

CAGE FIGHTING

Prisanth is a smallholder on the edge of Yala National Park. He ekes out an agricultural retainer toiling with his cattle. His herd is his living, his meal ticket. 'I don't mind if I lose one cow per year to leopards, I expect this living so close to the park.' But Prisanth and his brother have lost over fifty calves in the last year.

Meanwhile in the park a young male leopard is delighting viewers sashaying down a track before leaping up a Tamarind tree and adopting a classic arboreal pose full of indolent louchness. Yala has the highest density of leopards in Asia but the ones most viewed are the youngsters still within the vague auspices of their mother. They survive their early years much better than their cousins in Africa as their apex predator status ensures a relatively threat-free existence, except from other leopards. A territory of 2-4 KM is tiny compared to a Serengeti leopard yet still significant in this fertile park. Critical mass occurs when they are ousted from their parents' back yard. They have neither the muscle nor wherewithal to exist in established territories and retreat to the buffer zones of the park where the larder contains both different and easier dishes - cattle.

A young cat will never take on an adult cow but a calf presents a meal far more substantial than spotted deer and far easier to catch. Up until last year Prisanth's young herd were protected by a couple of useless strands of flimsy wire supported by spindly saplings. \$600.00 buys him an impregnable wire and steel fortress. Through tears he stammers that he would revere the leopard now. He freely admits to poisoning them in the past - an understandable retribution when livelihoods are at stake. Not any more.

In much the same way as a Bandhavgarh farmer who may have had his buffalo, goat or relation ravaged by a Bengal tiger needs to feel benefit from his box office neighbours before respecting and rallying behind them, so does a Yala farmer.

Exodus wildlife fans have so far bought eight of these pens. Only sixteen more are required and the problem is solved. My last group have already dug deep into recession-blighted pockets and contributed to two more pens. By the end of the year the problem could be solved. But it is better than just conserving leopards and cows, there is a perfectly weighted vertical integration in this appeal: the money is diligently raised, passed down the line to the wonderful naturalist, conservationist and photographer Chitral and then built solely by local craftsmen.

It has taken this nascent wildlife photographic tourism to kick-start this. Unfortunately 95% of those who visit Yala do so for one night and take one patronising and miserly game drive. Most are monstrous mainstream companies who noisily tick off a few species before moving on, en masse to yet another temple and souvenir shop without giving a thought to this fragile ecosystem. Just as they responded generously and quickly after the Tsunami, Exodus clients are cut from a different mould and there is now room for optimism about the park's dappled predator. Fortunately there is also no C-list luvviness involved crying crocodile tears about species they neither know or care about. It is a magnificent idea, brilliantly executed with neither fluff nor bureaucracy attached and critically with a tangible and tenable end game. And anyway the leopards, animals that have obsessed me for twenty years, are the genuine A-listers.