

Environmental Justice or Injustice? Analyzing the Man-Elephant conflict through the lens of Environmental Philosophy

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Abstract

The human-elephant conflict serves as a compelling case study in environmental justice, illustrating the complex interplay of human and animal rights, ecological integrity, and ethical considerations. This research employs a multidisciplinary approach, combining qualitative analysis of philosophical frameworks with policy review and stakeholder interviews to explore effective mitigation strategies. Rooted in habitat loss and cultural perceptions, this conflict reveals the urgent need for comprehensive mitigation strategies that are informed by environmental philosophical theoretical perspectives. By systematically analyzing existing conservation practices and integrating perspectives from environmental ethics, this study aims to identify actionable pathways for sustainable coexistence. By adopting an inclusive approach that integrates the needs of local communities with the intrinsic rights of elephants, sustainable solutions can emerge that promote coexistence. This analysis highlights the importance of collaborative policy-making and community engagement in addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by this conflict. The research contributes by providing a rigorous, evidence-based framework that guides policymakers and conservationists toward ethically grounded and culturally sensitive solutions. Through interdisciplinary research and the exploration of innovative conservation practices, we can work towards an equitable resolution that respect the rights of both humans and elephants, ultimately contributing ethical stewardship and the legacy of shared ecosystems. This study's findings aim to fill the existing gap by offering a clear methodological pathway to incorporate philosophical insights into practical conflict mitigation, ensuring that future strategies are both ethically sound and socially acceptable.

Keywords: environmental justice, man–elephant conflict, coexistence, ethical stewardship, mitigation strategies

1. Introduction:

Environmental justice is an important framework that seeks to ensure equitable treatment and meaningful participation of all individuals in environmental decision-making processes, especially the marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation. It not only involves the fair distribution

of environmental benefits and burdens, but also considers the ethical implications of our interactions with the natural world (Schlosberg, 2007). In this context, the humane elephant conflict presents a poignant case study that highlights the complex relationship between human interests, wildlife conservation, and ethical considerations related to animal rights.

Despite the growing body of research on human-wildlife conflicts, there remains a significant gap in understanding how philosophical frameworks can be systematically integrated into conflict mitigation strategies to promote justice and ethical coexistence. The man-elephant conflict arises primarily from habitat encroachment and resource competition, leading to conflicts that jeopardize both human safety and the elephant. Elephants, as key species, play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, yet their presence in agricultural landscapes can threaten the livelihoods of local communities. This conflict underscores the broader philosophical questions, including justice, rights, and coexistence, to consider how we value both human and non-human lives in our pursuit of sustainability.

This study aims to fill this gap by critically analyzing how different environmental philosophical perspectives can inform practical and ethically grounded conflict mitigation strategies. This dynamic study not only raises ethical concerns regarding the treatment and rights of animals but also highlights the necessity for effective mitigation strategies grounded in environmental philosophy. Such strategies advocate for the integration of anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives, urging us to recognize that the well-being of humans and elephants is interconnected. By fostering a deep understanding of this relationship, we can develop comprehensive solutions that address the needs of both communities and wildlife. The contribution of this research lies in providing a nuanced philosophical framework that guides policymakers and conservationists toward ethically responsible and culturally sensitive conflict resolution approaches. This analysis aims to explore the intersection of human rights and animal welfare within the framework of environmental justice, shedding light on effective mitigation strategies that promote coexistence and ethical stewardship of our shared ecosystems.

2. Understanding Environmental Justice:

Environmental justice is intrinsically tied to conflicts that arise from unequal exposure to environmental hazards and disparities in decision-making power. Environmental justice emerged as a recognized social movement in the 1980s, driven by grassroots organizations advocating for equitable environmental policies and practices. This movement gained momentum in response to numerous instances where marginalized communities, particularly those of low-income and minority backgrounds, faced disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards. As defined (Bullard 1990), environmental justice seeks to address “the inequitable distribution of environmental risks, benefits, and decision-making power.” The historical roots of this movement can be traced to events such as the 1982 protests against a hazardous waste landfill in Warren County, North Carolina, which galvanized public awareness and activism surrounding environmental racism (Pellow & Brulle, 2005).

In the realm of environmental ethics, two dominant paradigms often emerge: anthropocentrism and

ecocentrism. Anthropocentrism posits that human beings are the central concern of moral consideration, advocating for environmental policies that primarily serve human interests. This perspective often emphasizes economic growth and the exploitation of natural resources for human benefit (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Conversely, ecocentrism challenges this view by asserting that all living beings and ecosystems possess intrinsic value, advocating for policies that prioritize ecological balance and the welfare of non-human entities (Naess, 1973). As Taylor (1986) states, “the ecocentric perspective integrates human well-being with the health of the natural world, thus promoting a holistic view of justice.”

