

Tea gardens to turn wildlife mini-sanctuaries soon

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A number of tea plantations in Assam would soon be converted into wildlife havens to protect its fauna and reduce cases of man-animal conflict.

Apeejay Tea, which owns 17 plantations in Assam, has tied up with wildlife body WWF to initiate elephant conservation measures, while India's second largest tea producer Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited (APPL) is also chalking out a plan to nurture wildlife in its gardens.

"Large mammals cannot be excluded from the tea gardens. It is part of their natural habitat. With their natural habitat depleting rapidly, more such animals have been taking shelter in the tea es-

tates and a sustainable comprehensive management plan is required," AK Bhargava, Managing Director of Apeejay Tea, told PTI here.

Almost like a secondary forest, tea gardens host a number of animals and migratory birds. Among large mammals, leopards are frequently sighted hiding amidst tea bushes while elephants use tea estates for fodder, passage and shelter.

"You will also find many types of deer. Even rhinos cross over to adjoining tea gardens from Kaziranga forest upon flooding," says wildlife expert Robin Eastment, who is preparing an elephant management plan for APPL.

This move will also help reduce human-elephant con-



flict as jumbos are also responsible for damages to the crop and attack on labourers.

Elephant corridor

To allow free movement, Apeejay has decided to make the passage used by elephants through its Sessa Tea Estate in

Sonitpur as a formal elephant corridor.

To facilitate movement of elephants between Kaziranga forest and Karbi Anglong hills, APPL is planning to set aside a part of Hatikhuli and Diftloo tea estates for use as corridor. Once ready, these can also be

used by other animals like leopards and deer.

As their habitat has become fragmented, many animals go to other forests in search of food and shelter crossing tea gardens. This has led to increase in incidents of human-animal conflict.

'No hunting' as policy

Dipankar Ghose, Director (Species and Landscape) WWF-India, said on an average, 400 people get killed in India every year in conflicts with elephants.

Keeping in mind the principle of 'our home and theirs', tea estates are training staff members on the dos and don'ts when they encounter a wild animal on their path.

"Training to live with wild-

life is an ongoing process in our tea gardens. Co-existence is the norm, conflict is the exception. All residents of tea gardens are made aware of 'no hunting' as a policy and a principle of Apeejay Tea," Bhargava says.

Under a three-year strategic partnership with WWF, Apeejay has started implementing a plan to prevent and manage man-elephant conflict in Sonitpur district, the hotbed of such bitter encounters.

"Damage to life and property is the reason for hostility and the conflict that leads to retaliatory killings. The bottom line will have to be capacity building in humans first and where possible giving animals safe passage," Bhargava said.