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Cover: Digital illustration of Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* by Dupati Poojitha. Reference from the picture taken by Rana & Sugandhi.



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Smooth-Coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Mustelidae) observation near a community reservoir in Bannerghatta National Park

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Abstract: The Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* has not previously been documented from Bannerghatta National Park (BNP), southern India and this study confirms its presence from the landscape. A 10-day reconnaissance survey (from 17–26 October 2024) was conducted around the Chikkondanahalli Reservoir, which is located between BNP and the village of Chikkondanahalli (Karnataka) utilizing perimeter walks and community interviews. We gathered data and signs of otter presence and activity, such as spraints, tracks, and feeding remains. On the seventh day of the survey, a direct observation of a group of four otters was made, marking the first recorded sighting in the park. Additional evidence, including fresh spraints and track marks, confirmed otter presence. However, the survey also identified several anthropogenic threats, such as fishing, cattle grazing, and pollution, which may impact the quality of otter habitats and their long-term survival in the area. The results suggest that otters may use reservoirs like Chikkondanahalli as an important habitat with potential movement between water bodies. These findings highlight the need for further research to understand otter movement patterns and habitat preferences in the BNP landscape.

Keywords: Freshwater ecosystems, human-wildlife interactions, Karnataka, new record, observation, species distribution, otter conservation.

Kannada: Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* ಎಂಬ ನೀರ್ನಾಯ ಪ್ರಜಾತಿ ಬನ್ನೇರುಘಟ್ಟ ರಾಷ್ಟ್ರೀಯ ಉದ್ಯಾನವನದಲ್ಲಿ (BNP), ದಕ್ಷಿಣ ಭಾರತದಲ್ಲಿ ಇದುವರೆಗೆ ದಾಖಲಾಗಿರಲಿಲ್ಲ. ಈ ಅಧ್ಯಯನವು ಈ ಪ್ರದೇಶದಲ್ಲಿ ಅದರ ಉಪಸ್ಥಿತಿಯನ್ನು ಮೊದಲ ಬಾರಿಗೆ ದೃಢಪಡಿಸುತ್ತದೆ. 2024ರ ಅಕ್ಟೋಬರ್ 17ರಿಂದ 26ರವರೆಗೆ ಚಿಕ್ಕೊಂಡನಹಳ್ಳಿ ಗ್ರಾಮದ ಸಮೀಪದಲ್ಲಿರುವ ಚಿಕ್ಕೊಂಡನಹಳ್ಳಿ ಕೆರೆ ಸುತ್ತ 10 ದಿನಗಳ ಪ್ರಾಥಮಿಕ ಸಮೀಕ್ಷೆ ನಡೆಸಲಾಯಿತು. ಸಮೀಕ್ಷೆಯ ಸಂದರ್ಭದಲ್ಲಿ ಕೆರೆಯ ಸುತ್ತ ನಡೆ ಸಮೀಕ್ಷೆಗಳು ಹಾಗೂ ಸ್ಥಳೀಯ ಸಮುದಾಯದ ಸದಸ್ಯರೊಂದಿಗೆ ನಡೆಸಿದ ಸಂದರ್ಶನಗಳ ಮೂಲಕ ನೀರ್ನಾಯಗಳ ಉಪಸ್ಥಿತಿಯ ಗುರುತುಗಳಾದ ಮಲದ ಗುರುತುಗಳು (spraints), ಪಾದಚಿಹ್ನೆಗಳು ಮತ್ತು ಅಹಾರ ಅವಶೇಷಗಳನ್ನು ದಾಖಲಿಸಲಾಯಿತು. ಸಮೀಕ್ಷೆಯ ಏಳನೇ ದಿನ ನಾಲ್ಕು ನೀರ್ನಾಯಗಳ ಗುಂಪನ್ನು ನೇರವಾಗಿ ಗಮನಿಸಲಾಯಿತು. ಇದು ಉದ್ಯಾನವನದಲ್ಲಿ ಮೊದಲ ದಾಖಲಾದ ದೃಶ್ಯವಲ್ಲದೇನವಾಗಿದೆ. ಹೆಚ್ಚುವರಿ ಸಾಕ್ಷ್ಯಗಳಾದ ಹೊಸ ಮಲದ ಗುರುತುಗಳು ಮತ್ತು ಪಾದಚಿಹ್ನೆಗಳು ಈ ಪ್ರದೇಶದಲ್ಲಿ ಅವುಗಳ ಉಪಸ್ಥಿತಿಯನ್ನು ಮತ್ತಷ್ಟು ದೃಢಪಡಿಸಿವೆ. ಆದರೆ ಮೀನುಗಾರಿಕೆ, ಪಶು ಮೇಯಿಸುವಿಕೆ ಹಾಗೂ ಮಾಲಿನ್ಯ ಮುಂತಾದ ಮಾನವ ಸೃಷ್ಟಿ ಒತ್ತಡಗಳು ನೀರ್ನಾಯಗಳ ವಾಸಸ್ಥಾನಗಳಿಗೆ ಧಕ್ಕೆಯನ್ನುಂಟುಮಾಡುವ ಸಾಧ್ಯತೆಯಿದೆ. ಈ ಪರಿತಾಪಗಳನ್ನು ಚಿಕ್ಕೊಂಡನಹಳ್ಳಿ ಮುಂತಾದ ಕೆರೆಗಳು ನೀರ್ನಾಯಗಳಿಗೆ ಪ್ರಮುಖ ವಾಸಸ್ಥಾನಗಳಾಗಿರಬಹುದು ಹಾಗೂ ವಿವಿಧ ಜಲಾಶಯಗಳ ನಡುವೆ ಅವು ಸಂಚರಿಸುವ ಸಾಧ್ಯತೆ ಇದೆ ಎಂಬುದನ್ನು ಸೂಚಿಸುತ್ತವೆ. BNP ಪ್ರದೇಶದಲ್ಲಿ ನೀರ್ನಾಯಗಳ ಚಲನೆ ಹಾಗೂ ವಾಸಸ್ಥಾನ ಅಧ್ಯಯನ ತಿಳಿಯಲು ಮುಂದಿನ ಅಧ್ಯಯನ ಅಗತ್ಯವಾಗಿದೆ.

