

Conservation status of Reptilia in Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve, Western Ghats, India and its environment

Abstract

We studied and surveyed reptilian fauna in Agasthyamalai Biosphere reserve, Western Ghats of India. There are about 78 species of reptiles inhabited in the reserve, out of which 15 species are threatened as per IUCN, 2023 (four species are listed as endangered, six species are listed as vulnerable and five species are listed as near threatened). The reserve harbors three species of turtle and tortoises, 31 species of lizards under five families and 44 species of snakes under six families. There are about 37 species of reptiles which are endemic in the region comprises one species of Geoemydidae, six species of Gekkonidae, eight species of Agamidae, two species of Scincidae, seven species of Uropeltidae, eight species of Colubridae, one species of Pareidae, one species of Elapidae and three species of Viperidae.

Keywords: Agasthyamalai, Conservation, Endangered, Reptilia, Species.

Introduction

Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve is one of the rich faunal and floral assemblage, spread over an area of 3500 km² of which 1672.36 km² is in Tamil Nadu side and the rest 1827.64 km² is in Kerala side. Pathanamthitta, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram Districts in Kerala and Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari Districts in Tamil Nadu are the overall boundary of the reserve. The reserve lies Between 8° 8' to 9° 10' North Latitude and 76° 52' to 77° 34' East Longitude. Central location is 8°39'N 77°13'E . It comprises many wildlife sanctuary namely Neyyar, Peppara and Shendurney and their adjoining areas are Achencoil, Thenmala, Konni, Punalur, in addition Thiruvananthapuram and Agasthyavanam are some special division in Kerala. The famous tiger reserve Kalakkad Mundnthurai Tiger Reserve in Tamil Nadu is also form part of the reserve.

The reserve comprises of tropical wet evergreen forests, moist deciduous forests and montane rain forests and shoal. It is home to 79 species of mammals (out of which 20 species are endemic), 45 species of amphibians (out of which 30 species are endemic), 46 species of fishes (out of which 10 species are endemic) and 337 species of birds (out of which 20 species are endemic). Some of the rare animals like Tiger, Ancient Elephant and Nilgiri Tahr are the major attractions in the reserve.

The seasons are also vary in the reserve where summer is very warm and humid with showers due to southwest monsoon and winters are generally cool and dry. Summer starts in April and continue up to July and temperatures rises up to 35° C. Due to its location at tip of southern Indian Peninsula mainly experiencing two seasons of monsoon one is south west monsoon which bring rains in May and up to July and another is North-east monsoons which brings rain during October and November. The months between October and January marks the winter season where temperature hardly drop below 16° C.

We presented here 78 species of reptiles inhabited in the reserve, out of which 15 species are threatened as per IUCN (four species are listed as endangered, six species are listed as vulnerable and five species are listed as near threatened. The objectives of the present study are (i) To study status Reptilian fauna in Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve. (ii) To enumerate diversity and distribution of reptilian fauna in this environment.

Methods

Study area

The present study is an outcome of surveys conducted by the author and other survey team from the centre in various ranges namely Kalakkad, Mundanthurai, Ambasamudram, Pabanasam, Thirukurugudi, Alagiyapandiapuram, Boothapandi, Kalial, Kulasekaram and Vellimalai spread across Kanyakumari, Tenkasi and Tirunelveli Districts of Tamil Nadu and also based on published literature.

Survey methods

The survey teams spent 15-20 days on an average in the field during each survey for the period from April, 2018 to March, 2022. We employed day time opportunistic visual encounter method to site and locate active geckos, agamids, skinks, snakes and they were searched under boulders, tree holes, under leaf litters, and decomposed wooden logs. Nocturnal opportunistic visual encounter methods were used to search night snakes, geckos with the help of bright beam

lights and head lamps. Collected samples were photographed, on site euthanized, fixed in alcohol for 24 hours and preserved in 70% alcohol.

The data during day time was confined to number of individuals, nearest habitats, other species in the same habitat etc was studied. The animals were photographed using a NIKON Camera, geographical coordinates and altitude were recorded using Garmin-16. The different species of Reptiles were identified using field book [4], [14], [19].

