

Opportunities for Ph.D. in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation

We are excited to announce admissions to the 2026 Doctoral Program in wildlife ecology and conservation at the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS). The degree will be granted by the Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE). We are looking for highly motivated and academically driven candidates, with a demonstrated interest in field-based research in wildlife ecology and conservation in India and Asia.

Project Opportunities Available

1. Ecology and Conservation of Endemic Vertebrates in the Western Ghats

Description: The Western Ghats in India is one of the world's most important biodiversity hotspots, characterised by exceptionally high levels of endemism across vertebrate taxa. Despite this, many endemic species remain poorly studied, particularly with respect to their ecology, behaviour, and responses to rapid environmental change. The research will focus on investigating the ecology and conservation of endemic vertebrate species in the Western Ghats, with flexibility to focus on mammals, birds, amphibians or reptiles. The choice of focal species will be guided by the student's interest, conservation relevance and feasibility. The project may adopt a single-species or comparative framework, depending on the research questions developed. The research will involve field-based ecological and/or behavioural studies, and may include methods such as population surveys, behavioural observations, habitat and landscape assessments, acoustic or camera-based monitoring, and spatial analyses. The overarching aim is to understand how endemic species respond to habitat change, fragmentation, and other anthropogenic pressures, and to generate insights relevant for conservation planning and management. Applicants with strong field-based research experience and demonstrated statistical aptitude will be preferred.

2. Impacts of Landscape Change on Free-ranging Asian Elephants in Peninsular India

Asian elephants have experienced a 50% decline in population over just four decades due to habitat loss, degradation and conflict with humans across their range, as a result of which they are currently listed as Endangered. India supports the largest free-ranging elephant population in Asia, estimated at 25,000-30,000 individuals spread across 23 states. Human-induced land cover change and disturbance have influenced elephant distribution and movement patterns, leading to increased usage of human-dominated areas and resulting in conflict. The Western Ghats, particularly the Nilgiris, Anamalais, Periyar, and Agasthyamalai hills, harbour one of the largest elephant populations in the country, while the Eastern Ghats of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh also support significant, though smaller, populations. This PhD project will investigate the distribution and habitat relationships of free-ranging elephant populations and assess the impacts of land-cover change drivers, including mining, agriculture, dams, and plantations, on elephant ecology across Western and Eastern Ghats landscapes. Candidates should be experienced in ecological techniques such as transect surveys and camera trapping, and be familiar with other aspects of ecological and social science research methods. Candidates should be able to work in remote areas under challenging conditions.

3. Bat Conservation: Heritage Monuments, Wind Energy, Ecosystem Services and More

Description: India is home to over 135 species of bats, of which only 12 are legally protected. Across India, bats share space with humans in various contexts, exposing them to severe threats. For example, several species occupy historical monuments where they come into conflict with government departments that

manage our archaeological heritage. Wind turbines – that kill thousands of bats in Europe and North America – are spread across India and thorough investigations on the level of bat mortality and mitigation measures are lacking. Our upcoming bat research projects aim at finding scientifically guided solutions for such conservation problems. Possible topics for PhD projects include a) investigating bat mortality in wind farms and how it is influenced by landscape features and season, b) understanding why bats roost in historical monuments and how their presence is perceived by various stakeholders, c) quantifying the ecosystem services of bats that roost in historical monuments through diet analysis, acoustic monitoring, and field experiments. Students may also pursue other topics related to bat conservation issues in India depending on mutual interest and feasibility.

4. Evaluation of Tourism Opportunities and Challenges across Indian Protected Areas

Description: Wildlife tourism is a dynamic and influential sector with significant potential to boost local economies and create sustainable livelihood opportunities for local communities, while also playing an important role in advancing biodiversity conservation when implemented thoughtfully. In India, wildlife tourism has gained prominence due to the country's remarkable biological heritage and the rise in disposable incomes. With the world's second-largest human population and only five percent of the total geographical area under official protection, many wildlife species live and move beyond protected areas. In a rapidly growing economy like India, where demand for nature-based tourism is on the rise, it is vital to ensure that tourism remains a force for positive change, rather than becoming a burden on the wild places, wildlife, and communities we strive to protect. This PhD project aims to explore critical aspects of wildlife tourism, including analyzing visitation trends and patterns, evaluating the benefits and costs of tourism, understanding tourist preferences, assessing stewardship by local communities and the hospitality sector, building positive case studies and state-national policies.

5. Understanding Human-Wildlife Interactions

Description: The research project will evaluate conservation programs that help farmers experiencing wildlife conflict in receiving government compensation. The Ph.D. student recruited for this project will assist in the evaluation of this conservation program. Possible avenues for evaluation are: does the program increase compensation received per conflict incident? Does the program improve attitudes towards wildlife? If the program improves access to compensation, does its implementation reduce incentives to implement private investment in reducing animal conflict? Preferred applicants will demonstrate statistical training and aptitude, experience in program evaluation, and experience in fieldwork. A background in economics is preferred, but not required. This project is in collaboration with the University of British Columbia, Canada.