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Author contributions: AN: conducted field surveys, collected and compiled data, performed preliminary analysis, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. AK: conceived and supervised the study, contributed to study design and data interpretation, and reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

Otters, belonging to the subfamily Lutrinae, are an integral part of freshwater and coastal ecosystems worldwide. With 13 species distributed across five continents, these semi-aquatic mammals play a critical role as apex predators and ecosystem engineers, influencing trophic dynamics, and habitat health (Kruuk 2006 ; Roos et al. 2015). India is home to three of the 13 species, namely, Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra*, Smooth-coated Otter *Lutra perspicillata*, and Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus* (Samad et. al. 2020; WWF India 2024). Otter populations have been declining globally due to escalating threats such as habitat destruction, pollution, overfishing, and illegal trade (Baskaran et al. 2022). The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species has categorized the Eurasian Otter *Lutra lutra* as 'Near Threatened' and the Smooth-coated Otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* as 'Vulnerable', underscoring the precarious conservation status of these species (de Silva et al. 2015; Duplaix & Savage 2018; IUCN 2022).

These pressures are particularly pronounced in developing regions such as southeastern Asia, which has emerged as a major region of concern for otter trafficking (Basnet et al. 2020). In India, Smooth-coated Otters, stated as 'Vulnerable' on the IUCN Red List (de Silva et al. 2015) and protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Act, 2022 inhabit freshwater ecosystems but face multiple threats. These include persecution and deliberate habitat destruction by fishermen due to conflicts arising from otters damaging fishing nets while hunting prey, as well as water pollution and reduced prey availability caused by fish poisoning (Kamjing et al. 2017; Jain et al. 2023; Trivedi et al. 2023). Recent studies have highlighted the presence of otter populations in areas close to Bannerghatta National Park (Daily Pioneer 2017). Notably, a study by Gubbi et al. (2021), conducted between 2014 and 2021, reported the occurrence of Smooth-coated Otters in the Ramanagara District. In another study, Baskaran et al. (2022) recorded 36 Smooth-coated Otters along a 62-km stretch of the Cauvery River in Tamil Nadu, suggesting the potential occurrence of populations upstream in Karnataka. Ramanagara District lies to the west of Bannerghatta National Park, while the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary is located to the south and southwest, extending into both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. While all three otter species found in India have been reported from the southern Western Ghats (Arivoli et. al. 2021), their presence in Bannerghatta National Park has not been systematically

documented to date.

