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Electoral Politics of Human–Elephant Conflict in Sri Lanka Competing Agendas and Governance Responses

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Abstract
Human- Elephant conflict is a serious environmental and social issue in Sri Lanka, especially in rural and agricultural areas. This conflict has increasingly become part of electoral politics, as politicians use it to gain voter support by promising quick and visible solutions. The research problem is, how well-informed are rural voters about the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of human elephant conflict in their constituencies? The main purpose is writing this research paper, critically examine to assess rural voters' awareness of human elephant conflict issues and their perceptions of incumbent and challenger candidates' campaign promises related to human elephant conflict. And also sub purposes are to examine the influence of electoral promises on voters' trust and satisfaction with governance structures responsible for human elephant conflict mitigation, to analyze the effectiveness of governance responses—particularly community-based electric fencing and translocation programs—in reducing human elephant conflict incidents, as perceived by local stakeholders and to identify the gaps between campaign rhetoric and implementation of human elephant conflict mitigation strategies, thereby proposing policy recommendations to align electoral processes with evidence-based interventions. The writing of this article uses qualitative method. Use Details the mixed-methods approach, data sources, sampling techniques, and analytical methods. Specially analysis technique based on previous researchers' findings. A conceptual framework is developed, integrating theoretical perspectives from political ecology and environmental governance. Enhance Maintenance and Community Ownership of Electric Fences, while electric fences reduce crop raids by up to 70% in pilot sites (IIED, 2020) IIED, Strengthen and Streamline Compensation Mechanisms, Prioritize Ecological Corridor Restoration Over Translocation and Integrate HEC Mitigation in Electoral Manifestos with Accountability Mechanisms. these findings can be identified regarding how well-informed are rural voters about the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of human elephant conflict in their constituencies under the research.

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1. Introduction

Human–elephant conflict (HEC) in Sri Lanka represents one of the most pressing conservation and socio-economic challenges facing the island nation today. Over recent decades, rapid land-use change—driven by agricultural expansion, deforestation, and infrastructural development—has led to a significant decrease in elephant habitats, forcing wild elephants into closer proximity with human settlements (Fernando et al., 2019) [7, 19] (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19] SpringerLinkSpringerLink. As a result, both elephants and local communities have suffered high casualty rates: on average, more than 200 elephants and 70–80 humans are killed annually due to HEC incidents (Köpke et al., 2021) [14] (Supun Lahiru Prakash, Wijeratne & Fernando, 2020) [23] MDPIResearchGate. The historical significance of elephants in Sri Lankan culture—where they have served as royal and ritual symbols since the Anuradhapura era (377 BCE–1017 CE)—contrasts sharply with the contemporary tensions between conservation imperatives and rural livelihoods (Köpke et al., 2021) [14] MDPI.

These conflicts not only threaten the long-term viability of the endangered Sri Lankan elephant (Elephas maximus maximus) but also exacerbate socio-economic vulnerabilities among agrarian communities that depend on subsistence farming (Jupudi, 2025) [13] (The Guardian, 2024) [24] Global PoliticsThe Guardian.

Electoral politics in Sri Lanka further complicates governance responses to HEC. In areas with frequent conflict, political candidates often leverage HEC issues during campaigns to secure rural votes, promising quick-fix solutions such as electric fences, translocation of "problem" elephants, or harsher punitive measures for elephant offenses (Mongabay, 2024) [15] (Jupudi, 2025) [13] MongabayGlobal Politics. Such promises serve dual purposes: appealing to agrarian constituencies—who bear the brunt of crop losses and property damage—and signaling a candidate's alignment with nationalist and rural protective sentiments (Mongabay, 2024) [15]. However, many of these campaign pledges remain unfulfilled or short-lived once officials assume office, leading to a cycle of disenchantment and a growing perception of HEC governance as politically motivated rather than evidence-based (Mongabay, 2025) [16] (SciDev.Net, 2025) [18] MongabaySciDev.net.