Results and Discussion

In the present study there are 78 species of reptiles under 14 families along with their habitat and conservation status as per IUCN, 2023 and IWPA, 2022 are given in Table 1. The reptilian fauna in the ecosystems are represented by turtle and tortoises, lizards and snakes. Majority of the species are occur in terrestrial/forest habitat except few species occur in aquatic condition namely fresh water pond turtle and common keel back snakes, few species are arboreal in nature like *Hemidactylus leschenaultii* observed always rest on tree branches, flying snake, *Chrysopelea ornata* and Malabar pit viper, *Craspedocephalus malabaricus* observed on tree branches at different localities during the survey.

Table.1. Checklist of Reptiles in Agasthyamalai Biosphere Reserve and conservation status

S. No	Class/family	Species	Common name	Habitat	Conservation status as per	
					IWPA, 2022	IUCN, 2023
1	Order: Testudines Suborder: Cryptodira Family: Geoemydidae	<i>Melanochelys trijuga</i> (Schweigger, 1812)	Indian black turtle	Aquatic	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
2		<i>Vijayachelys sylvatica</i> (Henderson, 1912)	Cochin forest cane turtle	Terrestrial/ Forest	Sch.I (Pt.c)	EN
3	Family: Testudinidae	<i>Geochelone elegans</i> (Schoepff, 1795)	Indian star tortoise	Terrestrial/ Forest	Sch.I (Pt.c)	VU
4	Order: Squamata Suborder: Sauria Family:Gekkonidae	<i>Hemidactylus leschenaultii</i> Dumeril & Bibron, 1836	Bark gecko	Arboreal		LC
5		<i>Hemidactylus triedrus</i> (Daudin, 1802)	Dakota's leaf toad gecko	Terrestrial		LC

6		<i>Dravidogecko anamallensis</i> (Gunther, 1875)	Anamalai gecko	Forest		NT
7		<i>Hemidactylus frenatus</i> Dumeril & Bibron, 1836	Common house gecko	Terrestrial		LC
8		<i>Hemidactylus parvimaculatus</i> Deraniyagala, 1953	Spotted house gecko	Terrestrial		LC
9		<i>Cnemaspis indica</i> Gray, 1846	Indian day gecko	Forest		VU
10		<i>Cnemaspis ornata</i> (Beddome, 1870)	Ornate day gecko	Forest		NT
11		<i>Cnemaspis beddomei</i> (Theobald, 1876)	Beddome's day gecko	Forest		DD
12		<i>Cnemaspis mysoriensis</i> (Jerdon, 1854)	Mysore day gecko	Forest		LC
13		<i>Hemidactylus maculatus</i> Dumeril & Bibron, 1836	Spotted leaf rock gecko	Forest.		LC
14	Family: Chamaeleonidae	<i>Chamaeleo zeylanicus</i> Laurenti, 1768	Indian chamaeleon	Terrestrial	Sch.I (Pt.C)	LC
15	Family: Agamidae	<i>Calotes calotes</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Green forest lizard	Terrestrial		LC
16		<i>Calotes grandisquamis</i> Gunther, 1875	Large scaled forest lizard	Forest		LC
17		<i>Monilesaurus ellioti</i> Gunther, 1864	Elliot's forest lizard	Terrestrial		LC
18		<i>Agasthyagama beddomii</i> (Boulenger, 1885)	Indian kangaroo lizard	Terrestrial		EN
19		<i>Sitana ponticeriana</i> Cuvier, 1829	Pondicherry Fan throated lizard	Terrestrial		LC
20		<i>Calotes versicolor</i> (Daudin, 1802)	Common garden lizard	Terrestrial		LC
21		<i>Calotes nemoricola</i> Jerdon, 1853	Nilgiri forest lizard	Terrestrial		LC
22		<i>Monilasaurus rouxii</i> Dumeril & Bibron, 1837	Roux;s forest lizard	Forest		LC
23		<i>Psammophilus blanfordanus</i> (Stoliczka, 1871)	Blanford's rock agama	Terrestrial		LC
24		<i>Psammophilus dorsalis</i> (Griffith & Pidgeon, 1831)	South Indian rock agama	Terrestrial		LC
25		<i>Draco dussumieri</i> Dumeril & Bibron, 1837	Southern flying lizard	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC

26		<i>Pseudocalotes andamanensis</i> (Boulenger, 1891)	Green crestless forest lizard	Forest		VU
27	Family: Scincidae	<i>Kaestlea travanocorica</i> (Beddome, 1870)	Travancore ground skink	Forest		LC
28		<i>Sphenomorphus dussumierie</i> (Dumeril & Bibron, 1839)	Dussumier's litter skink	Terrestrial		LC
29		<i>Riopa punctata</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Dotted garden skink	Terrestrial		LC
30		<i>Eutropis carinata</i> (Schneider, 1801)	Common skink	Terrestrial		LC
31		<i>Eutropis macularia</i> (Blyth, 1853)	Bronze skink	Terrestrial		LC
32		<i>Eutropis beddomei</i> (Jerdon, 1870)	Beddome's mabuya	Terrestrial		LC
33	Family: Lacertidae	<i>Ophisops leschenaultii</i> (Milne-Edwards, 1829)	Leschenault's lacerta	Forest		LC
34	Family: Varanidae	<i>Varanus bengalensis</i> (Daudin, 1802)	Indian monitor	Terrestrial	Sch.I (Pt.c)	NT
35	Suborder: Ophidia Family: Typhlopidae	<i>Indotyphlops braminus</i> (Daudin, 1803)	Brahminy blind snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
36	Family: Uropeltidae	<i>Melanophidium punctatum</i> (Beddome, 1871)	Beddome's black earth snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	VU
37		<i>Teretrurus rhodogaster</i> (Wall, 1921)	Palni mountain burrowing snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
38		<i>Rhinophis sanguineus</i> Beddome, 1863	Salty earth snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
39		<i>Uropeltis ellioti</i> (Gray, 1858)	Elliot's earth snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
40		<i>Uropeltis liura</i> (Gunther, 1875)	Gunther's earth snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	DD
41		<i>Uropeltis articeps</i> (Gunther, 1875)	Tirunelveli earth snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	NE
42		<i>Uropeltis ocellata</i> (Beddome, 1863)	Ocellated earth snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
43	Family: Pareidae	<i>Xylophis deepaki</i> Narayanan, Mohapatra, Balan, Das & Gower, 2021	Deepak's wood snake	Terrestrial		NE
44	Family: Colubridae	<i>Ahaetulla dispar</i> (Gunther, 1864)	Gunther's vine snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	NT
45		<i>Ahaetulla nasuta</i> (Lacepede, 1789)	Green vine snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC

46		<i>Ahaetulla perroteti</i> (Dumeril, Bibron & Dumeril, 1854)	Western Ghats bronze back	Grassland	Sch.II (Pt.c)	EN
47		<i>Ahaetulla pulverulenta</i> (Dumeril, Bibron & Dumeril, 1854)	Brown speckled whipsnake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
48		<i>Amphiesma stolatum</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Buff striped keelback	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
49		<i>Hebius beddomei</i> (Gunther, 1864)	Beddome's keelback	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
50		<i>Dendrelaphis grandoculis</i> (Boulenger, 1890)	Large eyed bronze back	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
51		<i>Dendrelaphis tristis</i> (Daudin, 1803)	Common bronze back tree snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
52		<i>Lycodon travancoricus</i> (Beddome, 1870)	Travancore wolf snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
53		<i>Lycodon aulicus</i> (Linnaeus, 1754)	Common wolf snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
54		<i>Ptyas mocosa</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Oriental rat snake	Terrestrial	Sch.I (Pt.c)	LC
55		<i>Coelognathus helena monticollaris</i> Ganesh et al, 2018	Trinket snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
56		<i>Boiga forstenii</i> (Dumeril, Bibron & Dumeril, 1854)	Forsten' cat snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
57		<i>Boiga trigonata</i> (Bechstein, 1802)	Common cat snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
58		<i>Chrysopelea ornata</i> (Shaw, 1802)	Golden flying snake	Arboreal	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
59		<i>Liopeltis calamaria</i> (Gunther, 1858)	Calamaria reed snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
60		<i>Rhabdophis plumbicolor</i> (Cantor, 1839)	Green keelback	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
61		<i>Oligodon arnensis</i> (Shaw, 1802)	Common kukri snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
62		<i>Oligodon brevicauda</i> Gunther, 1862	Shorthead kukri snake	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	VU
63		<i>Oligodon taeniolatus</i> (Jerdon, 1853)	Streaked kukri snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
64		<i>Fowlea piscator</i> (Schneider, 1799)	Checkered keelback	Aquatic	Sch.I (Pt.c)	LC
65		<i>Proahaetulla antiqua</i> Mallik, Achyuthan, ganesh, Pal, Vijayakumar and Shanker, 2019	–	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	EN
66		<i>Ahaetulla travancorica</i> Mallik, Srikanthan,Pal,	–	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	NE