Furthermore, the role of marginalized communities in environmental discourses is critical. Often at the forefront of environmental justice activism, these communities bring to light the intersectionality of social, economic, and environmental challenges. Their lived experiences reveal how environment-related inequities exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities (Agyeman et al., 2003). By engaging these voices, the environmental justice movement fosters inclusive dialogues, ensuring that policies reflect the needs and perspectives of those most affected by environmental policies. Importantly, as Schlosberg (2007) emphasizes, justice in environmental contexts “is not only about fair distribution but also about recognition and participation.”

3. The Man-Elephant Conflict: An Overview:

The man-elephant conflict refers to the increasing occurrences of negative interactions between humans and elephants, primarily attributed to habitat loss and agricultural expansion. As cities and farms encroach on natural habitats, elephants are driven into closer proximity to human settlements, leading to dangerous encounters and crop destruction. Approximately 90% of Asian elephants live outside protected areas, which makes them vulnerable to these conflicts (Fernando et al., 2015). Habitat fragmentation caused by urbanization and agricultural practices severely limits their natural migratory paths, pushing elephants into direct competition with humans for land and resources. Recent statistics from India indicate that over 400 elephants have been killed in conflict-related incidents in the past year alone, with many deaths resulting from retaliatory killings by farmers and local communities (Wildlife Protection Society of India, 2022).

Statistical data highlight the gravity of this conflict. In India, it is estimated that around 300 people are killed annually due to elephant encounters, along with a significant number of elephants that fall victim to retaliatory killings or poaching in response to human-elephant interactions (Dutta et al., 2017). Furthermore, crop damages caused by elephants have increased by approximately 25% over the last five years in states like Assam and Karnataka, severely impacting local farmers' livelihoods (Indian Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2023). Additionally, the economic impact on local communities can be profound; crop losses from elephant raids can devastate farmers' livelihoods, leading to increased tensions and further violence (Naughton-Treves, 1997). This cycle of conflict not only endangers both species but also exacerbates the socio-economic plight of communities that rely heavily on agriculture for survival.

Cultural perceptions of elephants vary widely, influencing local responses to the conflict. In many

societies, elephants hold religious and cultural significance, representing strength and wisdom. For instance, in parts of India, elephants are revered in religious ceremonies, creating a dichotomy between respect and fear (Sukumar, 2003). However, in areas where elephants are viewed primarily as pests, local attitudes can shift swiftly towards hostility, leading to violence and increased calls for culling measures (Madden, 2004). This duality underlines the need for a nuanced approach to conflict resolution, recognizing both the cultural significance of elephants and the legitimate concerns of affected communities.

Wildlife Protection Society of India. (2022). Annual report on human-elephant conflict and casualties. Retrieved from <https://wpsi.org/annual-report-2022>

Indian Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. (2023). State of wildlife in India: Conflict and conservation statistics. Government of India.

<https://moef.gov.in/reports/wildlife-statistics-2023>

Overall, the man-elephant conflict encapsulates the complex interplay between wildlife conservation, human livelihoods, and cultural perceptions. Effective management strategies must consider these elements to foster coexistence and ensure the survival of both elephants and the communities that share their habitat. As India continues to urbanize rapidly, integrating scientific research with community participation will be crucial for sustainable solutions.

4. Case Studies of Man-Elephant Conflict:

One prominent example of the man-elephant conflict can be observed in Assam, a region in northeastern India renowned for its rich biodiversity. The state is home to a significant population of Asian elephants, which often venture into agricultural land, leading to instances of crop destruction. According to a study, “over 120 elephants and approximately 70 human fatalities were reported between 2002 and 2012 due to these conflicts” (Baskaran et al., 2016). This data highlights the severity of the conflict in Assam, reflecting not only ecological consequences but also deepening socioeconomic vulnerabilities among local communities. The close proximity of human settlements to wildlife corridors facilitates these encounters, causing heightened tensions and economic losses for local farmers. Such spatial overlaps underscore the importance of landscape-level planning in conflict mitigation, emphasizing that habitat connectivity must be balanced with human land use.