2. Research Problem

Despite the severity of human–elephant conflicts and their significant electoral salience in affected districts, there is limited empirical research examining how electoral politics shapes governance responses and public perceptions of HEC mitigation. While numerous studies have documented the ecological and socio-economic dimensions of HEC (Fernando et al., 2019) [6] (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19], scant attention has been paid to understanding the interplay between electoral competition—manifested through campaign rhetoric and policy promises—and actual governance outcomes. Consequently, the extent to which electoral agendas align with evidence-based conservation practices remains unclear, potentially undermining both elephant welfare and rural livelihoods (Köpke et al., 2021) [14] (Jupudi, 2025) [13] MDPIGlobal Politics.

How well-informed are rural voters about the ecological, social, and economic dimensions of HEC in their constituencies?

3. Literature Review

This provides a comprehensive review of existing scholarship on human–elephant conflict (HEC) in Sri Lanka, with a specific focus on the intersection between ecological dynamics, socio-economic factors, and electoral politics. The literature review is organized into four main sections: (1) the historical and socio-economic dimensions of HEC in Sri Lanka, (2) the role of electoral politics in wildlife conservation, (3) governance responses to HEC, and (4) the development of a political ecology–informed conceptual framework. Each section synthesizes empirical studies, policy documents, and theoretical perspectives, highlighting gaps in current knowledge and situating the present study within broader academic debates.

The relationship between humans and elephants in Sri Lanka extends over two millennia, deeply entwined within cultural, economic, and religious spheres. Elephants featured prominently as royal symbols and ritual animals in the ancient Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa kingdoms (circa 377 BCE–1017 CE), where they served not only as symbols of sovereignty but also as labor in agriculture and ceremonial processions (Köpke et al., 2021) [14] (Shaffer, Adams, & Gomez, 2019) [19]. Historical chronicles such as the Mahavamsa document elephants being used in warfare, timber extraction, and temple processions, underscoring their centrality in precolonial societies (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2018) [3]. Under British colonial rule (1815–1948), commercial logging and plantation expansion drastically reduced forest cover, initiating early stages of habitat fragmentation (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. These changes laid the groundwork for contemporary conflicts by disrupting elephant migratory routes and traditional ranging behaviors (Fernando, Nissanka, Gamage, & Wijeratne, 2019) [7].

Post-independence agrarian policies further accelerated forest clearance. From the 1950s through the 1970s, government incentives promoted paddy and sugarcane cultivation in the Dry Zone—home to the country's largest elephant populations—resulting in extensive habitat encroachment (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. For instance, the Mahaveli Development Project (1970s–1980s) aimed at expanding irrigation infrastructure, transforming over 100,000 hectares of forest land into agricultural fields (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2018) [3]. Although this project enhanced food security and rural livelihoods, it also fragmented wildlife habitats, impinging upon elephant corridors that connected core forest reserves in the North Central and Eastern provinces (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. By the late 20th century, scholars documented a sharp increase in HEC incidents—such as crop raiding, property damage, and human fatalities—particularly in areas adjacent to national parks (Fernando et al., 2019) [6] (Prakash, Wijeratne, & Fernando, 2020) [17].

A substantial body of ecological research has examined the proximate and ultimate drivers of HEC in Sri Lanka. Habitat loss and fragmentation remain primary factors, compelling elephants to forage in agricultural landscapes where crops such as rice, maize, and sugarcane offer high caloric returns (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. Satellite imagery analyses reveal that from 1990 to 2015, Sri Lanka lost approximately 30% of its lowland rainforest, with much of this deforestation occurring in former elephant range areas (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. Elephants' seasonal movements—historically reliant on forest cover for shade and water sources—are disrupted by newly constructed roads, irrigation canals, and human settlements, forcing elephants to navigate dangerous human-dominated environments (Fernando et al., 2019) [6] (The Guardian, 2024) [24].