This study presents the first direct observation of a Smooth-coated Otter group in Bannerghatta National Park, recorded during a 10-day survey. This finding marks a significant addition to the ecological knowledge of the biodiversity of the region and underscores the importance of further research into the park's aquatic ecosystems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study area

Bannerghatta National Park (BNP), covering approximately 256 km², is situated at the northernmost tip of the Eastern Ghats in Karnataka, India. The park has a linear shape, spanning no more than 5 km in width and shares its boundaries with the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary in Tamil Nadu to the south-east and the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary (CWS) in Karnataka to the south-west. Water sources play a crucial role in the succession of wildlife and its habitat. The BNP is well-endowed with a variety of water sources, including perennial and seasonal streams, tanks, and ponds. Artificial water holes have also been constructed through the soil and moisture conservation initiatives of the local forest department. Within the Kodihalli Range, the Neralatti (0.42 km²) and Chikkondanahalli reservoirs (0.61 km²) serve as vital perennial water sources for the park's wildlife (Image 1). Notably, the forest department has anecdotally reported otter presence at these water bodies, highlighting their presence within the area.

The park forms part of a broader, ecologically interconnected forest landscape, linked via multiple local river distributaries to the Hosur forests in Tamil Nadu to the south-east and the Ramanagara forests in Karnataka to the south-west (Baskaran et al. 2022). These ecological linkages extend further into the expansive forested regions of the CWS, the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, and the Eastern Ghats, traversing key areas such as the Male Mahadeshwara Hills, Biligiriranga Swamy Temple Wildlife Sanctuary, Kollegal Forest Division, and the Sathyamangalam forests. This landscape-level connectivity plays a critical role in facilitating transboundary wildlife movement, maintaining ecological integrity, and supporting long-term biodiversity conservation.

Methods

We conducted a consecutive 10-day reconnaissance survey around the Chikkondanahalli reservoir, in

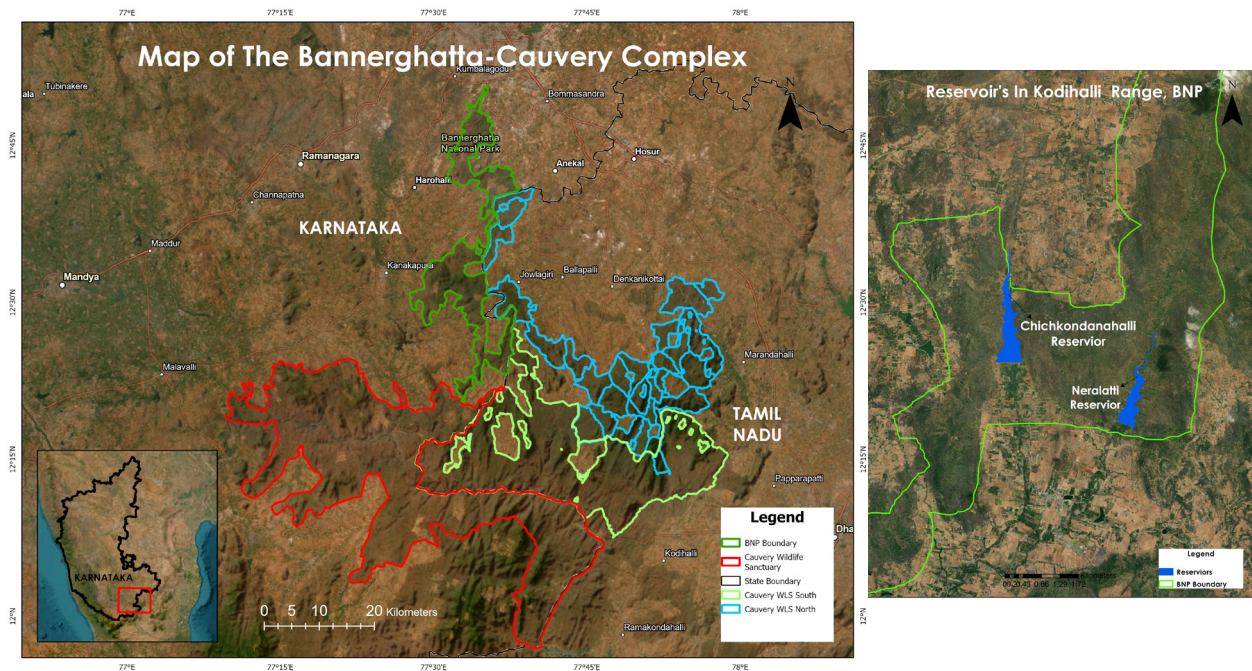


Image 1. Spatial representation of the Bannerghatta National Park–Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary complex (left), reservoirs in Kodihalli Range of BNP (right).

