

## **DHOLEPARAI: A community engagement effort for dhole conservation in an agroforest shared landscape of Valparai, Tamil Nadu, India**

Modifications to natural landscapes in the form of land-use changes and urbanization increases human–wildlife interface. Such conditions become conducive for excessive ‘shared spaces’ that harbor people as well as wild animals. In such complex landscapes, conservation can be challenging, especially for carnivores (which are perceived as potentially dangerous to human life, livelihood and safety). In these shared spaces, ecological literacy and the involvement of local communities in conservation action through sustained outreach activities can be crucial for facilitating their co-existence with megafauna.

Asiatic wild dogs, ‘dholes’ (*Cuon alpinus*), are apex carnivores found in South and Southeast Asia. They are categorized as ‘Endangered’ by the IUCN. While dholes primarily occur in forests, some populations also reside in agroforest habitats such as tea, coffee cardamom plantations adjoining forests. Given that most Protected Areas are becoming increasingly isolated, conserving dhole populations in agroforests and other sub-optimal habitats is extremely important to maintain connectivity across meta-populations.

India purportedly hosts the highest population of dholes across the species’ range. Here, most dhole populations are found in the forests and agro-forests of Western Ghats, Central India and Northeast India. One such agro-forest landscape is the Valparai plateau in the State of Tamil Nadu. Covering an area of 220 sq. km, Valparai is a mosaic of tea, coffee, and cardamom plantations interspersed with rainforest fragments. The adjacent Anamalai Tiger Reserve, along with rainforest fragments within the plateau, together make Valparai extremely biodiverse.

The Dhole Project, Wildlife Conservation Society–India, has been working in the landscape since late 2022. The multi-component project examines the social and spatial behaviour of dholes in a human-dominated area using an interdisciplinary approach. In the first phase of the project, we interacted with local community members to create an informant network; this network of volunteers kept us abreast of dhole pack sightings and movements. The goal here was twofold: first, to help gather real-time information on dholes from a large landscape (>200 sq. km). Second, we hoped to gradually build local capacity and involve more local people (particularly the youth in the landscape) in becoming stewards of dhole conservation through continued engagement.

With the intent to pursue community engagement and outreach, in the second phase of the project, we published an illustrated comic book “Dholeparai” on the dholes of Valparai. The name Dholeparai is a play on the word Valparai (*parai* means ‘rock’ in the local *Tamil* language). We believe this name would resonate with the residents and also instill a sense of ownership towards the carnivores that share spaces with them. The primary target audience for the book were school children (ages ~9–11) in the landscape.

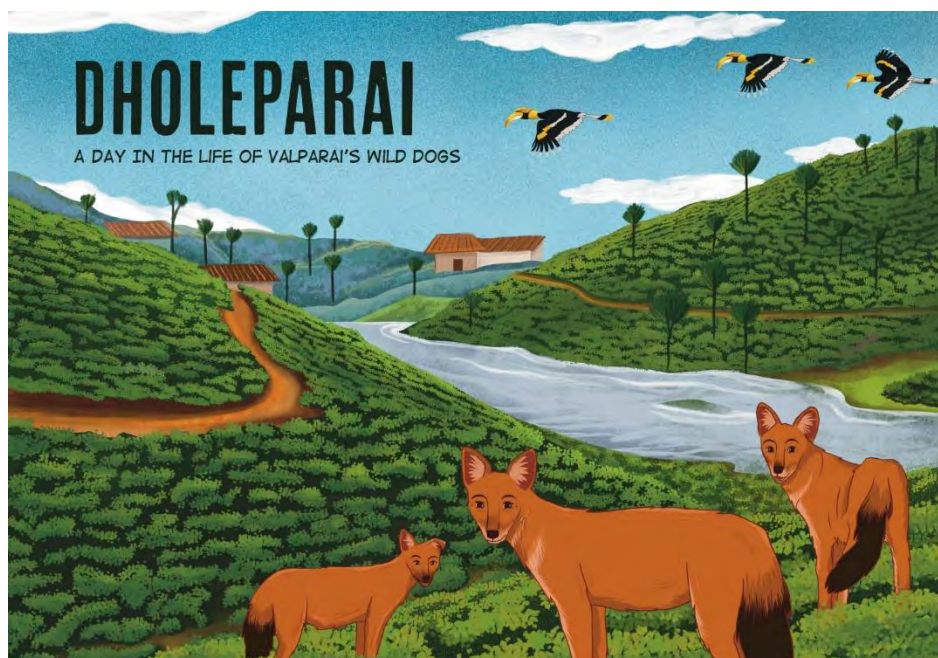


Image 1: Cover page of the illustrated comic on dholes of Valparai

The comic book was published in two local languages (*Tamil* and *Hindi*) and in English to inform the local community on various aspects of the ecology and behaviour of dholes. Through the support of ABS Outreach Grant, we were able to print and distribute the comics to the school children of Valparai. During the school visits, we conducted dramatic and engaging readings of the comic book story in English/Tamil and interacted with the children. We also tried to gauge their level of awareness about the species and discussed some precautionary measures, i.e., do's and don'ts when they encounter dholes (e.g., watching wild animals from distance to avoid any negative interaction). We believe this activity (and similar ones planned in the future) will incite interest towards the species' ecology and foster a positive conservation attitude towards dholes. The comics were also shared with the tea estate managers and Forest Department officials to forge and strengthen collaborative relationships in the landscape.