		D'Souza, Shanker and Ganesh, 2020				
67	Family: Elapidae	<i>Calliophis nigrescens</i> (Gunther, 1862)	Black coral snake	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
68		<i>Naja naja</i> (Linnaeus, 1758)	Spectacled cobra	Terrestrial	Sch.I (Pt.c)	LC
69		<i>Bungarus caeruleus</i> (Schneider, 1801)	Indian krait	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
70		<i>Ophiophagus hannah</i> (Cantor, 1836)	King cobra	Terrestrial	Sch.I (Pt.c)	VU
71	Family: Viperidae	<i>Craspedocephalus macrolepis</i> Beddome, 1862	Large scaled pit viper	Arboreal	Sch.II (Pt.c)	NT
72		<i>Craspedocephalus malabaricus</i> (Jerdon, 1854)	Malabarian pit viper	Arboreal	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
73		<i>Craspedocephalus gramineus</i> (Shaw, 1802)	Common bamboo viper	Arboreal	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
74		<i>Hypnale hypnale</i> (Merrem, 1820)	Hump nosed pit viper	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
75		<i>Craspedocephalus strigatus</i> Gray, 1842	Horseshoe pit viper	Terrestrial	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC
76		<i>Craspedocephalus peltopelor</i> Mallik, Srikanthan, Ganesh, Vijayakumar, Campbell, Malhotra and Shanker, 2021	–	Arboreal	Sch.II (Pt.c)	NE
77		<i>Craspedocephalus travancoricus</i> Mallik, Srikanthan, Ganesh, Vijayakumar, Campbell, Malhotra and Shanker, 2021	-		Sch.II (Pt.c)	NE
78		<i>Echis carinatus</i> (Schneider, 1801)	Saw scaled viper	Forest	Sch.II (Pt.c)	LC

Western ghats are known to rich assemblage of faunal wealth. Previous studies by many researchers reported occurrence of reptiles in different habitats. [6] in their study from KMTR recorded 17 species of forest floor reptiles by primary and secondary quadrats and overall reported 55 species of forest floor reptiles from the reserve. [7] reported 8 species of Agamid lizards from KMTR. [16] in their study on effect of road kills on wildlife population in KMTR reported 1450 incidences of road kills belonging to 29 species during different seasons. [18] studied population density of agamid lizards in human modified habitats where the encounter rate of *Monilesaurus ellioti* is higher in Vanilla plant than rainforest fragments, on the contrary *Draco dussumieri* density is identical in vanilla and rubber plantation. [17] reported influence

of season on population of three species of pit vipers where high encounter in monsoon compare to summer and winter due to low temperature, high humidity and rich prey base influences distribution of these species. [15] reported new distribution locality for *Calotes nemoricola* from Kudremukh hills of Western Ghats.

Previously [2] recorded 10 species of reptiles from upper Nilgiri Biosphere reserve. [12], [13] reported 26 species of reptiles from Kalakkad Sanctuary. Similarly [3] reported 30 species of reptiles from Kalakkad sanctuary. [10] reported flying lizard in Mundanthurai sanctuary. [11] reported arboreal skink *Dasia haliana* from Mundanathurai sanctuary. [5] reported 21 species of reptiles from Agumbe forest, Western ghats. [1] studied reptiles from Kanyakumari wildlife sanctuary.

