Snake in the diet of *Cuon alpinus* (Pallas, 1811) in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, Tamil Nadu

Dhole or Asiatic Wild Dog *Cuon alpinus* is a pack-living, social carnivore of Asian forests. As stated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Kamler et al. 2015) only about 949-2215 mature–3000 individuals of the species are left in the wild and its population is under severe threat due to anthropogenic pressure, prey availability, habitat loss and retaliation (Acharya 2007). Despite its endangered status, this splendid canid receives less conservation attention, unlike its sympatric felids. It is distributed in various habitats from scrub jungle to alpine meadows and eats a number of prey items (Selvan et al. 2013). Food habits of the Dhole were studied in some of the ranges where it is distributed. The species selects larger prey such as Gaur *Bos gaurus* and Sambar *Rusa unicolor* and medium-sized prey such as Chital *Axis axis* and Wild Boar *Sus scrofa* (Johnsingh 1992; Karanth & Sunquist 1995, 2000; Ramesh et al. 2012; Selvan et al. 2013). Dholes are experts in relying on hunting techniques wherein they coordinate with...
each other to exhaust the prey before it is eaten alive (Durbin et al. 2004). A study from Pakke Tiger Reserve emphasized that the Dhole’s major preferred prey is Wild Boar, which is extremely challenging and risky to handle (Selvan et al. 2013); however, southern (Kumaraguru et al. 2010) and central Indian studies (Acharya 2007) stated that the species does not prefer risky prey.

Here we report the first observation of snake in the diet of Dhole. The observation was made in Kalakad-Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu (KMTR), located at the southernmost end of the Western Ghats in the Ashambu hills (Johnsingh 2001) in India. We were collecting scat samples in the region as part of a preliminary study that is underway to understand the ecology of sympatric large carnivore interactions, and their prey selection and food habits.

On 5 March 2016, we collected the scat of an Asian Wild Dog in Naalumukku Tea Plantation of Bombay Burma Trading Corporation of Ambasamuthiram range of KMTR (N08°32′25.0″/E 077°21′14.5″; 319m elevation). This is the largest and prominent estate in KMTR with tea, cardamom, coffee, and eucalyptus plantation in an area of 3,391ha (Ali & Pai 2001). The Asian Wild Dog scat was confirmed based on its size, shape, and ancillary signs such as scratch and pugmark. Dholes generally consume grass and other vegetation (Barnett et al. 1980; Johnsingh 1983; Durbin et al. 2004; Bashir et al. 2013). It seems that the individual was suffering from digestive problems as the scat contained no remains of birds or mammals such as feathers, fur, teeth, bones, and claws; it contained only grass and the remains of a snake. As the snake was partially digested, we couldn’t identify the species beyond the genus Uropeltis (total length c. 16.18cm). The present observation was corroborated with previous literature. Rice (1986) stated that Dholes obviously, occasionally, and opportunistically feed on lizards or snakes. He also observed a reptile in Dhole scat collected at Eravikulam National Park in Kerala, though it was uncertain whether it was a lizard or a snake. In the present observation, it is not clear whether the Dhole purposefully consumed the snake or it was accidentally
consumed while the individual was feeding on grass. Further investigations are required to have a better understanding of the role of snakes in the diet of the endangered canid.

References

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