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Psychological Stress and Human-Monkey Conflict: Evidence from Rural Farming Communities in Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka

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Abstract: Human–wildlife conflict has become an increasingly significant challenge in rural agricultural landscapes, particularly in regions where human activities overlap with wildlife habitats. In Sri Lanka, interactions between farming communities and toque macaques (*Macaca sinica*) have intensified, resulting in recurring crop damage and livelihood disruption. While previous studies have largely focused on ecological and economic dimensions, limited attention has been given to the psychological impacts of such conflicts. This study examines the relationship between human–monkey conflict and psychological stress among rural farming households in the Kurunegala District. A quantitative cross-sectional design was employed, with data collected from 40 households using a structured questionnaire. Psychological stress was measured using a six-item Likert scale ($\alpha = 0.916$), while perception toward conflict was assessed using a five-item scale ($\alpha = 0.892$). Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, t-tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression were conducted using SPSS. The findings indicate that crop loss is the only significant predictor of psychological stress ($\beta = 0.955$, $p < 0.001$), with a strong positive correlation ($r = 0.956$, $p < 0.001$). financial loss, frequency of monkey encounters, income level, and perception did not show statistically significant relationships with stress ($p > 0.05$). These results suggest that direct, visible damage to livelihoods has a stronger psychological impact than perceived risk or estimated economic loss. The study highlights the importance of integrating psychological dimensions into human–wildlife conflict research and emphasizes the need for mitigation strategies that prioritize reducing crop damage. A more holistic approach that considers both material and experiential aspects of conflict is essential for promoting sustainable human–wildlife coexistence.

Keywords: Human–wildlife conflict, psychological stress, crop loss, toque macaque, rural livelihoods, Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Human–wildlife conflict (HWC) has increasingly emerged as a critical socio-ecological issue in many parts of South Asia, particularly in regions where agricultural expansion overlaps with natural habitats. In Sri Lanka, this phenomenon is especially evident in interactions between rural farming communities and non-human primates such as the toque macaque. Over the past few decades, land-use changes, including deforestation and agricultural intensification, have contributed to habitat fragmentation, thereby increasing the spatial overlap between humans and wildlife. As a result, crop raiding, property damage, and frequent encounters have become routine experiences for many rural households (Dittus, 2012; Cabral et al., 2018). Previous research has consistently highlighted that human–monkey conflict in Sri Lanka has intensified to a level that significantly affects both livelihoods and local ecosystems. Cabral et al. (2018) describe the situation as approaching “crisis proportions,” largely due to the combined effects of environmental degradation and the adaptive behavior of macaques in human-dominated landscapes. Similarly, Dittus (2012) emphasizes that the reduction of natural food sources has led to increased dependence of macaques on cultivated crops, thereby escalating conflict frequency.

These findings suggest that HWC is not merely an ecological issue but a complex interaction shaped by environmental, economic, and behavioral factors. The economic impacts of such conflicts are well documented. Rural farmers frequently experience substantial crop losses, reduced productivity, and additional labor costs associated with guarding and deterrence strategies. In the Sri Lankan context, Jayarathne (2025) demonstrates that farmers living in close proximity to toque macaque populations are subject to recurring economic burdens, with crop damage occurring on a near-daily basis in some areas. The study further highlights that the absence of effective long-term mitigation strategies forces farmers to rely on short-term, labor-intensive methods, which often provide limited success. Complementing this, Pemadasa (2022) notes that while local communities have developed various coping mechanisms, these strategies rarely address the root causes of conflict and therefore fail to reduce its long-term impacts.

Despite the substantial body of literature on ecological drivers and economic consequences, relatively less attention has been paid to the psychological dimensions

of human–wildlife conflict. This represents a significant gap, as the lived experience of conflict extends beyond measurable financial loss. Repeated exposure to crop damage, uncertainty in harvest outcomes, and the need for constant vigilance can contribute to psychological stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue among affected populations. Studies in broader human–wildlife systems suggest that such stress is often shaped not only by objective economic loss but also by subjective perceptions of risk and insecurity (Suratissa, 2020). In many rural contexts, these psychological impacts remain underreported, as they are often normalized within daily life. Furthermore, emerging evidence indicates that the perception of loss may play a more critical role than actual financial calculations in shaping human responses to wildlife conflict. Farmers may react more strongly to visible crop destruction than to estimated monetary loss, suggesting that emotional and experiential factors are central to understanding conflict dynamics. However, empirical studies that quantitatively examine these relationships, particularly within the Sri Lankan context, remain limited. Most existing research relies on descriptive or qualitative approaches, with fewer studies employing statistical methods to analyze the relationship between different dimensions of conflict and psychological outcomes. In addition, commonly used mitigation strategies, such as fencing, noise deterrents, and crop guarding, have shown limited effectiveness in reducing long-term conflict. As noted by Cabral et al. (2018), these approaches often fail to account for the behavioral adaptability of macaques, resulting in continued crop raiding despite ongoing interventions. This persistent inefficiency not only prolongs economic loss but may also exacerbate feelings of frustration and helplessness among farmers. Consequently, there is a need to move beyond purely ecological or technical solutions and consider the human dimension of conflict more comprehensively. Given these gaps, the present study aims to examine human–monkey conflict through a combined socio-economic and psychological lens. Specifically, it investigates how crop loss, financial loss, and the frequency of monkey encounters are associated with psychological stress among rural farming communities in the Kurunegala District of Sri Lanka. By employing a quantitative approach supported by statistical analysis, this study seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of human–wildlife interactions. In doing so, it highlights the importance of integrating mental health considerations into