There are 16 species of reptiles which are protected under different categories of IUCN [8]. Out of which four species are included under endangered category, six species are listed as vulnerable and five species are included under near threatened category. In addition, two species are listed as data deficient, five species are listed as not evaluated and 56 six species are listed under least concern. This indicates the reserve is very suitable and provide safe habitat for reptiles in its environment. Compared to Eastern ghats western ghats are more protected and composed of virgin forest this leads richness of fauna. During survey we come across thick forest, less disturbance and good habitat. This indicates free movement of animals from one place to another in search of food and other requirements. In addition, the temperature and humidity are also play an important role in the reserve.

There are seven species of reptiles which are protected under schedule I and 41 species under Schedule II of IWPA [9] as shown in Table 1. Among these forest cane turtle, *Vijayachelys sylvatica*, star tortoise, *Geochelone elegans*, Indian Chamealeon, *Chamaeleo zeylanicus*, Indian monitor, *Varanus bengalensis*, Oriental rat snake, *Ptyas mucosa*, checkered keel back *Fowlea piscator*, spectacled cobra, *Naja naja* and king cobra, *Ophiophagus hannah* are protected under Schedule I of IWPA and one species of Geoemydidae, one species of Agamidae, one species of Typhlophidae, seven species of Uropeltidae, 21 species of Colubridae, two species of Elapidae and eight species of Viperidae are protected under Schedule II of IWPA, 2022. It reveals that different species of reptiles occur in different habitat conditions and are protected under different schedules of IWPA.

There are about 37 species of reptiles which are endemic in this unique ecosystem and are represented by one species of turtle, 18 species of lizard of which five species of

Gekkonidae, six species of Agamidae, two species of Scincidae and 15 species of snakes of which seven species of Uropeltidae, eight species of Colubridae, three species of Viperidae, one species of Elapidae and one species of Pareidae.as shown in plate 1. Where lizards are represented by 54% , snakes 44 % and turtles 3% respectively in the reserve. This indicates highest representation of endemism in the reserve.