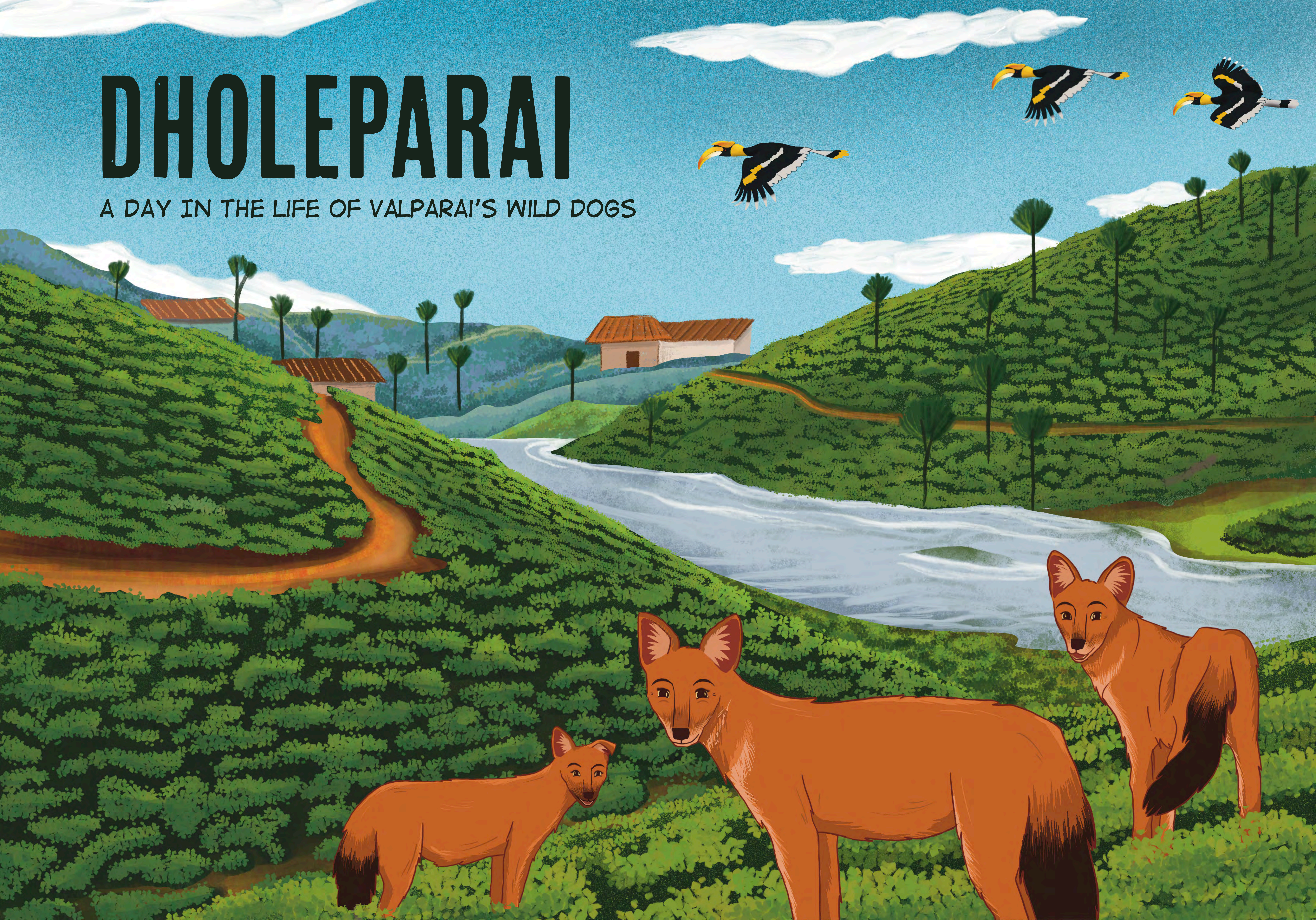


Image 2: Comic book distribution and interactive reading sessions being carried out by the team in various schools of Valparai, India.