Chikkondanahalli Village, Kanakapura Taluk, Ramanagara District. Our survey efforts focused on monitoring the reservoir each morning 0530–0930 h and evening 1600–1800 h, from 17–26 October 2024. Over this period, we covered a total distance of 4.33 km, walking along the reservoir's perimeter. Following the morning monitoring sessions, the team surveyed 13 anicuts or check dams in the vicinity for signs of otter presence, aiming to identify potential routes used by the otters to access or retreat from the reservoir. The reservoir is bordered by 11 adjoining villages. During the survey period, perimeter walks were conducted around the lake to observe and record signs of otter presence, including track marks, spraints, and feeding remains.

Additional observations included sightings of other wildlife and any potential threats to the habitat. Location data was recorded through the GPS device (Garmin eTrex 10), and observations were made using binoculars (Nikon 175133 BJ) and a camera (Nikon Coolpix P1000). We engaged with local communities for insights into otter sightings (locally referred to as “neer naye”/ನೀರ ನಾಯಿ in Kannada), using interviews with local communities to assess their perceptions and experiences with otter interactions. Respondents were also asked whether their encounters with otters were perceived as positive (non-conflictual) or negative (encounters involving perceived conflict, economic loss or disturbance).

RESULTS

On the first day, we recorded indirect evidence of otter presence in the form of otter spraints, three fresh and four old, at two different locations along the reservoir perimeter.

On the seventh day, we observed seven fresh otter spraints on the same rocks where dry spraints had been found on the first day, along with track marks (Image 2).

On 23 October 2024, at 0727 h, a direct sighting of Smooth-coated Otters was recorded. A family of four otters was observed (Image 3), engaging in grooming, playing, and swimming. Their behaviour and movements were monitored for an hour before they disappeared. Additional evidence, including fresh spraints and track marks, was also documented. However, the age and sex of the individuals could not be determined.

The visits to the anicuts yielded no direct evidence of otter presence. However, interviews with local fishermen and farmers frequently visiting these areas suggested that otter sightings were common. Notably, three residents at the anicuts reported spotting otters just 1–2 days before their interviews on the fourth and fifth days of the survey. Additionally, residents near the reservoir reported otter sightings approximately 5–6 days before the survey commenced, coinciding with an increase in pollution and fish die-offs. This raises the possibility that



Image 2. Otter spraints (top) and track marks (below). © A Rocha India.

deteriorating water quality may have influenced otter movement, potentially driving them to seek alternative foraging areas. Meanwhile, two fishermen expressed negative views, primarily due to perceived competition for fish and concerns over damage to fishing nets attributed to otter activity.

Several anthropogenic threats to the habitat were



Image 3. Group of Smooth-coated Otters spotted in the water and at the identified feeding spot. © A Rocha India.

also observed. These included active fishing practices involving poisoning, fishing nets, and pollution, evidenced by plastic waste and the presence of dead fish and crustaceans in the water (Image 4).

DISCUSSION

BNP harbours a rich assemblage of fauna, including flagship and ecologically significant species such as the Asian Elephant *Elephas maximus*, Indian Gaur *Bos gaurus*, Leopard *Panthera pardus*, and Dhole *Cuon alpinus* (Varma et. al. 2009). Furthermore, the documented occurrence of smaller carnivores such as the Rusty-spotted Cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus*, Jungle Cat *Felis chaus*, and Ratel *Mellivora capensis* underscores the park's ecological value in sustaining a diversity of both terrestrial and semi-aquatic mammalian species