In addition to habitat loss, landscape-level variables such as proximity to protected areas, road density, and human population density have been statistically linked to HEC hotspots. Shaffer et al. (2019) [19] conducted logistic regression models using geo-referenced HEC incident data (2010–2017) and found that areas within 5 km of national parks experienced a threefold increase in conflict incidents compared to areas farther away (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. Similarly, low-intensity agricultural fringes adjacent to wildlife corridors served as "conflict zones," where elephants frequented cultivated fields due to easier access to water and nutritious crops (Fernando et al., 2019) [6]. These ecological drivers, compounded by seasonal resource fluctuations—such as dry-season water scarcity—have created temporal peaks in elephant crop-raiding during the months of March–May and September–October (Supun Lahiru Prakash, Wijeratne, & Fernando, 2020) [23].

HEC exerts profound socio-economic costs on rural households, affecting both livelihoods and community well-being. Smallholder farmers, who constitute over 60% of the rural population in conflict-prone districts (Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Hambantota), often allocate 70–80% of their annual income to subsistence agriculture. When elephants raid crops, estimated losses per incident can range from LKR 10,000 to LKR 50,000 (USD 34–170), depending on the crop type and growth stage (Prakash et al., 2020) [17]. For households with an average annual income of LKR 216,000, a single raid can erase up to 25% of the year's earnings, exacerbating existing poverty and food insecurity.

Beyond direct economic losses, HEC incidents impose indirect costs: time spent guarding fields, repairing damaged infrastructure, and seeking medical attention following human–elephant confrontation (Fernando et al., 2019) [6]. Supun Lahiru Prakash et al. (2020) [23] estimate that rural communities collectively lose over 100,000 labor hours annually to HEC mitigation activities, such as guard duties and fence maintenance (Prakash et al., 2020) [17]. Human fatalities—averaging 70–80 per year—and serious injuries result in emotional trauma and decreased labor productivity, with ripple effects on children's school attendance and psychological health (The Guardian, 2024) [24].

Compounding these challenges, retaliatory killings of elephants by frustrated farmers have risen sharply. Between 2010 and 2020, at least 150 elephants were illegally poisoned or trapped in landmines planted along agricultural edges, representing a significant proportion of the estimated 200 elephants killed annually due to conflict (Köpke et al., 2021) [14] (Supun Lahiru Prakash et al., 2020) [23]. Such retaliatory measures not only contravene wildlife protection laws but also undermine long-term conservation goals, perpetuating a vicious cycle of escalating conflicts (Köpke et al., 2021) [14].

Overall, the historical expansion of human activities into elephant habitats—coupled with limited livelihood alternatives—has entrenched HEC as a multidimensional challenge, with ecological drivers tightly interwoven with socio-economic vulnerabilities. Understanding these dynamics is essential for crafting governance responses that balance elephant conservation with rural development imperatives.

Political ecology provides a valuable lens for examining how power relations, resource competition, and institutional dynamics shape environmental outcomes. In the context of HEC, scholars emphasize that conservation practices are not solely the domain of technocratic experts but are deeply influenced by local politics, cultural values, and economic inequalities. Fabricius (2004) argues that local elites and political brokers often appropriate conservation issues to bolster their authority, frequently marginalizing vulnerable groups whose livelihoods hinge on access to natural resources. Similarly, Neumann (2005) highlights that wildlife conservation is inherently a political process, where competing discourses—such as development versus preservation—are negotiated in arenas of power.

Applying these perspectives to Sri Lanka, de Silva and Srinivasan (2018) [3] underscore how post-independence state policies favored agricultural expansion over habitat preservation, reflecting broader political priorities aiming to achieve food security and rural vote banks. As a result, elephants became seen by many rural constituents as obstacles to development, rather than cultural icons. These normative shifts shaped electoral discourses, wherein candidates compete to demonstrate their commitment to "solving" HEC in order to gain rural support (Jupudi, 2025) [13] (Mongabay, 2024) [15].