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Number of species

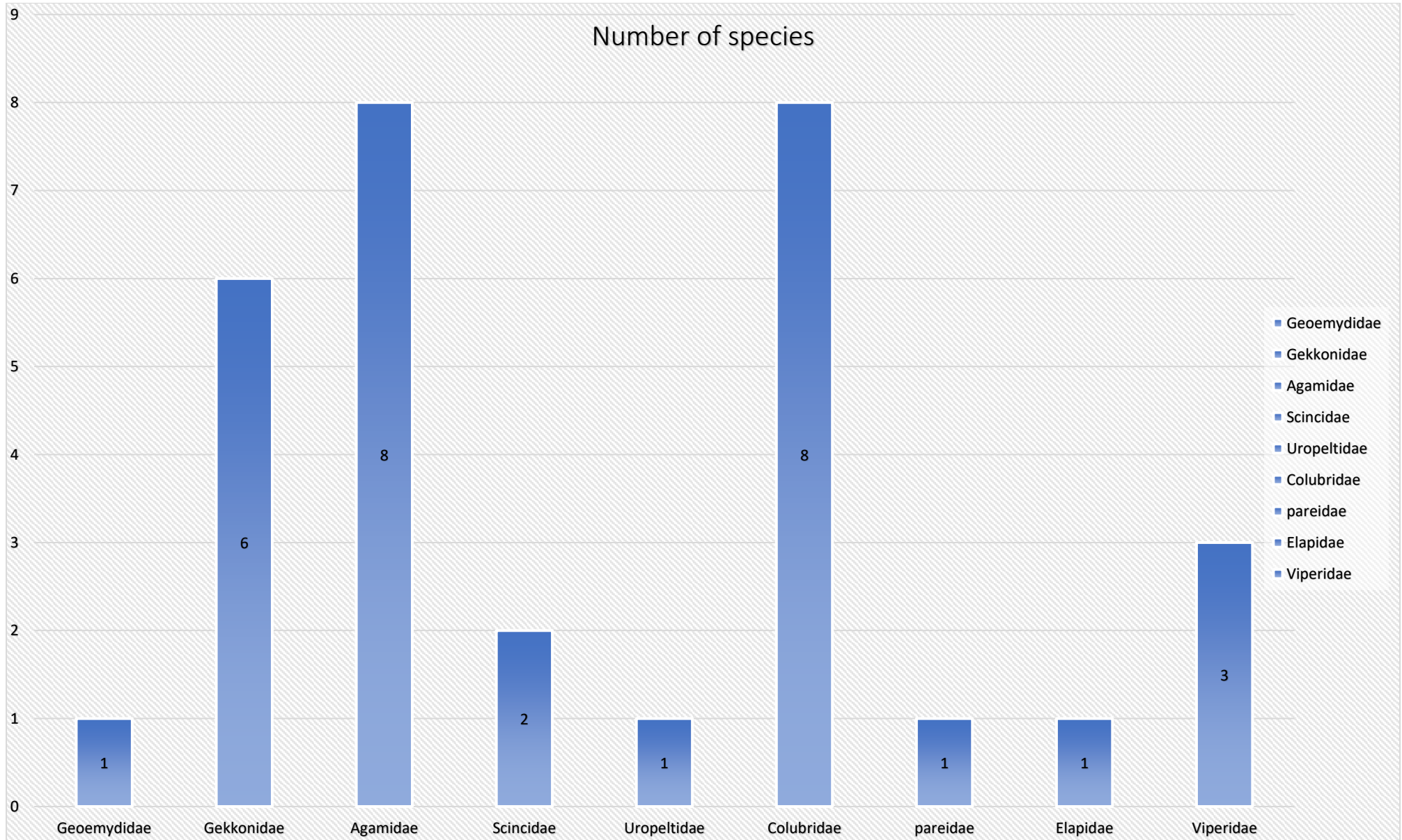


Fig1 . Percentage of endemism of different families of Reptiles in Western ghats.