# DHOLEPARAI

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF VALPARAI'S WILD DOGS









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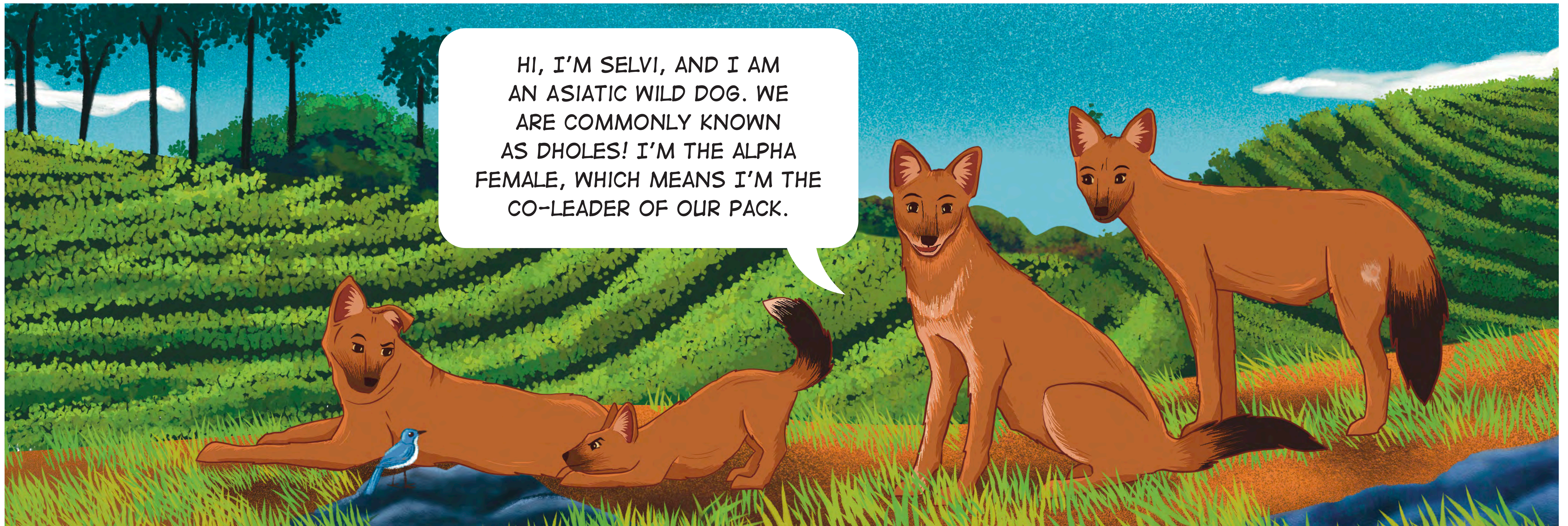
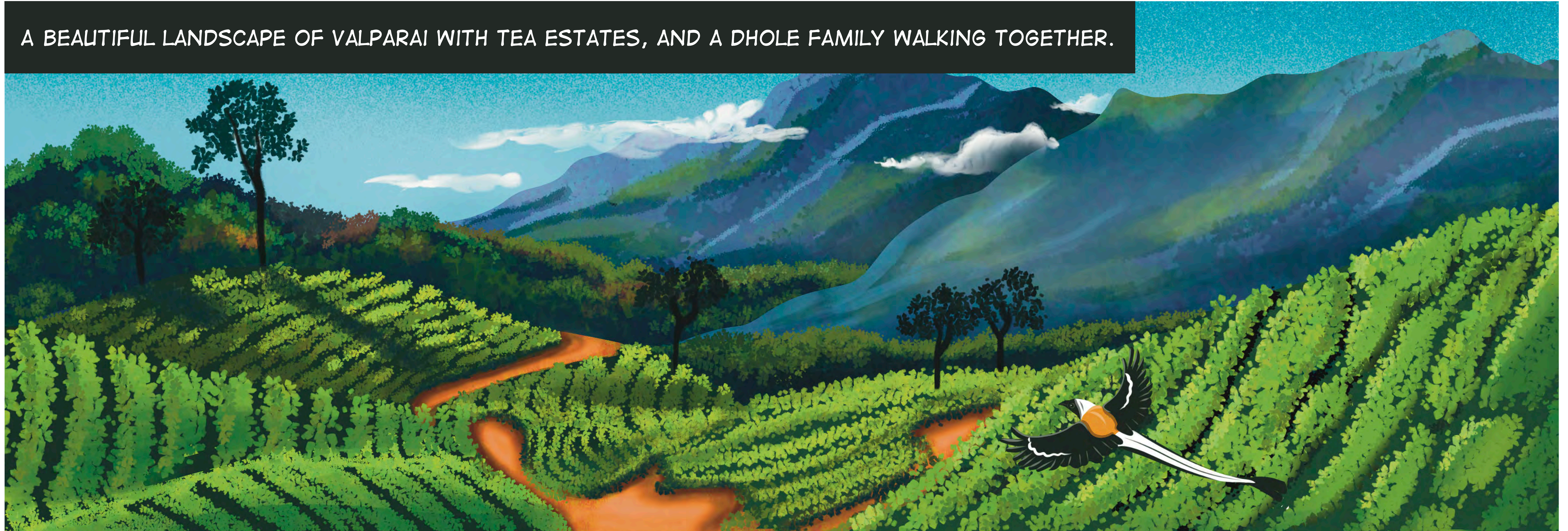
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Website: [www.thedholeproject.com](http://www.thedholeproject.com)