Research on electoral behavior in Sri Lanka consistently identifies rural issues as pivotal determinants of voting patterns, with HEC emerging as a salient electoral issue in high-conflict districts. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, candidates in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa campaigning on promises to erect electric fences and expedite compensation processes garnered a 15% higher vote share compared to counterparts focusing on broader national issues (Jupudi, 2025) [13] (Mongabay, 2024) [15]. Qualitative interviews with local party organizers reveal that addressing HEC during house-to-house canvassing and rural rallies engenders perceptions of "caring for the farmer," thereby translating into electoral gains (Jupudi, 2025) [13].

Mongabay (2024) [15] documents several instances where prospective Members of Parliament (MPs) and Provincial Council candidates pledged to allocate constituency development funds explicitly for HEC mitigation—such as constructing collapsible electric fences along major elephant corridors and distributing chili-based deterrents to farmers (Mongabay, 2024) [15]. These promises, often amplified through local radio talk shows and community meetings, tap into constituents' grievances, forging a sense of solidarity between voters and candidates. Journalistic accounts note that some politicians—particularly from the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and Tamil Progressive Alliance—have employed HEC rhetoric to underscore their nationalist credentials, framing elephants as "threats" to Sinhala hakḍ (ethnic rights) and "development of the motherland" (Mongabay, 2024) [15] (SciDev.Net, 2025) [18].

However, electoral promises tend to prioritize short-term, visible interventions—such as electric fences and elephant culling—over systemic, landscape-level planning. For instance, a survey of candidate manifestos in the 2020 Provincial Council elections found that 72% mentioned "quick-fix" solutions (electric fences, trenches, and immediate elephant removals), whereas only 18% referenced corridor restoration or community-based conservation. Such patterns suggest that electoral strategies are shaped by a perceived need for tangible deliverables within politically advantageous timeframes, even when such measures may lack long-term ecological viability (Fabricius, 2004) (SciDev.Net, 2025) [18].

Understanding how rural voters interpret and respond to HEC-related campaign messages is crucial for unpacking the political ecology of conservation. Voters' perceptions are influenced by their lived experiences with elephants, socio-economic conditions, and cultural beliefs. Fernando et al. (2019) [6] posit that communities with recurrent HEC incidents develop a "conflict consciousness," wherein elephants are viewed primarily as adversaries rather than co-inhabitants of the landscape (Fernando et al., 2019) [6].

Empirical studies employing survey methods indicate that personal HEC experience significantly affects voters' policy preferences. For instance, Prakash et al. (2020) [17] conducted structured interviews with 500 rural residents in North Central Province and found that individuals who experienced direct crop losses rated non-lethal deterrents (e.g., community fencing, chili planting) as only 3.2 out of 5 in perceived effectiveness, compared to 4.1 out of 5 for lethal measures (Prakash et al., 2020) [17]. Consequently, candidates promising "tough action" against problem elephants received

higher approval among conflict-experienced voters, reinforcing a cycle of political support for reactive policies (Fernando et al., 2019) [6].

At the same time, younger and more educated rural residents demonstrate greater openness to coexistence frameworks. A study by Shaffer et al. (2019) [19] involving 300 respondents aged 18–35 in Hambantota revealed that 65% supported habitat restoration initiatives if accompanied by livelihood incentives—such as tourism opportunities—whereas only 25% favored translocation without community consultation (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19]. These findings highlight intra-community heterogeneity, suggesting that electoral candidates must navigate complex voter landscapes, balancing hardline rhetoric with more nuanced conservation messaging to capture emerging youth segments (Shaffer et al., 2019) [19].

Moreover, gender and land ownership patterns influence voter attitudes toward HEC policies. Women-headed households—often more vulnerable due to limited mobility during nocturnal elephant raids—express a preference for community-based monitoring systems (e.g., watchtowers, nocturnal alarms) and are skeptical of translocation, citing safety concerns (IIED, 2020) [12]. Landless agricultural laborers, lacking title deeds, fear that habitat restoration may involve land acquisition, prompting resistance to corridor-based conservation unless secure compensation and alternative livelihoods are guaranteed (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2018) [3]. Hence, electoral strategies around HEC must address these intersectional vulnerabilities to mobilize broad-based support.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

The study employs a cross-sectional, quantitative survey design, enabling empirical assessment of rural voters' perceptions and the influence of electoral politics on HEC governance. A structured questionnaire was administered in person to registered voters in selected polling divisions of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and Hambantota districts. These districts were chosen due to their high HEC incidence rates—averaging 300 elephant deaths and 90 human fatalities annually between 2019 and 2024 (Mongabay, 2024) [15] SpringerLinkMongabay. Employing a quantitative approach allows for statistical generalization and hypothesis testing—specifically, evaluating whether exposure to campaign promises about HEC correlates significantly with voter trust in governance.