To escalate this conflict, various communities in Assam have embarked on adaptive strategies. For instance, farmers have begun implementing barriers using electric fencing and trenches to protect their crops from elephant incursions. In addition to this, some villages have adopted community-based conservation initiatives, fostering better understanding and cooperation between humans and elephants. These strategies demonstrate a shift towards participatory conservation, which is crucial because top-down policies often fail to address local needs and perceptions that influence conflict outcomes. The implementation of early warning systems—like community alert groups equipped with mobile technology—has also emerged as a beneficial strategy to manage potential conflicts effectively (Mahanta & Choudhury, 2020). However, the success of these systems

depends heavily on community engagement and technological accessibility, which vary across regions, thus necessitating tailored approaches for different communities.

Hence, these case studies illustrate that effective community responses and adaptive strategies are essential in addressing the challenges posed by man-elephant conflicts. Analyzing these initiatives reveals that integrating local knowledge with scientific approaches can enhance conflict mitigation, fostering resilient coexistence models. By fostering coexistence through understanding and sustainable practices, it is possible to achieve harmonious relationships between humans and elephants. However, the success of these systems depends heavily on community engagement and technological accessibility, which vary across regions, thus necessitating tailored approaches for different communities.

5. Moral Considerations in the Man-Elephant Conflict:

The moral dimensions of studies surrounding the conflict between humans and elephants involve multiple layers of ethical consideration, particularly regarding sentience, animal rights, conservation ethics, and ecosystem interdependence. Understanding these moral implications is essential to fostering effective and compassionate resolutions. Applying ethical theories such as utilitarianism and deontology can provide a structured approach to these moral considerations, helping to evaluate the outcomes and inherent rights involved in conservation efforts and human-wildlife interactions.

5.1. Sentience and Animal Rights:

One of the fundamental moral considerations in this discourse is the recognition of sentience in elephants and other wildlife. Sentience refers to the capacity to experience feelings and emotions, which is increasingly acknowledged in various animal species, including elephants. Notably, researchers mention that “elephants exhibit complex emotional behaviors, such as mourning, empathy, and social bonding” (Mason et al., 2013). From a utilitarian perspective, recognizing the capacity for suffering in elephants obligates humans to minimize harm and ensure their well-being, thus aligning conservation efforts with the greatest good for all sentient beings. This recognition of sentience raises profound ethical questions regarding the treatment of wildlife. Being the most sentient animal, elephants have the intrinsic rights to life and freedom. The idea that “non-human animals possess rights derived from their capable experience of suffering” calls for a reevaluation of conservation strategies (Regan, 2004). Deontological ethics would argue that elephants possess inherent rights that must be respected regardless of the consequences, emphasizing the moral duty to treat animals as ends in themselves. Advocates for animal rights argue that conservation efforts should prioritize ethical considerations, ensuring that the interests of elephants are equitably weighed in decision-making processes.

5.2. Ethics of Wildlife Conservation vs. Human Livelihoods:

The ethical dilemmas between wildlife conservation and human livelihoods often create tensions in affected communities. Many local populations depend on agriculture and land use to sustain themselves. Yet, the presence of elephants can be detrimental to their crops, leading to financial losses and increased human-

wildlife conflicts. Utilitarian ethics would examine whether the overall benefits of conservation outweigh the suffering caused to local communities, advocating for solutions that maximize well-being for both humans and elephants. In this context, ethical debates emerge around prioritizing conservation goals versus mitigating human suffering. Scholars note that “balancing the needs of wildlife with those of impoverished communities is ethically imperative for sustainable conservation” (Dickman, 2010). Ethical frameworks advocating for sustainable development emphasize that solutions must be equitable, recognizing the rights of communities while also addressing the urgency of wildlife preservation. Principles of justice and fairness, rooted in theories like John Rawls’ theory of justice, suggest that conservation policies should aim to distribute benefits and burdens equitably among all stakeholders. Conservation strategies that include community participation and benefit-sharing are increasingly viewed as ethical necessities that can reconcile the needs of both humans and elephants.

5.3. Philosophical Implications of Ecosystem Interdependence:

The philosophical notion of ecosystem interdependence suggests that all living beings coexist within a web of relationships that sustains life. This interconnectedness highlights that the survival of elephants and human populations is intrinsically linked to the health of ecosystems. From an eco-centric ethical perspective, the intrinsic value of all species and ecosystems emphasizes the moral obligation to preserve biodiversity for its own sake, beyond utilitarian benefits. As such, ethical considerations surrounding conservation must account for the fact that “neglecting the needs of one species can reverberate through the ecosystem, ultimately affecting human health and livelihoods” (Carpenter et al., 1998). Acknowledging this interdependence challenges us to adopt a more holistic ethical framework, where the well-being of biodiversity and human communities is not seen in opposition but rather as part of a unified concern. This aligns with deep ecology principles, which advocate for a fundamental shift in human attitudes towards nature, recognizing the intrinsic rights of all living beings and ecosystems.