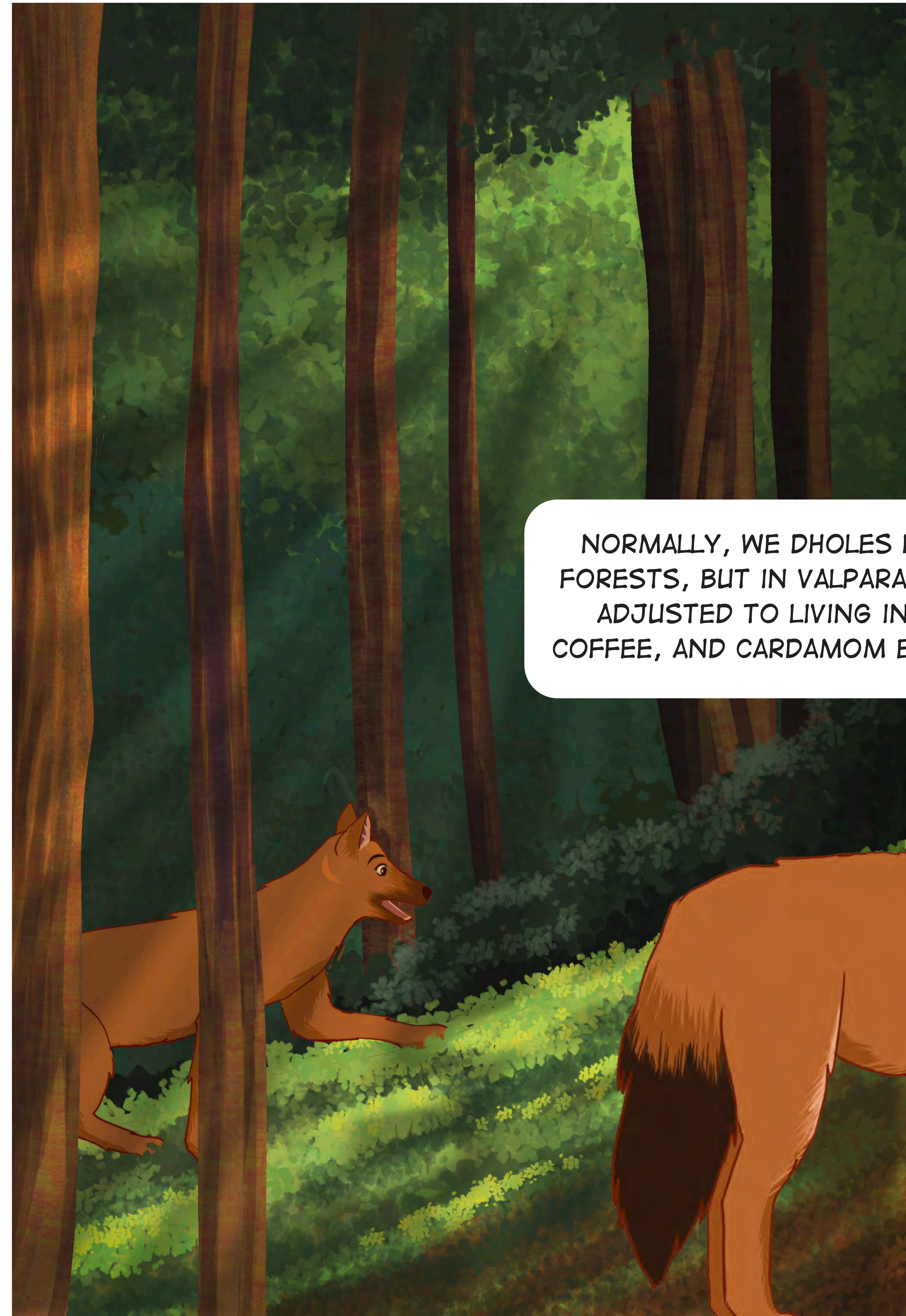


A BEAUTIFUL LANDSCAPE OF VALPARAI WITH TEA ESTATES, AND A DHOLE FAMILY WALKING TOGETHER.



HI, I'M SELVI, AND I AM AN ASIATIC WILD DOG. WE ARE COMMONLY KNOWN AS DHOLES! I'M THE ALPHA FEMALE, WHICH MEANS I'M THE CO-LEADER OF OUR PACK.





NORMALLY, WE DHOLES LIVE IN FORESTS, BUT IN VALPARAI, WE'VE ADJUSTED TO LIVING IN TEA, COFFEE, AND CARDAMOM ESTATES.

