



Elephants cross the Borjuli tea estate in Sonitpur district. Telegraph picture

A home for jumbos & man

ALIPTA JENA

Calcutta, April 9: “Our home and theirs” is the new approach Apeejay and WWF-India will employ in their fight against the continuous man-animal conflict in Assam.

Apeejay Tea and WWF-India today announced their decision to work together to develop and implement strategies to check the human-elephant conflict in the state, particularly in Sonitpur district, where the highest number of deaths have been recorded in the country so far.

Ashok Bhargava, the managing director of Apeejay Tea Ltd and Dipankar Ghose, the director (species and landscape), WWF-India, addressed a press conference in Calcutta today to outline the project, which will also feature low-cost and eco-friendly measures, such as bio-fencing, for the first time in Assam.

The low-cost fencing will cost only Rs 80,000 per km, while the earlier model cost Rs 3 to Rs 5 lakh per km.

Bhargava, who is also the chairman of the Indian Tea Association, spoke of the need for a sustainable strategy with the collaboration of all stakeholders, including the Assam forest department and the local residents.

“Apeejay Tea recognises the need for a sustainable plan to minimise and resolve human-elephant conflict in the tea gardens of Assam, a plan, which can be easily replicated by other tea estates,” he said.

“A better strategy was needed as the forest habitats of elephants have depleted rapidly and more and more animals have sought shelter in our estates.”



Dipankar Ghose, director, (species and landscape), WWF-India, in Calcutta on Thursday.

Picture by Mayukh Sengupta

Apeejay has four tea estates in Sonitpur — Dhulapadung, Ghoirallie, Borjuli and Sessa.

The first phase of the project will commence immediately in Sonitpur — where there have been 206 human and 131 elephant deaths in the district between 1996 and 2009 — with several new ideas aimed at reducing the loss of life and damage to crop and property.

WWF had earlier implemented the “Sonitpur model” in collaboration with the Assam forest department where locals are trained and equipped to form anti-depredation squads that can drive the wild elephants back using searchlights, firecrackers and *kunki* (trained elephants).

The new project will first undertake a three-month assessment of the damage and focus on prevention and containment meas-

ures. It will calculate the amount of loss in terms of damage to crop, infrastructure, as well as injuries to residents.

Of the 245 people who died in Sonitpur district in the human-elephant conflict from 2001 to 2014, 128 were from the tea estates.

Attributing the human-elephant conflict to habitat degradation, Ghose said they would also develop monitoring systems to track elephants on the move and set up early warning systems.

The route used by elephants through Sessa tea estate will be formalised as a movement corridor and hedged by a bio-fence.

Project to mitigate conflict

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Instead of a regular electric fence, an eco-friendly one made of giant thorny bamboo (*Bambusa bambos*) will be used to line the corridor to deter the herds.

The bio-fence is safe for elephant and other wildlife. Moreover, the bamboo will be grown at nurseries inside the Apeejay tea estates, aiming to produce 40,000 saplings in three years.

The pilot project in Sonitpur district will subsequently be replicated in Nagaon, Golaghat, Sivasagar and Tinsukia districts.

Anupam Sarmah, the head of the north bank landscape, WWF-India, said in spite of the large-scale destruction, many villagers profess that they don't want the animals killed, as they see the elephants as incarnations of Ganesh.

He cited an instance where the villagers refused to send a petition seeking the death of three rogue elephants even after the splinter herd had killed six persons in the span of three days. He also stressed the importance of community involvement in erecting, maintaining and patrolling the fences, as well as early-warning systems.