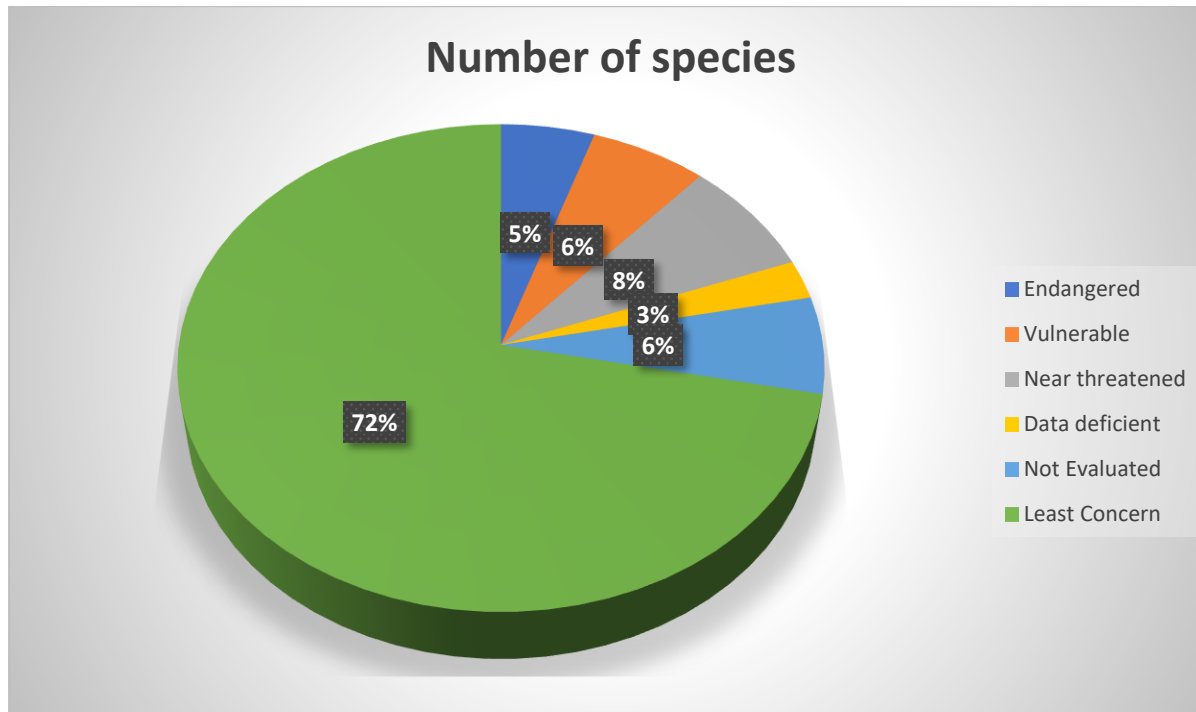


Fig.2. Percentage of threatened species of Reptiles in Agashyamaial Biosphere reserve as per IUCN, 2023.

Conservation implications

The Reptilian fauna occur in different niches i.e different species of reptiles occur from low altitude to high altitude unlike other groups. This distributional pattern in different altitudinal gradient has play an important role in conservation of reptiles in protected areas like Agasthyamalai Biosphre reserve.

Conclusion

The present study provided data on distribution of Reptilian fauna in Agasthyamalai biosphere reserve. During survey noticed at many places virgin forest has been replaced by rubber plantation and extraction of rubber is going on inside the forest. This lead to loss of natural habitat and affect the population of wild fauna. Habitat loss and human interference are the major factors affecting the wild fauna and flora. Further research is necessary in the study area to improve habitat and conservation of Reptilian fauna. It is need to promote coordination among forest authorities and locals to improve wild fauna and flora in this unique environment.

Abbreviations: EN- Endangered, VU- Vulnerable, NT- Near Threatened, LC- Least Concern, NE- Not Evaluated, DD- Data Deficient, KMTR: Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve, IWPA: Indian Wildlife Protection ACT, Sch: Schedule, Pt: Part.

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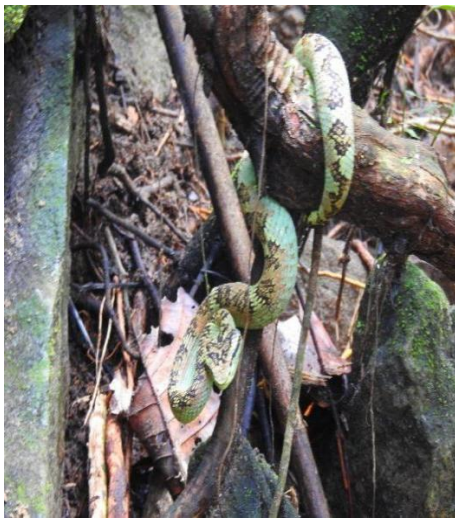
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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

Plate . 1. Different species of Reptiles sighted during survey in Agasthyamalai biosphere reserve.



Craspedocephalus malabaricus



Amphiesma stolatum



Calotes versicolor



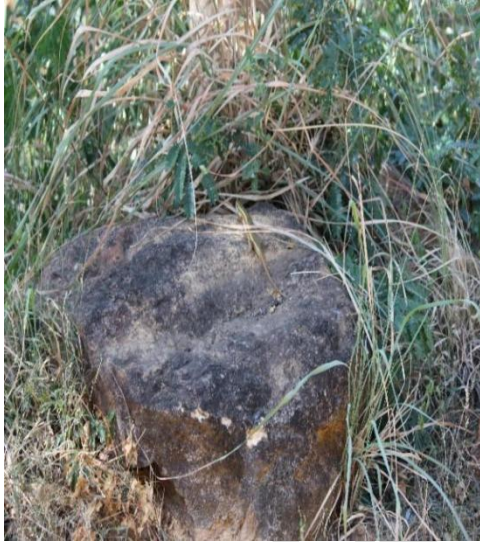
Monilesaurus elliotii



Calotes calotes



Sitana visiri



Eutropis carinata



Hemidactylus leschenaultii



Psammophilus dorsalis



Sphenomorphus dussumieri

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