



Small scale farmers in Sri Lanka are installing electric fences in an effort to protect their crops and homes from wild elephants. Photos: MONLAR

## Spring Story

# WE ARE A CHANGED PEOPLE

BY GILLIAN SOUTHEY | CWS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR.

The world is continuing to heat up with devastating consequences, but for many of the poorest people it is the latest in a series of calamities that have undermined and sometimes destroyed homes and livelihoods. The Movement for Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR) brings together networks of farmers and rural people in Sri Lanka to learn eco-agricultural techniques and campaign for community concerns, with support from Christian World Service supporters like you. One of the big challenges facing Sri Lankan farmers is human-elephant conflict. In 2023, 449 elephants were killed and 169 people lost their lives, up from 433 and 145 respectively the year before.

**H**ambantota in southern Sri Lanka is one area where MONLAR works with small-scale farmers. Until recently Hambantota was a sleepy seaside town surrounded by over 118,000 hectares of forests populated by elephants and other wildlife. Since 2001 a quarter of that land has been swallowed up for infrastructure projects such as a major seaport and large scale commercial agricultural projects.

The government had planned to allocate land for a Managed Elephant Reserve but by the time it was gazetted in 2021, the area that was meant to provide for 300–400 elephants (ten per cent of the country's elephant population) had been more than halved. The loss of habitat has forced the elephants to come closer to humans in search of food and water.

Dayaseeli who lost her husband in the 1980s works tirelessly to create a sustainable future for elephants



Dayaseeli says there is room for elephants and people to live alongside each other with better management.

and people. She has raised two children, runs a small, successful agro-business and is an auditor for community organisations and farmer associations. In her quiet way she has shared her expertise with other women farmers who have been left alone to raise their children. She is an active member of MONLAR's campaign to protect the elephants, their habitat and the community.

Dayaseeli has been at the forefront of community efforts to protect the elephants and improve the livelihoods of other small-scale farmers in the Hambantota district. The 65-year-old lives in a small home and grows crops on her two acres of land.

Small-scale farmers used to grow enough food for their needs on small plots of land. One or two elephants would sometimes arrive in a village but as soon as they saw people, they would retreat to the nearby forest. Since 2012, when land began being rapidly cleared for



Above: Dayaseeli prepares vegetables to sell at the market.  
 Top right: New fences will guide elephants to local water sources and keep them away from people.

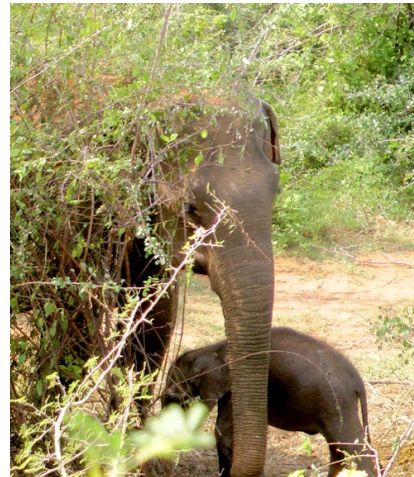


development, the elephants have been unable to feed themselves in the shrinking forests. Now a few marauding elephants can destroy months of hard work by small-scale farmers in one night.

More hungry elephants have put more pressure on rural communities.

“There is fear and panic. Parents are afraid to send their children to school. People are afraid to take their produce to the market on motorcycles. The fear has crippled the social and economic life of the village. This is the plight of many villages in Hambantota district,” she says.

Over the years officials from the department of wildlife conservation and forest department have tested various solutions to the human-elephant conflict. MONLAR has also been researching solutions.



Hambantota’s elephants try to hide from the many tourists who visit the district.

Map credit: Uwe Dederig, CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons

**“MONLAR over the years has helped us with sustainable agriculture and promoted the rights of peasants.... We are a changed people,” Dayaseeli says.**

“Ultimately what works best is fencing. However, the government has made partial constructions and businessmen who clear forests for various ‘development’ activities too have built fences. This overlapping and unsystematic fencing made matters worse. In response we came up with a proposal to establish a 10-kilometre elephant fence using a design of our own. The design was approved by wildlife officials,” she says.

“Once we build the fence over 5,800 farming families in the area will be able to carry out their agricultural activities without fear. Thousands of children will be able to go to school in the morning. The lives of dozens of elephants and humans will be saved each year. If we succeed here, this will provide a blueprint that can be followed by other struggling farming communities. We just want a country where humans and elephants can live in harmony,” she concludes.

Late last year small-scale farmers raised enough funds to build the first five kilometres of the electric fence.

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<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal15>

**Support Small-scale Farmers losing livelihoods to the climate crisis**

Many small-scale farmers are standing on the brink of disaster. Please support the Small-scale Farming Appeal so more farmers can learn climate resilient agriculture and address big challenges like elephants and the lack of water.