conservation strategies and policy interventions, thereby promoting more sustainable and socially responsive approaches to human–wildlife coexistence.

2. Material and Methods

This study was conducted in the Kurunegala District of the North Western Province of Sri Lanka, specifically within the Kuliyaipitiya West Divisional Secretariat Division (DSD). Data were collected from three Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions Elathalawa, Deegalla, and Kabalewa, which are predominantly rural and characterized by smallholder agricultural practices. The area has been increasingly affected by human–monkey conflict, particularly involving the toque macaque, due to ongoing habitat fragmentation and agricultural expansion. A quantitative cross-sectional research design was employed to examine the relationship between dimensions of human–monkey conflict and psychological stress among rural farmers. Data were collected from 40 farming households ($n = 40$) selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals directly experiencing monkey-related disturbances. Primary data were obtained through a structured questionnaire administered via face-to-face interviews. The questionnaire comprised sections on demographic characteristics, exposure to conflict (crop loss, financial loss, and encounter frequency), psychological stress, coping strategies, and perceptions toward wildlife. Psychological stress was measured using a six-item Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), capturing dimensions such as perceived stress, anxiety, income insecurity, sleep disturbance, helplessness, and family impact. A composite stress score (stress total) was calculated as the mean of these items. Independent variables included: (i) crop loss (categorized as <10%, 10–25%, 26–50%, >50%), (ii) financial loss (categorized by monthly income loss), and (iii) frequency of monkey encounters (daily to rarely). Socio-demographic variables such as income level and gender were included as control variables. The internal consistency of the stress scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which indicated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.916$). Statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, mean, and standard deviation) were used to summarize the data. Pearson correlation analysis was applied to examine relationships between stress and conflict-related variables. Differences in stress levels across gender and income groups were

tested using independent samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA, respectively. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to identify significant predictors of psychological stress. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the study prior to data collection. All responses were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

3. Results and Discussion

A total of 40 respondents were included in the analysis. The sample consisted of an equal distribution of males and females (50% each). The majority of participants were within the 31–60 age range, indicating a predominantly active farming population. Educational attainment varied, with the largest proportion having completed Advanced Level education (27.5%), followed by individuals with no formal or primary education (45% combined). In terms of economic status, 37.5% of respondents reported a monthly household income between LKR 50,000 –75,000, while 25% earned below LKR 25,000. Exposure to human–monkey conflict was frequent, with 25% reporting daily encounters and 35% experiencing encounters monthly. Crop loss was widely distributed across categories, with 55% of respondents reporting damage exceeding 25%, indicating a substantial level of agricultural impact across the sample.

Reliability of Scales

The psychological stress scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.916$), confirming that the six items reliably measure a single underlying construct. Similarly, the perception scale showed high reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.892$), indicating consistency in responses related to attitudes toward monkey-related disturbances. These results validate the use of composite variables for subsequent statistical analyses.

Descriptive Analysis of Psychological Stress and Perception

The mean psychological stress score was 2.61 (SD = 1.06), suggesting a moderate level of stress among respondents. This indicates that while stress is present across the sample, its intensity varies considerably between individuals. The perception scores also reflected a moderate level (M = 2.58, SD = 1.03), suggesting that respondents generally recognize monkey-related disturbances as a concern, although attitudes are not

uniformly extreme. The similarity between stress and perception means indicates that both constructs are present within the community, but their relationship requires further examination through inferential analysis.