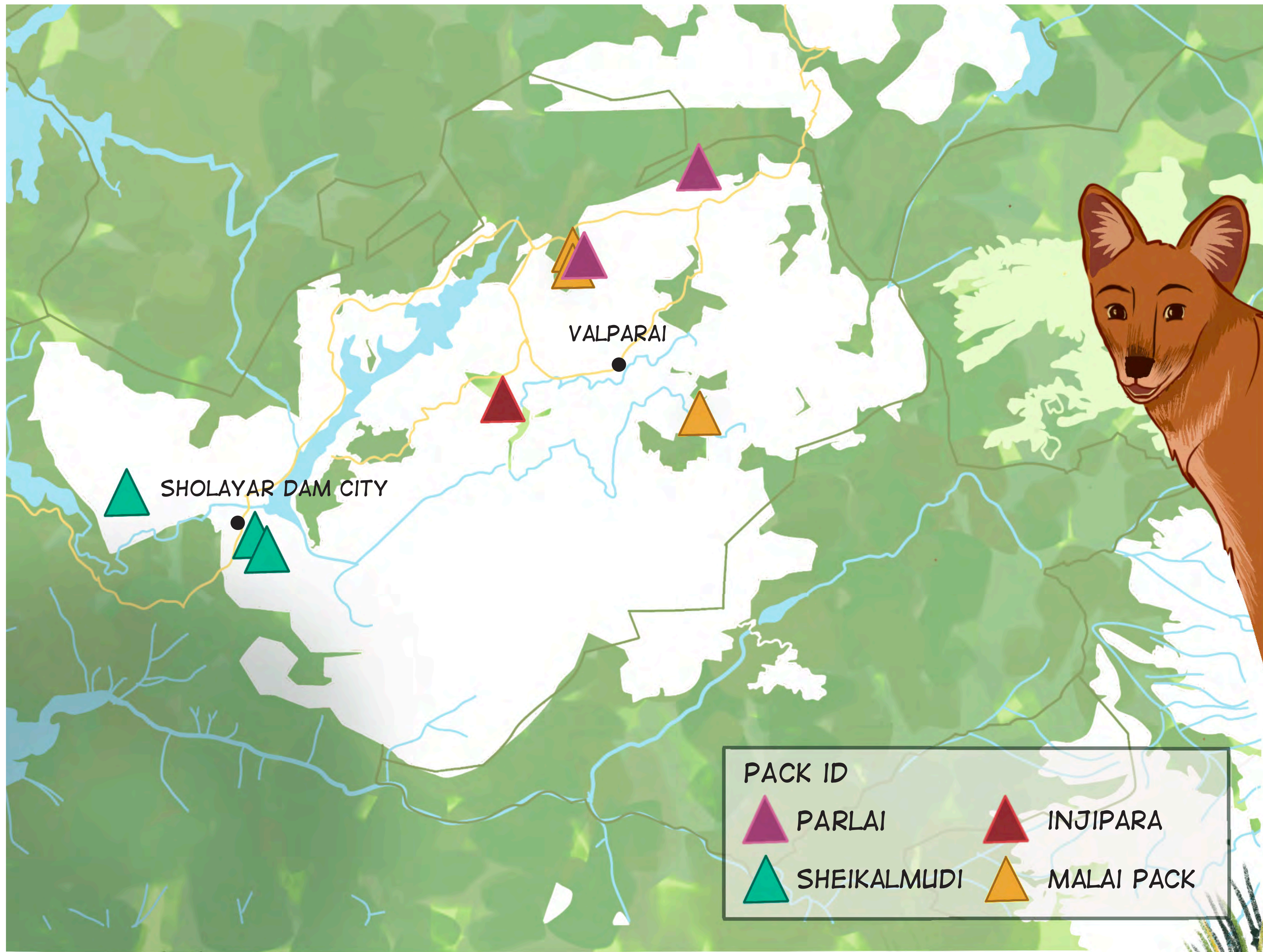




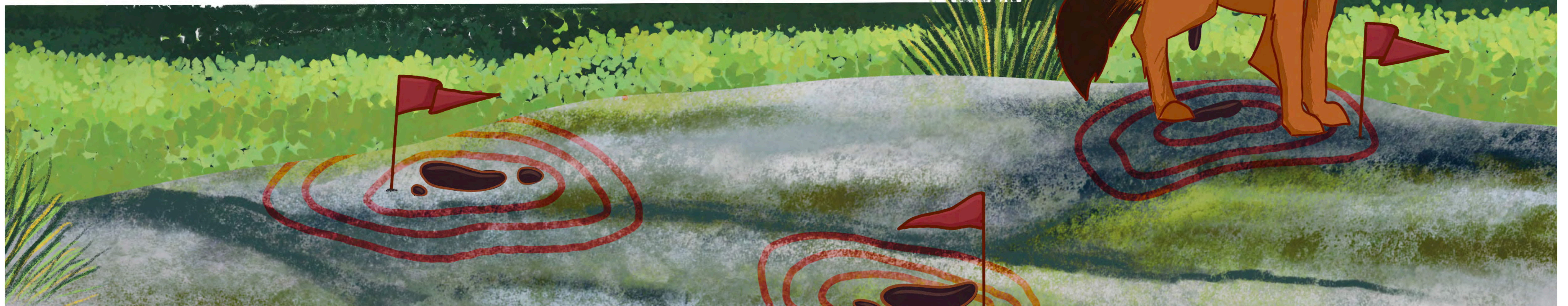


WE LOVE WATER, SO YOU'LL  
OFTEN FIND US NEAR  
STREAMS AND SWAMPS,  
PLAYING AND HAVING FUN.