6. Building Capacity for One Health and Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation in Forest-Fringe Communities of the Western and Eastern Ghats

Description: India is home to one of the highest incidences of human-wildlife conflict (HWC) in the world, creating frequent avenues for transmission of zoonotic diseases to human populations. CWS' Wild Surakshe program provides training in forest-fringe communities in the Western and Eastern Ghats to increase awareness of public health and safety in relation to HWC and zoonotic diseases, where community engagement, social networks, and connected communities are important for resilience in the face of such collective challenges and for One Health solutions. The doctoral student recruited for this project will conduct research supporting the Wild Surakshe program by applying social science methods such as social

network analysis, survey research, focus group discussions, and qualitative research methods to explore how local government staff and other community members coordinate and respond to HWC and zoonotic disease incidents, and to identify opportunities for improved awareness and effective mitigation at the local level. The preferred applicant will have demonstrated experience working in forest-fringe communities in South India, interacting with government staff, and conducting social science research. They will also have experience or interest in One Health, social network analysis, and qualitative research methods.

7. Hunting and Wildlife Trade in the Western and Eastern Ghats

Description: Hunting and illegal wildlife trade represent some of the most significant threats to global biodiversity. However, systematic data on hunting pressures remain limited. This PhD project will investigate contemporary hunting practices in the Western and Eastern Ghats. The research will assess drivers and motivations behind these activities, their impacts on wildlife, species at risk, and links to wildlife trade. The project will integrate ecological surveys, key informant interviews, and community engagement, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods. Candidates should demonstrate skills in ecological techniques such as camera trapping, experience in social science research, and the ability to work in remote areas under challenging conditions while engaging effectively with local communities.

8. Understanding Non-Timber Forest Products Extraction in the Western Ghats

Description: Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are vital for sustaining rural and forest communities, providing essential resources for livelihoods, cultural practices, and economic activities. However, concerns over overharvesting and biodiversity conservation highlight the need for sustainable management. Despite their importance, comprehensive research on the scale and patterns of NTFP extraction remains limited. This PhD project will focus on NTFP extraction, specifically flora, in the Western Ghats, a globally significant biodiversity hotspot. It will investigate collection patterns, drivers and motivations, species at risk, and links to community livelihoods. Using key informant interviews and community engagement, the project will employ both quantitative and qualitative methods. Candidates should have experience in social science research and the ability to work in remote, challenging conditions while engaging effectively with local communities.

9. Designing and Evaluating Environmental Education Curricula and Programs

Description: The research project will evaluate CWS' Wild Shaale program that focuses on environmental education for school-going children between the ages of 10-13 years living in rural areas around wildlife reserves in India. The Ph.D. student recruited for this project will assist in the design and evaluation of curriculum, teacher training and network effects of the program. Possible avenues for evaluation are: does the program increase compassion of children for wildlife? What is the long term impact of the program on the children when they or their family encounter wild animals especially in conflict situations? Does the program improve their attitudes towards wildlife? Preferred applicants will demonstrate statistical training and aptitude, experience in program evaluation, and experience in fieldwork.

10. Open topic

In addition to the positions available in different projects (as stated above), candidates with CSIR/UGC/DST doctoral fellowships are encouraged to apply, provided their interests match that of a Guide at CWS. Typically, most projects are executed in collaboration with faculty from international

universities and national institutions in India.

Essential Qualifications

- Indian national /or OCI, with a postgraduate degree in natural sciences, social sciences, medical sciences, veterinary sciences, or engineering, with at least 65% marks or equivalent, and a minimum of 2 years of experience in field-based wildlife research.

Desirable Qualifications

- Demonstrated ability to write proposals and reports; Publication of scientific and popular articles; Knowledge of survey and analytical methods in ecology; Working knowledge of software such as QGIS/ArcGIS/Google Earth Engine and R or Python. UGC/CSIR-NET/GATE eligible candidates are encouraged to apply; GRE/TOEFL scores for OCI candidates.

Fellowship

- Each selected Ph.D. student will get a fellowship of Rs. 40,000, and once they successfully complete the required coursework and pass their candidacy examination the fellowships will get revised to Rs. 50,000.

How to apply

- Please fill the format at cwslnk.co/apply2026phd to apply.
- Please submit in **one pdf document**:
 1. Undergraduate transcript
 2. Masters' transcript
 3. CV/resume
 4. 1-2 page personal statement identifying your main research interests from the above list (max. 2) and expanding on your relevant experience
 5. List and copies of scientific publications, technical reports, or popular articles published
 6. **Students with other scholarships/fellowships:** Students who have secured the DST-INSPIRE, UGC-NET, CSIR fellowships and GATE scores *would also be required to attend the written entrance examination.*
 7. Three referee statements should be sent directly to Dr. Sruthi Unnikrishnan via the email doctoral.program@cwsindia.org by the referees.
- **The deadline for submitting applications is March 15th 2026.**

Selection Process

Applicants shortlisted based on essential and desirable qualifications would be required to appear for an in-person entrance test conducted by CWS. Those who have cleared the entrance test will be invited for an in-person/online interview with the Centre for Wildlife Studies (CWS), Bangalore. Expenses need to be borne by the candidates themselves.

If any additional queries please contact Dr. Sruthi Unnikrishnan, doctoral.program@cwsindia.org