

# Mayday Calls from the Wild

To minimize incidents of human-elephant conflicts, Assam needs to revive elephant habitats, remove squatters from forest land and re-settle tribes that live off forests away from the elephant corridors, **Bikash Singh** reports

**K**hanapara is a lush-green eastern suburb of Guwahati, now home to some of the toniest five-star hotel properties in the Northeast. An arterial road snakes past Khanapara and forks out at a Y junction, the concrete dual carriageway signalling constant human intrusion into the tranquil animal kingdom just beyond Guwahati's metropolitan limits. One of those roads heads to Shillong, while the other meanders through the outer periphery of thick tropical forests hosting some rare animal species in South Asia, and leads to the easternmost corners of Indian territory.

By its distance from Khanapara, however, the Amchang Wildlife Sanctuary could literally be described as located 'next door', highlighting the fact that the wild is never too far from the tamed in Assam. Exactly two years ago, on November 27, several 'domesticated' elephants, guided by their trained handlers, razed to the ground hundreds of reed huts in this reserve forest to preserve the precious home of their 'wild' fraternity.

This highlights the fragile territorial peace in an eco-sensitive region where elephant habitat is fast dwindling, forcing the largest land animal to leave its forest bailiwick and forage in plantations, paddy fields – or even fruit-laden trucks stranded on highways. The severity of Assam's man-elephant conflict made national headlines yet again this month when a rogue elephant – Laden, aka Krishna – died in captivity at the Orang National Park.

## DEATH IN CAPTIVITY

The rogue elephant, which was tranquilized in the Rongjuli forest division of Goalpara district in western Assam, was in captivity at the Rowmari camp of Orang National Park. It was tranquilized on November 11 by a team of experts, led by BJP legislator from Sootea constituency, Padma Hazarika. The incident sparked a controversy as NGOs, and the Congress, questioned whether the BJP MLA transgressed his brief in shooting the rogue elephant with a tranquilizer dart.

To minimize incidents of human-elephant conflicts, the state needs concerted efforts to create sustainable solutions. They include reviving elephant habitats, removing squatters from forest land, forcing industrial units to vacate land close to elephant habitats, and re-settle tribes that live off forests away from the elephant corridors.

"Using flood lights or fencing are short-term measures," Dr Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar, programme secretary of NGO Aaranyak, told ET. "In the long term, we need to revive the elephant habitat, and clear the encroachment on elephant corridors. Presently, many elephant corridors in Upper Assam are encroached upon by industrial units."

The drive to increase elephant habitat is work-in-progress. Forest Minister Parimal Suklabaidya said that while 3,780.1102 sq km (of the total 17,408.187 sq km) forest land in Assam is still under encroachment, the present government has freed 27.61 sq km hectares of illegally occupied land.



The rogue elephant which was tranquilised by the forest department died in captivity on Nov 17

**This is a region where the elephant habitat is fast dwindling, forcing the largest land animal to leave its forest bailiwick and forage in plantations, paddy fields – or even fruit-laden trucks stranded on highways**

Furthermore, the corridors should not stop elephants from moving across man-made state boundaries.

"We also need to facilitate interstate movement of elephants. Presently, it is difficult for the elephant to move from the Assam side to Meghalaya," said Lahkar.

Suklabaidya said that around 750 people and 250 elephants have died in human-elephant conflicts between 2010 and 2018.

The biggest causes were electrocution (92), followed by train accidents (54), accidental (38), poisoning (30), poaching (20) and injury (15). Human fatalities have also increased, highlighting the severity of the problem.

Most of these casualties have been reported from the districts of Sonitpur, Udalguri, Baksa, Golaghat, Nagaon, Goalpara and Karbi Anglong. Suklabaidya said Rs 85.74 crore ex gratia has been released in the past eight years on account of human-elephant conflict.

The government said that in order to reduce the conflicts, elephant depredation squads have been formed in each district, comprising officials of district administration, local villagers and NGOs. Solar fencing has also been installed in some places.

Considering the gravity of the situation, wildlife NGO Aaranyak has asked state government to declare the man-elephant conflict a disaster.

"Declaring this as a disaster will mean there will be funds for mitigation, and compensation will be paid," said Lahkar. "Presently, payment of compensation for damages to crops has huge backlog, causing anger among farmers. Besides, there will be SDRF and NDRF team to assist the affected people. Uttar Pradesh has done it and it is showing good results."

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Efforts are on to reduce the conflict. Products of Bhut Jolokia or chili of Capsicum Chinese family like chilli-cakes and chilli fences have experimentally proved effective in keeping wild elephants at bay. The chili-coated iron bar works as a deterrent for elephants entering paddy fields or villages.

## CRUSHING THE FIRST FLUSH

Tea estates of Assam, which produce 52 percent of India's tea, are particularly vulnerable.

Apeejay Tea and WWF India achieved success in reducing incidents of human-elephant conflict and bringing down the financial loss at Apeejay Tea Estates by 74 percent in the last three years.

Renu Kakkar, Director CSR, Apeejay Surrendra Group, said: "More than half the deaths caused by human-elephant conflict were recorded from tea gardens in Sonitpur, when Apeejay Tea and WWF India decided to work together. Low-cost solar power fences installed across the Apeejay Tea estates have demonstrated the effectiveness in minimizing the loss to human life and property, a concept that has already been adopted by many government and non-government agencies in the state."