Madras HC tells Keralam to use AI cameras to save elephants on tracks

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News

A Madras High Court Division Bench of Justices N. Satish Kumar and G.K. Muthukumar, hearing petitions seeking steps to stop wild elephants being killed by trains in the forest stretch on the Tamil Nadu–Keralam border, issued directions to the Keralam government (reported 21 November 2026). Keralam said three underpasses for elephants to cross the tracks had been sanctioned and that tendering had begun for works between Madukkarai and Kanjikode; the Railways said Keralam had agreed to only two locations and that it was awaiting the State's written approval (DT Next). Praising Tamil Nadu's existing use of AI cameras, the court directed Keralam to implement similar AI camera surveillance on railway tracks in its forest areas within two months. Keralam was told to give written approval for the agreed underpass locations immediately, and the Railways to build them and file an action-taken report at the next hearing. The case will next be heard on 5 February 2027 (Daily Thanthi, Dinamalar, DT Next).

Key facts for the exam

Point	Details
Court	Madras High Court – Justices N. Satish Kumar, G.K. Muthukumar
Reported	21 November 2026
Key direction	AI camera surveillance on Keralam's forest rail tracks within 2 months

Point	Details
Underpasses	Keralam: 3 sanctioned; Railways: only 2 sites agreed – written approval ordered at once
Railways told	Build underpasses, file action-taken report
TN model	Madukkarai range: thermal cameras on 12 towers, 7 km, ₹7.24 crore (Feb 2024)
Earlier deaths	11 elephants on these tracks since 2008 (Down To Earth)
Next hearing	5 February 2027

Background

- Geography: The Coimbatore–Palakkad railway (two tracks, A and B lines) runs through the Madukkarai–Walayar forests near the Keralam border, in the Palakkad Gap region of the Western Ghats. About 130 trains run daily, and elephants cross nearly 1,000 times a year, Down To Earth reports.
- Tamil Nadu's AI system: In the Madukkarai range of Coimbatore Forest Division, thermal and normal cameras were fitted on 12 tall towers, 500 m apart, along the most vulnerable 7 km of track (₹7.24 crore; February 2024). When an elephant nears the track, forest and railway staff are alerted and trains slow down. Down To Earth describes it as India's first such AI-based system.
- Jurisdiction: The case has been before the Madras High Court since at least 2022; judges inspected the Ettimadai–Walayar tracks on 10 April 2022. The line is run by the Palakkad division of Southern Railway (HQ Chennai). Under Article 226(2) (added by the 15th Amendment, 1963), a High Court may issue directions to a government or authority outside its territory if the cause of action arises wholly or partly within it.
- Elephant protection: The Asian elephant is 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List and is in Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (the Act has four Schedules after the 2022 amendment). The Centre's Project Elephant began in 1991–92; India has 33 Elephant Reserves (MoEFCC).
- Numbers: India's first DNA-based Synchronous All India Elephant Estimation (SAIEE 2021–25, released Oct 2025) put wild elephants at 22,446. Karnataka (6,013), Assam (4,159), Tamil Nadu (3,136) and Keralam (2,785) lead.

Tamil Nadu link: The order holds up the AI system set up by the Tamil Nadu Forest Department in the Madukkarai range as the model for Keralam. Down To Earth reported (March 2025) that no wild elephant had been killed on the two tracks since it was commissioned.

Frequently asked questions

What is this news about?

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What are the key facts to remember for the exam?

Court: Madras High Court – Justices N. Satish Kumar, G.K. Muthukumar; Reported: 21 November 2026; Key direction: AI camera surveillance on Keralam's forest rail tracks within 2 months; Underpasses: Keralam: 3 sanctioned; Railways: only 2 sites agreed – written approval ordered at once.

What is the background to this news?

Geography: The Coimbatore–Palakkad railway (two tracks, A and B lines) runs through the Madukkarai–Walayar forests near the Keralam border, in the Palakkad Gap region of the Western Ghats.

Practice questions (with answers)

1. Tamil Nadu's AI early-warning system (2024) against elephant–train collisions is in which forest range of Coimbatore?

A) Sathyamangalam

B) Hosur

C) Gudalur

D) Madukkarai

Answer: D – Explanation: Madukkarai – thermal cameras on 12 towers along 7 km of track, ₹7.24 crore; launched in February 2024 (TN Government).

2. What is the conservation status of the Asian elephant (Elephas maximus) on the IUCN Red List?

A) Vulnerable

B) Endangered

C) Critically Endangered

D) Near Threatened

Answer: B – Explanation: Endangered. The African savanna elephant is also Endangered, while the African forest elephant is Critically Endangered.

3. When did the Centre's 'Project Elephant', to protect elephants, their habitats and corridors, begin?

A) 1973

B) 1986

C) 1992

D) 2002

Answer: C – Explanation: 1991–92, as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme. 1973 saw Project Tiger. India now has 33 Elephant Reserves (MoEFCC).

4. As per India's first DNA-based elephant estimation (2025), which State has the most wild elephants?

A) Karnataka

B) Assam

C) Keralam

D) Tamil Nadu

Answer: A – Explanation: Karnataka (6,013); Assam 4,159; Tamil Nadu 3,136; Keralam 2,785. India's total is 22,446 (Oct 2025).

5. In which Schedule of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 is the elephant listed, giving it the highest protection?

A) Schedule IV

B) Schedule III

C) Schedule II

D) Schedule I

Answer: D – Explanation: Schedule I – the highest protection and stiffest penalties. After the 2022 amendment the Act has four Schedules.

Sources: Daily Thanthi, 21 Nov 2026; Dinamalar, 21 Nov 2026; DT Next, 21 Nov 2026; The News Minute, 10 Apr 2022; TN Government press release No. 258, 9 Feb 2024 (kygcms.tn.gov.in); Down To Earth; PIB / MoEFCC (SAIEE elephant estimation). © Shanmugam IAS Academy.