VALPARAI HAS OTHER DHOLE FAMILIES LIKE US. WE ALL LIVE PEACEFULLY BY MAKING SURE EVERYONE KNOWS WHERE EACH OTHER'S HOMES ARE. HOW DO WE DO THIS? WELL, THAT'S EASY!









LET ME  
INTRODUCE YOU  
TO SOME OF MY  
AMAZING FAMILY  
MEMBERS!




HEY! I'M SATISH, THE  
ALPHA MALE. TOGETHER  
SELVI AND I LEAD OUR  
FAMILY. WE ARE ALSO  
PROUD PARENTS OF  
MOST OF THE PUPS IN  
OUR PACK!



HI, I'M MUTHU. I HELP MOM AND  
DAD TAKE CARE OF THE PUPS AND  
ENSURE THEY STAY SAFE AND  
DON'T GET INTO TROUBLE!

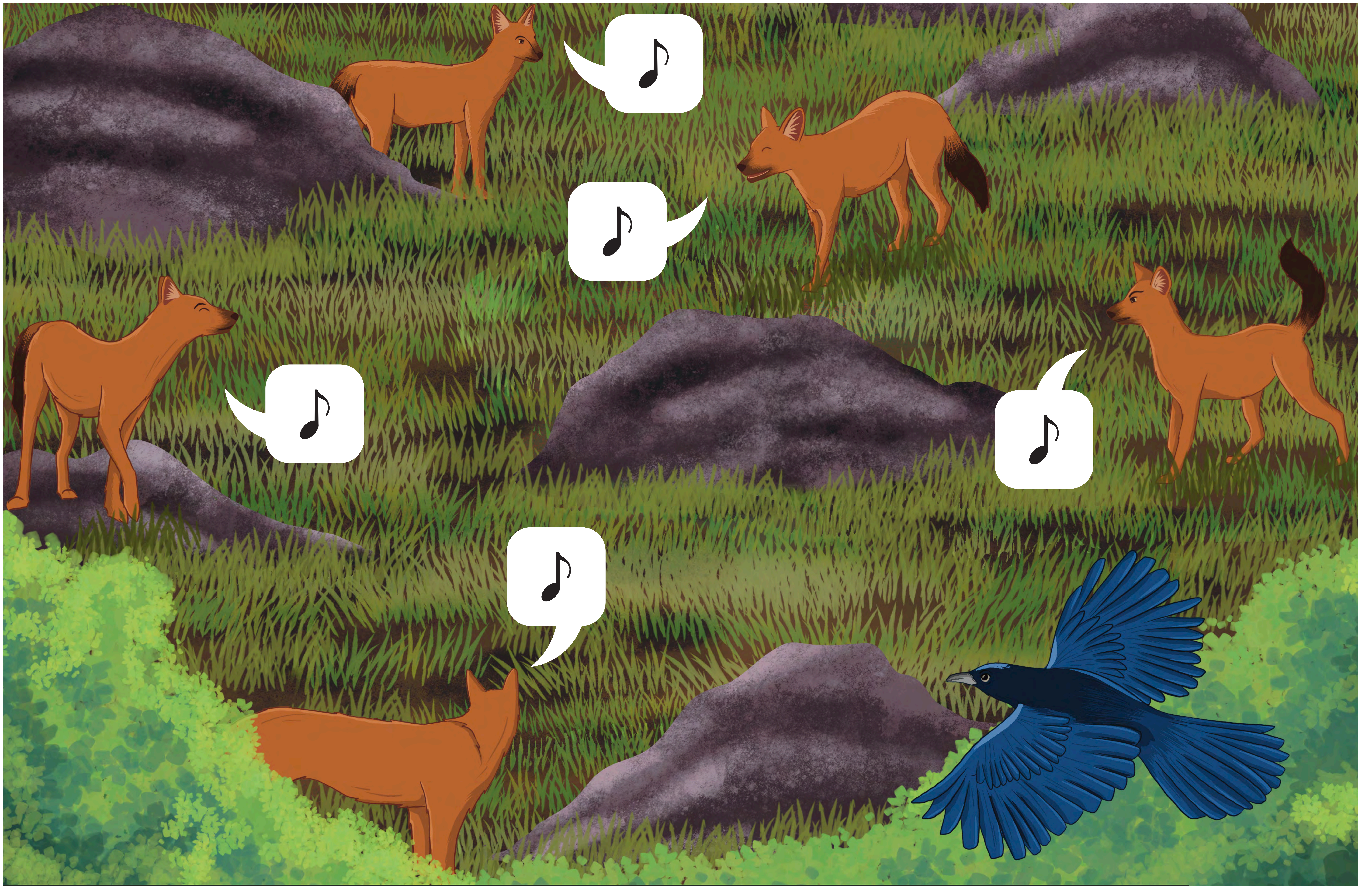


THIS IS MALAR, THE  
YOUNGEST AND MOST  
MISCHIEVOUS IN THE FAMILY.