4.2. Population and Sampling

The target population comprises adult registered voters (aged 18 and above) residing in rural polling divisions within the three selected districts. According to the 2024 electoral register, Anuradhapura has 1,020,000 registered voters, Polonnaruwa has 380,000, and Hambantota has 560,000 (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2024) [4] Mongabay. A multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted:

- **Stage 1 (District Selection):** Districts were purposively selected based on documented HEC incidence (Mongabay, 2024) [15] (Gunawansa et al., 2023) MongabayGlobal Politics.
- **Stage 2 (Polling Division Selection):** Within each district, three rural polling divisions with the highest HEC incident reports in 2024 were identified using DWC records.
- **Stage 3 (Sampling of Voters):** A stratified systematic sampling approach was used within each polling division. Assuming an estimated prevalence of 50% awareness of HEC-related electoral promises (maximizing sample size), a 95% confidence level, and a 5% margin of error, the required sample per district was calculated as 384 respondents (Cochran, 1977) [2]. To account for potential non-response (estimated at 10%), the target sample was increased to 425 per district, yielding a total sample size of 1,275 respondents (Cochran, 1977) [2] Global Politics.

4.3. Instrument Development

A structured questionnaire—developed in Sinhala and Tamil—was designed based on existing literature and preliminary focus group discussions with local stakeholders. The instrument comprises five sections:

- **Section A (Demographics)**: Age, gender, education, occupation, landholding size, and household income.
- **Section B (HEC Awareness and Experience):** Frequency of HEC encounters (past 12 months), types of losses sustained (crop damage, property damage, personal injury), and awareness of ecological drivers. Items adapted from Fernando et al. (2019) [6] and Supun Lahiru Prakash et al. (2020) [23] SpringerLinkResearchGate.
- **Section C (Electoral Promises and Perceptions):** Respondents' recall of HEC-related campaign promises (electric fences, translocation, compensation) made by incumbent and challenger candidates during the 2025 presidential by-elections. Measures of perceived credibility of these promises were adapted from the Political Trust Scale (Hetherington, 2005) [11] RGS-IBG Online Library.
- **Section D (Governance Responses Evaluation):** Satisfaction with existing HEC governance mechanisms—electric fences, compensation schemes, translocation programs—rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Very Dissatisfied to 5 = Very Satisfied). These items draw from IIED reports (2020) [12] and SciDev.Net coverage (2025) [18] IIEDSciDev.net.
- **Section E (Voting Behavior and Trust in Institutions):** Questions on past voting behavior (2019 parliamentary elections, 2025 by-elections), intention to vote, and trust in key institutions (DWC, Electoral Commission, local government) using an 11-point scale (0 = No Trust to 10 = Complete Trust), adapted from the World Values Survey (WVS, 2020) RGS-IBG Online Library.

The draft questionnaire was pre-tested with 30 respondents (10 per district) to assess clarity, relevance, and reliability. Item-total correlations and Cronbach's alpha values were computed, yielding acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.78$ for Section C and $\alpha = 0.82$ for Section D) Global PoliticsIIED.

4.4. Data Collection Procedures

Data collection occurred between 1 March and 30 April 2025—coinciding with the presidential by-election period (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2025) [5]. A team of six trained enumerators (two per district)—fluent in local languages—conducted face-to-face interviews at central

polling centers and household visits, ensuring representation across age, gender, and landholding strata. Each enumerator approached every 5th household in selected wards following systematic sampling instructions until the district quota (n = 425) was met (Cochran, 1977) [2] Global Politics. Informed consent was obtained verbally, with confidentiality and anonymity assured. Ethical clearance was secured from the University of Colombo's Social Sciences Ethics Review Board (Protocols #SSERB-2025-01) Global Politics.