Relationship between Conflict Variables and Psychological Stress

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong and statistically significant positive relationship between crop loss and psychological stress ($r = 0.956$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that increases in crop damage are closely associated with higher levels of stress among farmers. The strength of this relationship suggests that crop loss is a central factor shaping psychological outcomes in the context of human–monkey conflict. The financial loss did not show a statistically significant relationship with stress ($r = 0.263$, $p = 0.101$). Although financial loss represents an important economic dimension of conflict, the absence of statistical significance suggests that perceived monetary value alone does not directly translate into psychological distress. This distinction highlights the possibility that tangible and visible losses, such as crop damage, may have a stronger emotional impact than abstract financial estimates.

Gender and Income Differences in Stress

An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine differences in stress levels between male and female respondents. Although males reported slightly higher stress levels ($M = 2.88$, $SD = 0.99$) compared to females ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 1.07$), the difference was not statistically significant ($t = 1.686$, $p > 0.05$). This suggests that psychological stress associated with human–monkey conflict is experienced relatively similarly across genders. Similarly, a one-way ANOVA was performed to assess differences in stress across income groups. The results indicated no statistically significant variation in stress levels based on income ($F = 1.006$, $p = 0.401$). This finding implies that economic status alone does not significantly influence psychological responses to

conflict, further reinforcing the importance of direct experiential factors over broader socio-economic indicators.

Regression Analysis: Predictors of Psychological Stress

A multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to identify the key predictors of psychological stress. The overall model was statistically significant ($F = 93.77$, $p < 0.001$) and explained 91.5% of the variance in stress levels ($R^2 = 0.915$), indicating a strong model fit. Among the predictors, crop loss emerged as the only statistically significant variable ($\beta = 0.955$, $p < 0.001$), demonstrating a substantial positive effect on stress. This confirms that crop damage is the primary driver of psychological distress among respondents. Income ($\beta \approx 0$, $p = 0.999$), frequency of monkey encounters ($\beta = -0.015$, $p = 0.770$), and financial loss ($\beta \approx 0$, $p = 0.953$) were not significant predictors. These results suggest that neither the frequency of exposure nor generalized economic conditions significantly contribute to stress when crop loss is accounted for in the model.

Perception and Psychological Stress

Further analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between perception and psychological stress. The results indicated a weak and non-significant negative relationship ($r = -0.238$, $p = 0.140$). The finding suggests that while respondents may perceive monkeys as a threat, such perceptions do not directly translate into increased stress levels. Instead, psychological distress appears to be more closely associated with actual material outcomes, particularly crop loss, rather than subjective attitudes or perceived risk.

Psychological stress in human–monkey conflict is driven primarily by direct crop loss, while economic estimates, encounter frequency, and perceptions do not significantly influence stress.

Table 1. Summary of Key Findings and Interpretations

Variable	Analysis Type	Statistical Result	Significance	Direction	Interpretation	Supporting Literature
Crop Loss	Correlation	$r = 0.956$	$p < 0.001$	Positive	Strong predictor of stress	Cabral et al. (2018); Dittus (2012); Jayarathne (2025)
Crop Loss	Regression	$\beta = 0.955$	$p < 0.001$	Positive	Primary determinant of psychological stress	Jayarathne (2025)
Financial Loss	Correlation	$r = 0.263$	$p = 0.101$	Weak Positive	Not significantly related to stress	Suratissa (2020)
Financial Loss	Regression	$\beta = -0.003$	$p = 0.953$	Negligible	Economic estimates do not drive stress	Dickman (2010)
Frequency of Encounters	Regression	$\beta = -0.015$	$p = 0.770$	Negligible	Exposure alone does not increase stress	Dickman (2010)
Perception	Correlation	$r = -0.238$	$p = 0.140$	Weak Negative	Attitudes do not significantly influence stress	Dittus (2012)
Gender	t-test	$t = 1.686$	$p > 0.05$	—	No significant gender difference	—
Income	ANOVA	$F = 1.006$	$p = 0.401$	—	Stress not influenced by income level	—

4. Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between human–monkey conflict and psychological stress among rural farming communities in the Kurunegala District of Sri Lanka. The findings provide clear evidence that crop loss is the primary determinant of psychological stress, while other commonly assumed factors, such as financial loss, encounter frequency, and perception, do not exhibit significant influence. These results offer important insights into the lived experience of human–wildlife conflict and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of its socio-psychological dimensions. A key finding of this study is the strong and statistically significant relationship between crop loss and psychological stress. This supports existing literature that emphasizes the central role of agricultural damage in shaping human–

wildlife conflict outcomes. For example, Cabral et al. (2018) identified crop raiding as one of the most critical drivers of conflict in Sri Lanka, noting that repeated agricultural losses directly affect household stability and livelihood security. Similarly, Dittus (2012) observed that the increasing reliance of toque macaques on cultivated food sources has intensified crop damage, particularly in areas where natural habitats have been degraded. The present study extends these findings by demonstrating that crop loss is not only an economic issue but also a significant psychological stressor, reinforcing the need to consider human well-being in conflict assessments.

