

Sightings of King Cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* in northern coastal Andhra Pradesh

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The King Cobra *Ophiophagus hannah* Cantor, 1836, is the largest venomous snake in the world, reaching to a length of up to 5.85m (Aagaard 1924). Although not a common snake, the species has a wide distribution (David & Vogel 1996). This monotypic genus of the family Elapidae is considered as a species complex by Das (2002), as the species varies in coloration, scalation and body proportion throughout its range.

In India, the distribution range of the species is recorded as Western Ghats, Uttar Pradesh (Terai), Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal, northeastern India and also the Andaman Islands (Whitaker & Captain 2004). In its distributional range, the species is recorded from various habitat types such as lowland, wet tropical forest, coastal rainforest, tropical and subtropical wet montane forest, dry forest, swamps and marshes, open scrubland, plantation and cultivated areas, alluvial and terai grassland, mangrove swamps, open country and disturbed areas, and near human habitations (Narayan & Rosalind 1989; David & Vogel 1996; Selich & Kestle

2002; Leviton et al. 2003).

The King Cobra is listed under Schedule II of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972; Appendix II of CITES; and in the Vulnerable category by IUCN (2010) which also recommends research into, and monitoring of the population status of this species to gain a better understanding of how the population responds to threats and conservation.

In the present paper, we report the sightings of *Ophiophagus hannah* from different locations

in the northern coastal Andhra Pradesh region (18°12'10.83" & 83°04'30.95" to 18°48'38.31"N & 83°48'52.44"N approximately) over the last few years (Image 1). Two large male King Cobras were even killed by locals on two separate occasions in this region which encompasses three districts of Srikakulam, Vizianagaram and Visakhapatnam respectively. A 4.26m long male King Cobra (Images 2 & 3) was spotted dead by volunteers of Green Mercy (an NGO working for wildlife conservation in the three districts) on 28th July 2009, at Sitampeta forest area 18°40'33.96"N & 83°48'27.11"E in Srikakulam (Murthy & Murthy 2010). The dead King Cobra weighed about 6.5kg and as the specimen was decomposing



Image 1. Different locations where sightings of *Ophiophagus hannah* were reported between 2006–2010 (Map Source: Google Earth 2011)



Image 2. Dead *Ophiophagus hannah* specimen



Image 3. Dorsal View of the head preserved at Science college in Srikakulam.

fast, it was carried to a nearby science college and preserved in 10% formalin solution. On enquiring, it was learnt that the snake was killed by people from surrounding villages. In another incident, a 3.84m long male King Cobra weighing 5.7kg was stoned to death by locals (Images 4 & 5) at Kapusompuram,

a small village near S. Kota Town 18°06'57.67"N & 83°04'35.23"E. This incident took place on 30 October 2010. King Cobras have been sighted here by locals, forest department personnel and members of Green Mercy Organization in the recent past.

The geographic region of

north Coastal Andhra has varied habitats ranging from coasts to dry, thorny, scrub to dry, deciduous forests and sal forests. Small pockets of semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests do exist in Makkuva, Duggeru and Salur forest blocks of Vizianagaram Division. This division occupies a very strategic position owing to the fact that many wild animals including elephants wander into this district from the adjacent state of Orissa on a regular basis. There are unconfirmed occasional sightings of King Cobras by locals from this region and also few other locations in Srikakulam and Visakhapatnam divisions as well. Direct evidence like actual sightings, killings by humans as well as indirect evidence in the form of shed skins, skeletal remains, tracks, and deserted leaf nests clearly suggests the occurrence of the species in this region. Furthermore, there have been reports in the local electronic and print media about sightings and killings of King Cobras with visuals. The species was also sighted by locals near Sunnapu Gedda Waterfalls in the adjoining Sitampet mandal of Srikakulam District which lies at Andhra-Orissa border (K.V. Ramana Murthy, Green Mercy, 25-08-2010 pers. comm.).

There is an apparent dearth of information regarding the exact distributional status of the species in northern coastal Andhra Pradesh due



Image 4. *Ophiophagus hannah* killed by villagers near S.Kota Town.



Image 5. Flattened head of *Ophiophagus hannah*

to paucity of herpetological surveys. Invariably, it is a serious impediment for chalking out conservation management strategies. Lack of awareness and prevalent myths lead to unnecessary killing of these majestic serpents. Perhaps, habitat destruction, poaching and redundant killings by locals are taking a heavy toll on the resident King Cobra

population. Developing inter-linking corridors between forest areas i.e., from S.Kota – Araku-Salur – Duggeru-Parvathipuram and Sitampeta regions could be useful for the long-term survival of King Cobra populations in Andhra Pradesh. Therefore, we recommend that immediate intensive surveys be carried out in all the three districts of northern

Coastal Andhra Pradesh. Awareness programmes for local communities should be carried out to educate them about the ecological significance of the species and their conservation importance.

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