

Anti-depredation squads mooted to check marauding jumbos

SIVASISH THAKUR

GUWAHATI, April 20: With Sonitpur district at the centre of a raging man-elephant conflict for years, conservationists have stressed the need for – aside the long-term strategy of forest protection – effective deployment of anti-depredation squads (ADS) to mitigate the situation, especially in warding off marauding herds of elephants.

For the anti-depredation squads to function effectively, it is imperative that members of these squads are trained and sensitised on the basic do's and don'ts while trying to prevent elephants from causing depredation in human settlements.

Significantly, functioning of these squads along with adoption of other measures has changed the behaviour of the people living in vulnerable areas towards elephants. As there is less panic or aggres-

sive reaction by the villagers and enhanced cooperation with forest personnel, the situation is easing, conservationists claim. As of now, there are around 100 such squads working in conflict areas across Assam.

"Anti-depredation squads can be effective in mitigating the man-elephant conflict. In Sonitpur district which has been a hotbed of man-elephant conflict, these squads have been successful in easing the situation, especially in reducing the incidence of human fatalities," Dr Anupam Sarmah, Head, Assam Landscapes, WWF-India, told *The Assam Tribune*.

With vast stretches of tea garden areas falling in the man-elephant conflict zone, many such squads have been engaged in and around tea gardens for easing the conflict.

"WWF-India and Apeejay Tea have collaborated since



2015 to mitigate and manage the man-elephant conflict in Sonitpur. Approximately 25 anti-depredation squads have been formed in Sessa, Ghoirallie, Dhulapadung and Borjuli tea estates. In addition, 75 such squads have been formed in other parts of Sonitpur and across Assam," Dr Sarmah added.

An orientation programme was organised at Apeejay Tea's Dhulapadung Tea Estate

on Thursday for sensitising the estate's anti-depredation squad members on avoiding any negative interaction with wild elephants. The members in turn are spreading the message to their fellow villagers. Over 60 members from four tea gardens of Apeejay Tea – Sessa, Ghoirallie, Dhulapadung and Borjuli – attended the programme.

The seven orientation programmes held recently in sev-

eral tea estates were attended by over 600 people who were oriented on the basic do's and don'ts of elephant behaviour and man-elephant conflict management methods.

"These squads along with many other measures have changed the people's behaviour towards elephants, especially in Apeejay tea estates whose managements are taking the matter seriously. Awareness activities have also been undertaken in other tea estates in Sonitpur at a larger scale as part of WWF-India's joint project with Apeejay Tea, including the entire tea garden complex in the western part of the district. Recently in Naharani Tea Estate under Amalgamated Plantation Limited, an orientation camp was attended by over 50 participants from Naharani and Hatibari estates," Dr Sarmah said.

The camps cover topics like elephant behaviour, basic do's

and don'ts to avoid negative interaction, role of good communication in minimising man-elephant conflict, handling and maintaining of search lights, fire crackers, solar-powered fences, etc.

"This is a part of the conflict mitigation initiatives taken under the WWF-Apeejay Tea collaboration. An open discussion was also held with a local wildlife conservationist, Sourav Barkataki, where he explained the role of other animals in our ecosystem and requested the participants to contact him during any wildlife rescue operation, especially handling and rescuing of snakes," he added.

After the theoretical sessions, practical demonstration of low-cost power fence, use of chilli smoke and chilli rope fence and use of chilli fire cracker is done to highlight their effectiveness in checking elephant depredation.