I'M NOT MISCHIEVOUS! I JUST  
LOVE EXPLORING, SWIMMING,  
AND PLAYING WITH MY  
SIBLINGS. MUTHU CAN BE A BIT  
BOSSY, BUT I STILL LOVE HIM!





LIKE HUMANS, DHOLES COMMUNICATE USING DIFFERENT SOUNDS, EVEN EARNING THEM THE NAME 'WHISTLING HUNTERS'.





TO FEED THE GROWING PUPS, DHOLES HUNT ANIMALS LIKE GAUR, SAMBAR, AND WILD BOAR.





I CAN'T BELIEVE WE TOOK DOWN  
SUCH A BIG ANIMAL!

WHEN DHOLES WORK AS A TEAM  
WE CAN TACKLE EVEN LARGER  
ANIMALS. WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE  
THE PACK IS WELL-FED AFTER ALL!





VALPARAI IS HOME TO MANY KINDS OF ANIMALS APART FROM DHOLES. HUMANS ARE A COMMON SIGHT HERE, BUT WE KNOW HOW TO SHARE OUR SPACE WITH THEM!

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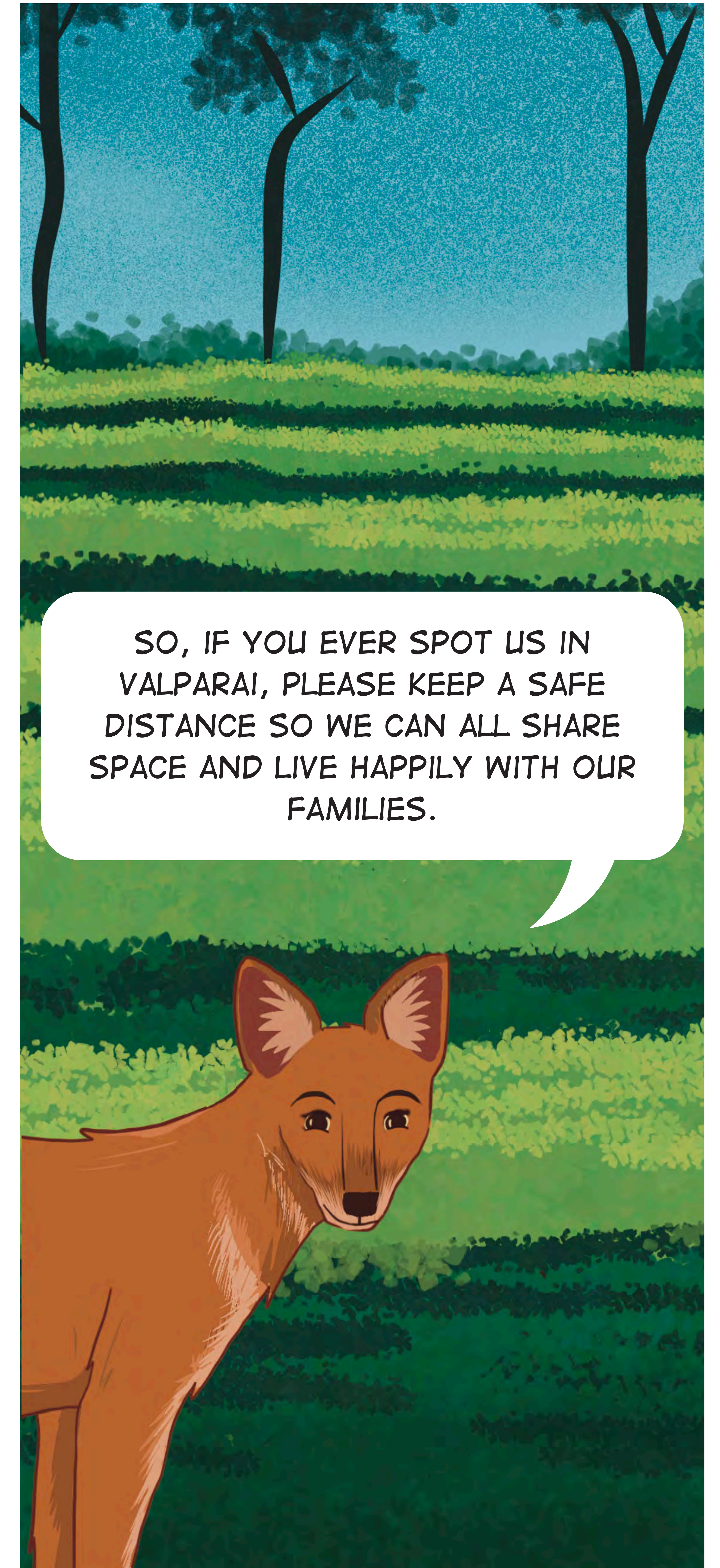


I ALERT MY FAMILY IF ANY CURIOUS HUMANS GET TOO CLOSE.





