## THE HIND

## The King under threat

Numbers of the little known Eastern Ghats King Cobra on the decline

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esidents of the Saradapuram hamlet of Makannapuram village, Sompet Mandal in Srikakulam district, have recently killed a 15-foot King Cobra. The story they told a vernacular newspaper reporter is that the snake fell from a mango tree and when people chased it tried to enter a house and therefore it had to be killed. A picture of people holding the snake was published in the newspaper.

Another King Cobra was killed in Thoyyeru village in Devipatnam mandal in East Godavari district. According to the report, the snake entered a house ad-

joining a field.

What are the King Cobras doing in the Eastern

Ghats? While the whole world knows of the King Cobras of the Western Ghats, not many know that they exist in good numbers even in the Eastern Ghats, but apparently their numbers are fast declining.

Save the Snake crusader and founder of the Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society (EGWS) Murthy Kantimahanti told The Hindu that he had documented 30 King Cobra killings in the past three years. He had vernacular newspaper clips, dates and places he gathered from his sources to backup his claim.

Many of the King Cobra experts including the legendary Romulus Whitaker were surprised when he told them about the killings. The world's first King Cobra Symposium was held in the Netherlands on October 6-7,

Mr. Murthy said.

Mr. Whitaker, known to all as the founder of the Madras Snake Park, is also the founder of Agumbe Rain-

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forest Research Station in Karnataka mainly for studying the King

its habitat. The King Cobra was recognised as a "flagship spe-

Cobra and



A King Cobra killed by a vehicle on a road in agency area of Srikakulum.



cal rainforests at the Symposium. It is the world's longest venomous snake reaching lengths of up to six metres. They have a massive range extending from South India to the Philip-

pines and Southern China to the Indonesian Archipelago.

"The King Cobras function as apex predators playing a critical role in ecosystem processes," Mr. Murthy said. They are actually friends of man because they feed on poisonous snakes that cause many human deaths. Snake bites are recognised as one of the leading causes of death. Though they are called Cobras because of their hood, they do not even belong to the Cobra genus. The King Cobras belonged to the genus Ophiophugus, snake-eater in Latin, he explained.

The King Cobras prefer to stay in thick forest but come close to human habitations hunting other snakes which come in search of rats, Mr. Murthy said to explain why they come close to human habitations.

The Houston Zoo has recently taken Mr. Murthy as conservation partner and offered support to his endeavour to conserve snakes in the Eastern Ghats.

"I suspect many more King Cobras are being killed in interior areas, but it is not known to anybody including the Forest Department," he said. While the King Cobra had been studied extensively in the Western Ghats using radio telemetry, no studies had been made on its Eastern Ghats counterpart, he said.

Mr. Murthy said with support form the Houston Zoo, he was going to launch community education programmes to promote awareness about the King Cobra.