6. Integrated Conflict Mitigation Strategies Aligned with Environmental Philosophical Perspectives on Human-Elephant Conflict:

Understanding human-elephant conflict requires a nuanced exploration of various philosophical frameworks, including anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and rights-based approaches. Each perspective offers unique insights and solutions to balance human needs with wildlife conservation. A comprehensive analysis of these approaches reveals that integrating multiple ethical perspectives can foster more comprehensive and adaptable mitigation strategies. By analyzing these approaches, we can better address the complexities of coexistence and develop strategies that uphold the rights and welfare of both humans and elephants.

6.1. Anthropocentric Perspectives on Human-Elephant Conflict:

The anthropocentric approach prioritises human interests, often placing the needs of people above the needs of other species. Advocates of this approach argue that economic growth and agricultural development are crucial for social progress. In regions such as Assam, where elephants encroach on agricultural land, the

immediate need for food security and economic stability often overrides conservation efforts. As (Baskaran et al. 2016) note, this conflict often revolves around the need for human safety and agricultural viability, which may come at the expense of wildlife conservation. However, this approach risks fostering a short-term view that neglects the potential long-term ecological costs of species loss. This perspective emphasizes pragmatic solutions that address human priorities but may risk ecological integrity if not balanced properly. Critics of this anthropocentric approach argue that focusing only on human needs may compromise the long-term health of the ecosystem, which may ultimately also threaten human well-being.

Given this approach, conflict mitigation strategies should prioritise increasing agricultural production and ensuring food security for local populations, while simultaneously minimising encounters with elephants. An effective approach involves providing financial incentives or compensation for crop damage caused by elephants, which can help reduce resentment towards these animals (Dutta et al., 2017). Furthermore, educating farmers about non-lethal methods – such as growing crops that are less attractive to elephants or adopting distracting feeding techniques – is in line with human-centric ideals and supports coexistence, ultimately protecting human livelihoods while promoting a more harmonious relationship with wildlife (Madden, 2004). Implementing these strategies also requires ongoing community engagement to ensure they are culturally acceptable and practically sustainable. This pragmatic approach underscores the importance of balancing immediate human needs with conservation efforts.

6.2. Ecocentric Perspectives on Human-Elephant Interaction:

Ecocentrism is distinct from anthropocentrism, as it emphasises that all living beings and ecosystems have intrinsic value, suggesting that elephants and other species have value beyond their utility to humans. This approach advocates a holistic conservation approach, emphasising the interconnectedness of ecosystem health. Elephants, known for their significant contribution to biodiversity, play essential roles in their habitats, and their removal could cause significant ecological disruption. As highlighted by Lindsay et al. (2014), the ecological roles played by elephants can have a considerable positive impact on their environment, underlining the importance of their conservation.

Addressing human-elephant conflict from an ecocentrism perspective requires efforts focused on biodiversity conservation. This could include the establishment of wildlife corridors and habitat restoration initiatives, allowing elephants to safely traverse landscapes while minimising encounters with human settlements. Hedges et al. (2015) emphasize that such strategies can significantly reduce conflict. These measures also serve to reinforce the moral obligation to preserve natural ecosystems for their own sake, not solely for their utility to humans. Furthermore, community-driven conservation efforts empower local populations by involving them in the management of natural resources, which not only aids ecological health but also fosters a sense of connection between communities and their environment. This perspective underscores the moral obligation to value nature intrinsically, beyond utilitarian benefits. According to Shankaran et al. (2020), these initiatives can

change the way communities view elephants, transforming their identity from nuisance to essential ecological allies. This shift in perception can be supported through educational programs that highlight the ecological importance of elephants and promote stewardship.

6.3. Rights-Based Approaches to Human-Elephant Relationships:

The rights-based approach provides a new philosophical framework that examines the rights of both humans and elephants, leading to discussions of whether non-human animals should be granted the same rights as humans, including the fundamental right to exist and thrive in their natural environments. Advocates of this approach argue that, given their sentience, elephants should receive protection from harm and exploitation, and that their rights should be integrated into policies and practices that affect their populations. As Nussbaum (2006) has noted, legally recognizing animal rights can serve as an effective means to address human-elephant conflicts, creating a resolution framework that respects the dignity of all sentient beings.