AND WE MAKE SURE TO KEEP A  
SAFE DISTANCE FROM THEM TO  
AVOID ANY TROUBLES.



SO, IF YOU EVER SPOT US IN  
VALPARAI, PLEASE KEEP A SAFE  
DISTANCE SO WE CAN ALL SHARE  
SPACE AND LIVE HAPPILY WITH OUR  
FAMILIES.



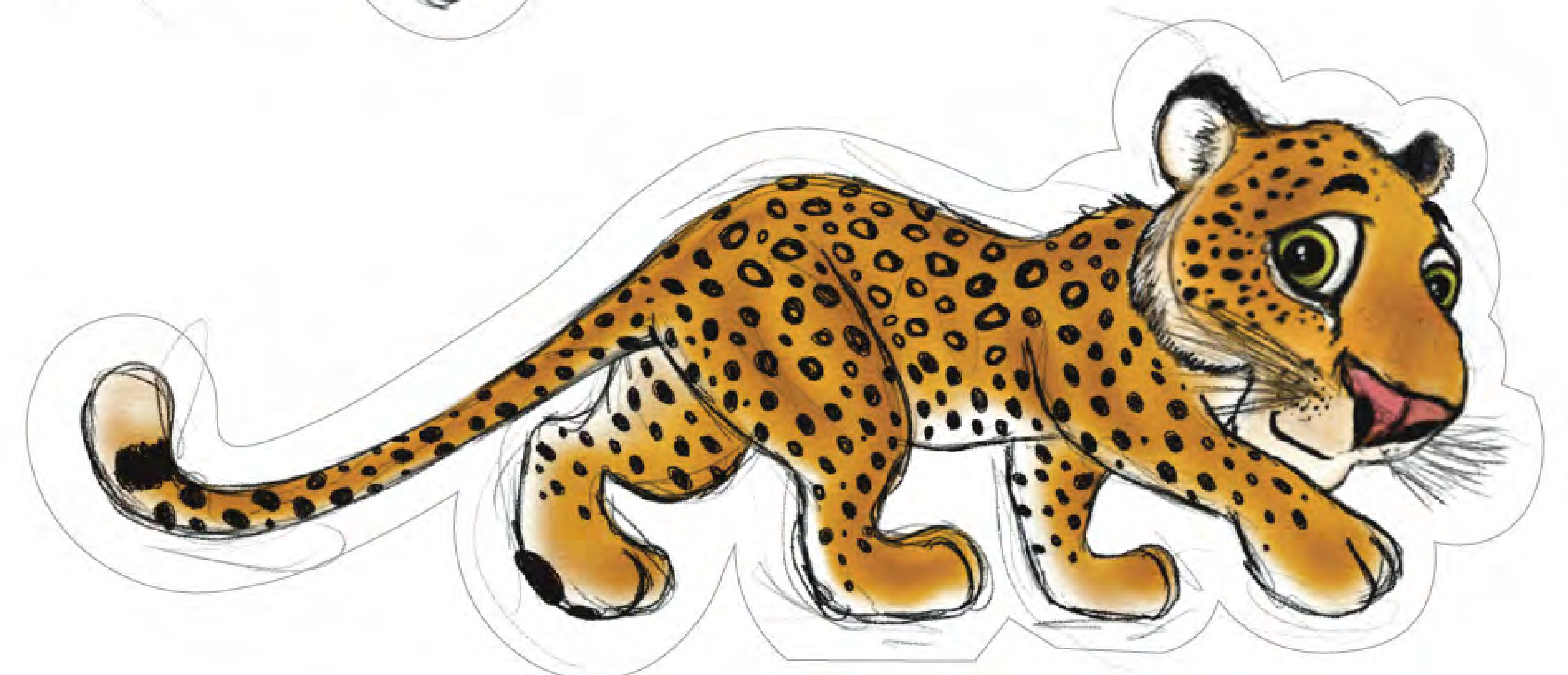


YOU MEAN LIKE THOSE PEOPLE?

YES! RECENTLY THOSE RESEARCHERS HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING US FROM AFAR. THEY SEEM CURIOUS TO LEARN MORE ABOUT US. I WONDER WHAT THEY'RE DOING.













DHOLEPARAI IS A COMIC BOOK WRITTEN BY RESEARCHERS FROM THE WILDLIFE CONSERVATION SOCIETY-INDIA AND THE DHOLE PROJECT. SINCE 2023, OUR PROJECT HAS FOCUSED ON THE DHOLES OF VALPARAI, TO UNDERSTAND WHERE THEY LIVE, WHAT THEY EAT AND HOW MANY PACKS THERE ARE, AND HOW THEY INTERACT WITH PEOPLE. DHOLEPARAI FEATURES A DHOLE PACK THAT SHARES SPACE WITH PEOPLE AND OTHER WILDLIFE OF VALPARAI AND IS BASED ON OBSERVATIONS FROM THE FIELD.

