government has responded positively. It is a collective effort that is actually making it a win-win situation, both for elephants and for people," said Kumar. Even incidents of elephants damaging property have reduced by half as the people embraced a philosophy of living with elephants and made food stores more secure.



*An elephant walks close to a house in a village. Photograph: Ganesh Raghunathan/Whitley Awards*

Kumar said the challenge was not removing dangerous elephants but making habitat safe for both elephants and humans. He believes the perception of the [deranged rogue elephant](#) that has pervaded much the elephant conflict debate in India had been thoroughly debunked by science and the results of his programme.

"There are no problem elephants, there are problem locations," he said.

Kumar and seven other grassroots conservationists from Africa, Asia and South America will receive their awards from Princess Anne at a ceremony in London hosted by television naturalist Kate Humble and attended by David Attenborough in his role as a Whitley trustee. Kumar said the money would be used to explore how the model that has worked so well in Valparai can be expanded into other areas.

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