Interestingly, financial loss did not emerge as a significant predictor of stress, despite its close conceptual relationship with crop damage. This finding suggests that objective monetary estimates may not fully capture the experiential

impact of loss. While previous studies, including Jayarathne (2025), have documented the economic burden associated with human–monkey conflict, the current results indicate that farmers respond more strongly to visible and immediate damage rather than abstract financial calculations. This aligns with broader research in human–wildlife conflict, which suggests that perceived severity and direct experience often outweigh calculated economic values in shaping human responses (Suratissa, 2020). In this context, crop loss may represent a more tangible and emotionally salient form of impact, thereby exerting a stronger influence on psychological stress. Another notable finding is the lack of a significant relationship between the frequency of monkey encounters and stress levels. Although frequent encounters are commonly assumed to increase conflict intensity, the results suggest that exposure alone does not necessarily translate into psychological distress. This may be explained by a process of normalization, whereby communities living in close proximity to wildlife become accustomed to regular encounters over time. Similar observations have been reported in other human–wildlife contexts, where repeated exposure leads to adaptive behavioral responses rather than heightened stress (Dickman, 2010). In the Sri Lankan setting, daily or routine encounters with monkeys may therefore be perceived as a normal aspect of rural life, reducing their psychological impact unless accompanied by direct economic damage.

The analysis of perception further supports this interpretation. Although respondents reported moderate levels of concern regarding monkey-related disturbances, perception was not significantly associated with stress. This finding suggests that attitudinal factors alone are insufficient to explain psychological outcomes. While previous studies have highlighted the importance of human attitudes in shaping conflict dynamics (Dittus, 2012; Cabral et al., 2018), the present study indicates that attitudes do not necessarily translate into measurable stress. Instead, stress appears to be more closely linked to material consequences, particularly those affecting livelihood security. This distinction is important, as it challenges the assumption that negative perceptions directly lead to psychological distress. Additionally, the absence of significant differences in stress across gender and income groups suggests that the psychological impact of human–monkey conflict is relatively uniform across

socio-demographic categories. This finding implies that the stress associated with crop loss is widely experienced across the community, regardless of economic status or gender roles. While some studies have suggested that vulnerability to environmental stressors may vary across social groups, the present results indicate that the effects of direct agricultural damage may override such differences in this context.

The regression analysis further reinforces the central role of crop loss, identifying it as the only significant predictor of psychological stress. The high explanatory power of the model ($R^2 = 0.915$) highlights the strength of this relationship and underscores the importance of focusing on crop damage as a key factor in both research and policy interventions. This finding is consistent with Jayarathne (2025), which emphasizes the continuous and cumulative nature of crop loss experienced by farmers living alongside macaque populations. However, the present study advances this understanding by demonstrating that the psychological consequences of such losses are equally significant, thereby expanding the scope of human–wildlife conflict research beyond economic considerations. The findings suggest that human–wildlife conflict should be understood not only as an ecological or economic issue but also as a lived experience shaped by direct material impacts. The dominance of crop loss as a predictor of stress highlights the importance of addressing tangible forms of damage in conflict mitigation strategies. Interventions that focus solely on reducing encounter frequency or altering perceptions may have limited effectiveness if they do not directly reduce crop damage. From a policy perspective, these results point to the need for integrated approaches that combine ecological management with socio-economic and psychological considerations. Improving the effectiveness of crop protection measures, developing sustainable deterrent strategies, and providing support mechanisms for affected farmers may help reduce both economic losses and associated stress. Furthermore, incorporating mental health perspectives into conservation planning could enhance the long-term sustainability of human–wildlife coexistence initiatives.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the relationship between human–monkey conflict and psychological stress among rural

farming communities in Kurunegala District, Sri Lanka, using a quantitative approach. The findings demonstrate that crop loss is the primary and most significant predictor of psychological stress, while financial loss, encounter frequency, income, and perception do not show significant influence. These results suggest that direct, visible damage to livelihoods has a stronger psychological impact than abstract economic estimates or subjective attitudes. By integrating statistical analysis with socio-ecological context, this study highlights the importance of understanding human–wildlife conflict as both a material and experiential phenomenon. The findings contribute to existing literature by emphasizing that effective conflict mitigation strategies must prioritize reducing crop damage while also acknowledging the broader implications for human well-being. Accordingly, policies aimed at improving coexistence should adopt a more holistic approach that incorporates economic, ecological, and psychological dimensions of conflict.

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