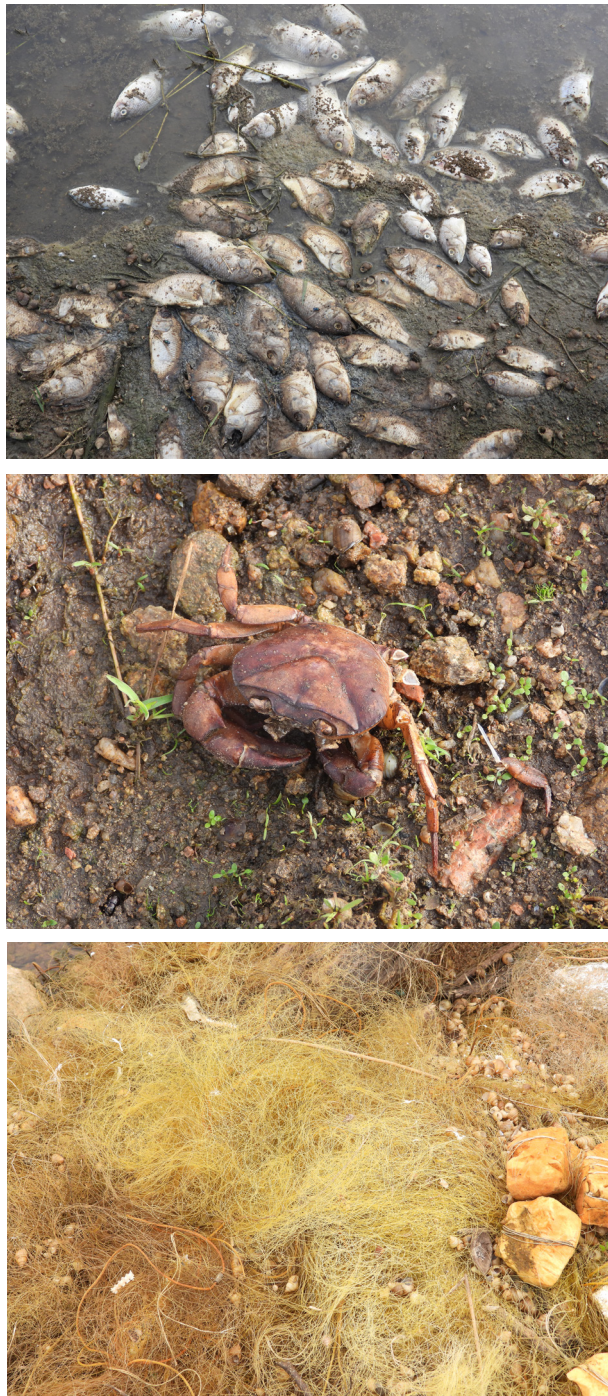


Image 4. Threats observed at the location including (top) fish mortality likely from poisoning, (middle) a deceased crustacean, and (bottom) discarded fishing nets entangled with debris, highlighting human-induced pressures on the ecosystem. © A Rocha India.

(Krishnan et al. 2016). However, BNP faces increasing anthropogenic pressures, which pose a significant threat to wildlife, particularly along its forest-farm interface. Cattle grazing, sand mining, and fuelwood collection constitute major anthropogenic pressures in the area,

driven by approximately 200 settlements located within 5 km of the park's boundary (Karikalán 2013).

The Chikkondanahalli and Nerletti reservoirs within the forests of BNP are hydrologically connected to the CWS through local stream networks and river distributaries (Baskaran et al. 2022). CWS has established records of otter presence indicating potential movement corridors between these protected areas. Our direct sighting of otters on day seven confirms their utilization of the reservoir, suggesting possible upstream movement which needs to be studied further.

Despite no direct evidence of otter presence at the anicuts, these structures may serve as crucial ecological features (Image 5), facilitating movement between breeding and nesting habitats in the CWS in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu and feeding grounds in BNP. Alternatively, these structures could function as temporary refuges during unfavorable environmental conditions, such as pollution spikes and prey depletion in the reservoir.

Further research is necessary to understand the movement patterns and habitat preferences of smooth-coated otters in and around the national park, particularly concerning the anicuts and reservoirs. Since otters are highly dependent on both the quality and connectivity of aquatic habitats, identifying critical movement corridors and feeding areas is essential for managing their conservation in this landscape (Duplaix & Savage 2018). Addressing the growing threats requires an integrated conservation approach. Habitat degradation, pollution, and overfishing need targeted management strategies that incorporate both habitat restoration and community-based conservation efforts. Specific actions such as monitoring fishing practices, reducing plastic pollution, and minimizing disturbance from grazing and other human activities is vital. Additionally, long-term monitoring of otter populations and habitat health should be prioritized. Implementing these strategies will ensure the conservation of Smooth-coated Otters and the integrity of their ecosystems in the face of anthropogenic pressures.