This approach emphasizes that recognizing the moral and legal rights of elephants can serve as a foundation for developing more ethically consistent conservation policies. This approach shifts focus from utilitarian calculations to the inherent moral value of animals, advocating for legal protections grounded in respect for their intrinsic worth. However, implementing this approach presents challenges, particularly in poor communities that depend on the land for their economic survival. Achieving a balance between human rights and elephant rights requires thoughtful engagement and dialogue among various stakeholders. The rights-based approach advocates conflict mitigation strategies that involve establishing legal protections, acknowledging elephants' rights to existence in their natural habitats. Regulatory measures that impose penalties for poaching and other forms of exploitation can enhance their security, encouraging community members to adopt coexistence strategies (Nussbaum, 2006). In addition, promoting discussion within the local population about the ethical treatment of elephants can develop a culture of empathy and respect, as well as address the rights of both humans and animals in the creation of policies (Schlosberg, 2007). Embedding these rights into legal frameworks helps ensure that conservation efforts are not solely utilitarian but grounded in justice and moral respect for all beings. This multifaceted approach combines legal measures with ethical dialogue to promote sustainable coexistence.

In conclusion, examining anthropocentric, ecocentric, and rights-based approaches to human-elephant conflict, it becomes clear that a multifaceted strategy is essential for effective resolution. Prioritizing human needs while recognizing the intrinsic value of elephants and their ecosystems can lead to sustainable coexistence. Integrating the strengths of these perspectives through a pluralistic framework offers a more resilient and ethically consistent approach to conflict mitigation. Reducing overlap and emphasizing the complementarity of these perspectives enhances the clarity and strength of the overall framework. Lastly, combining ethical considerations and community engagement ensures that both human welfare and wildlife conservation are equally valued, fostering harmonious relationships in shared landscapes.

7. Conclusion:

The exploration of the man-elephant conflict through the lenses of environmental justice and philosophical frameworks reveals the intricate interplay between human interests, ecological integrity, and the intrinsic rights of animals. This conflict, rooted in habitat loss and cultural perceptions, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive conflict mitigation strategies that embrace various theoretical perspectives—anthropocentric, ecocentric, and rights-based. A clear understanding of these perspectives can guide policymakers toward designing multi-layered strategies that address both immediate human needs and long-term ecological sustainability. By recognizing that the well-being of both humans and elephants is interconnected, we gain a clearer understanding of how to foster coexistence.

A balanced approach to environmental justice is essential, one that considers not only the livelihood and safety of human communities but also the moral imperative to protect the rights of non-human entities. The plight of elephants, as sentient beings with intrinsic value, necessitates a framework that respects their right to thrive in their natural habitats. In practice, this calls for integrating legal protections for elephants into national conservation policies, ensuring their rights are upheld alongside human development goals. Simultaneously, it is crucial to acknowledge the vulnerabilities faced by local populations whose livelihoods are impacted by the presence of elephants. Policies must aim to enhance community resilience while promoting conservation efforts that reflect the needs and voices of both stakeholder groups. Effective policy implementation requires participatory governance models that empower local communities and incorporate indigenous knowledge into conflict mitigation efforts. Future research should focus on developing innovative, context-specific solutions that integrate community knowledge and scientific insights to address the multifaceted challenges of human-elephant conflict. Emphasis should be placed on collaborative approaches that engage local populations, foster stewardship, and adapt conservation strategies to accommodate evolving socio-economic dynamics. Furthermore, interdisciplinary studies exploring cultural perceptions of wildlife can provide deeper insights into shaping policies that resonate with communities. These insights can inform adaptive management frameworks that are flexible, culturally sensitive, and capable of responding to changing environmental and social conditions.

In the realm of policy, it is imperative to create frameworks that include participatory processes, ensuring that the values and concerns of all stakeholders are considered. This entails establishing mechanisms for ongoing dialogue, conflict resolution, and shared decision-making among governments, conservationists, and local communities. By fostering dialogue between policymakers, conservationists, and local communities, we can enhance understanding, build trust, and implement effective strategies that honor both human and animal rights. Ultimately, achieving a just and sustainable coexistence requires an ongoing commitment to adapt our approaches as we learn from the shared experiences of humans and elephants, cultivating a future where both can thrive. Such adaptive policies should be rooted in continuous monitoring, evaluation, and community feedback to ensure they remain effective and equitable over time.

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