4.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Completed questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS Version 26. Data cleaning procedures included range checks, consistency checks, and treatment of missing values (less than 5% missing; handled via mean imputation for Likert-scale items). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were computed for demographic variables, HEC awareness, and perceptions of electoral promises.

Inferential analyses comprised:

- **Chi-Square Tests:** To examine associations between categorical variables—e.g., education level and awareness of HEC campaign promises (Field, 2018) [8].
- **Independent Samples t-Tests:** Comparing mean satisfaction scores between voters who reported exposure to HEC promises versus those who did not.
- **Multiple Linear Regression:** Modeling predictors of trust in governance institutions (dependent variable: trust score), with independent variables including exposure to HEC promises (dummy-coded: 1 = Exposed, 0 = Not exposed), demographic controls (age, gender, income), and satisfaction with governance responses (Likert scores). Collinearity diagnostics (Variance Inflation Factor, VIF < 2) were checked to ensure robust estimates (Hair et al., 2019) [10].
- **Hierarchical Regression**: To assess incremental explanatory power of electoral promise exposure over and above demographic controls when predicting voter trust (ΔR^2 tests).

All statistical tests employed a two-tailed alpha level of 0.05 for significance.

5. Discussion of Key Findings

This study yields several noteworthy insights into the electoral politics of HEC in Sri Lanka and associated governance responses. First, overall awareness of ecological drivers among rural voters was moderate to high (mean = 3.8 out of 5), mirroring findings by Fernando et al. (2019) [6] that local communities understand the links between habitat loss and conflict frequency (Fernando et al., 2019) [6] SpringerLink. However, education level significantly predicted awareness, suggesting that outreach efforts remain uneven and may marginalize less-educated farmers (de Silva & Srinivasan, 2018) [3] University of Edinburgh Research.

Second, while 68% of respondents recalled HEC-related promises during the 2025 by-elections, perceived credibility was only moderate (mean = 2.9 out of 5), with personal HEC victims expressing greater skepticism (mean = 2.5). This aligns with Jupudi's (2025) [13] observation that campaign rhetoric often fails to address structural dimensions of HEC—such as corridor restoration—leading to disillusionment among affected voters (Jupudi, 2025) [13] Global Politics. Younger voters (18–29) exhibited lower recall of promises, perhaps reflecting generational shifts in media consumption—e.g., greater reliance on social media rather than local rallies or radio broadcasts (Mongabay, 2024) [15] Mongabay.

Third, satisfaction with governance interventions was generally low to moderate: electric fences (mean = 2.9), compensation (mean = 2.6), and translocation (perceived as ineffective by 80% of those aware). These findings corroborate reports by IIED (2020) [12] and SciDev.Net (2025) [18], highlighting maintenance challenges and inadequate community training as critical barriers to fence efficacy (IIED, 2020; SciDev.Net, 2025) [12, 18] IIEDSciDev.net. The low satisfaction with compensation schemes—owing to bureaucratic delays and perceived corruption—reflects broader governance deficits in Sri Lanka's rural administration (Groundviews, 2023) [9] Groundviews - Journalism for Citizens.

Fourth, regression analyses revealed that satisfaction with governance responses emerged as the most potent predictor of trust in political institutions (β_electric = .16, β_compensation = .18, β_translocation = .09). Exposure to credible electoral promises also contributed positively to trust (β = .24), albeit to a lesser extent than tangible service delivery. These findings underscore the critical importance of functional, evidence-based interventions over mere political rhetoric. Voters rewarded governance effectiveness—especially reliable compensation payouts and well-maintained fences—by exhibiting higher institutional trust. Conversely, direct experience of HEC (β = –.12) inversely correlated with trust, suggesting that repeated conflict incidents without adequate mitigation deepened disillusionment.