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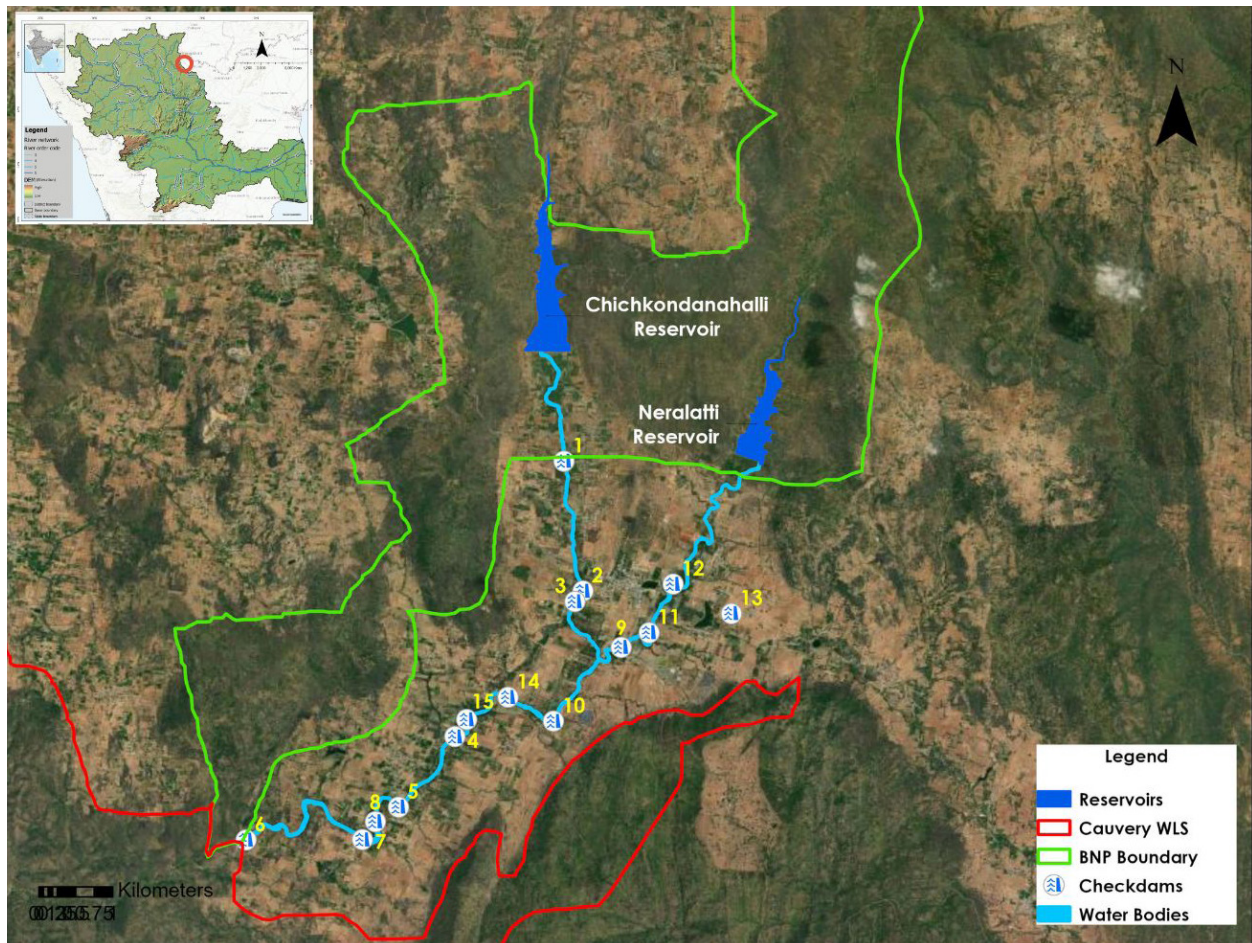


Image 5. Track log map showing check dams near the reservoirs. The inset map displays the Cauvery Wildlife Sanctuary river system, with the study area highlighted.

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