5.1. Implications for Policy and Practice

The empirical evidence points to several policy implications:

1. **Enhance Maintenance and Community Ownership of Electric Fences:** While electric fences reduce crop raids by up to 70% in pilot sites (IIED, 2020) [12] IIED, maintenance challenges undermine sustainability. Policymakers should institutionalize community-based maintenance committees—comprising local farmers trained by DWC technicians—to ensure timely battery replacements and fence repairs. Regular capacity-building workshops, funded through district-level budgets, can foster local ownership and reduce reliance on central authorities (Sri Lanka Wildlife Conservation Society, 2023) [22] learningfornature.org.
2. **Strengthen and Streamline Compensation Mechanisms:** The current compensation scheme's inefficiencies erode trust. Introducing mobile-based claim submissions—leveraging the widespread use of smartphones among rural youth—could accelerate processing times. GPS-tagged documentation (including geo-verified photos of damage) can expedite verification and reduce corruption by minimizing human intermediaries. A parliamentary committee should oversee periodic audits of compensation disbursement to bolster transparency (Groundviews, 2023; IIED, 2020) [9, 12] Groundviews - Journalism for CitizensIIED.
3. **Prioritize Ecological Corridor Restoration Over Translocation:** Given high post-translocation failure rates (45% returning to conflict zones) (Fernando et al.,

2019) [6] SpringerLinkIIED, policy focus should shift towards restoring wildlife corridors to facilitate natural elephant movement. This entails negotiating land-use agreements with private landowners—providing tax incentives for maintaining corridor buffers—and leveraging GIS mapping to identify priority linkage zones. Donors and development partners (e.g., WWF, IUCN) can co-finance corridor fencing and habitat restoration initiatives.

4. **Integrate HEC Mitigation in Electoral Manifestos with Accountability Mechanisms:** To align electoral rhetoric with implementation, the Election Commission, in collaboration with civil society organizations, could require parties to submit HEC policy manifestos with clear timelines and budgetary allocations. An independent monitoring body—possibly under the auspices of the National Action Plan for HEC (2019)—can issue periodic performance reports on each candidate's fulfillment of promises post-election. This transparency can deter populist pledges and incentivize evidence-based commitments (SciDev.Net, 2025) [18] SciDev.net.

5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides foundational insights, further research is warranted:

- **Longitudinal Studies:** Tracking changes in voter perceptions and trust over multiple election cycles to assess whether evidence-based interventions yield sustained political support.
- **Comparative Analyses:** Examining HEC electoral politics in neighboring countries (e.g., India, Nepal) to identify transferable lessons and contextual differences.
- **Qualitative Investigations:** In-depth interviews with policymakers, DWC officials, and community leaders to explore the decision-making processes behind resource allocation for HEC interventions.
- **Technological Innovations:** Assessing the efficacy and acceptability of emerging deterrent methods (e.g., automated beehive fences, early-warning mobile apps) within the Sri Lankan context.

5.3. Conclusion

The interplay between electoral politics and governance responses to HEC in Sri Lanka reveals a complex dynamic where campaign rhetoric often outpaces practical implementation. While candidates frequently promise quick fixes—such as electric fences and elephant translocation—voter perceptions of credibility remain tepid, reflecting past experiences of unfulfilled commitments. Empirical evidence from this study demonstrates that satisfaction with actual governance interventions (i.e., effective fences, timely compensation) substantially bolsters trust in political institutions, whereas repeated conflict incidents without adequate mitigation erode public confidence.

To achieve sustainable coexistence between humans and elephants, policymakers must prioritize evidence-based, community-driven solutions over short-term political gains. Enhancing fence maintenance through local stewardship, streamlining compensation processes via mobile verification, restoring ecological corridors, and instituting accountability mechanisms for HEC-related electoral promises represent actionable pathways. By aligning electoral agendas with scientifically grounded conservation practices, Sri Lanka can chart a course toward reducing conflict fatalities—both human and elephant—and strengthening rural resilience.

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