

Mini-sanctuaries to protect wildlife in TEs

KOLKATA, July 26: 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 and more such animals have been taking shelter in the tea estates 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

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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 the adjoining tea gardens from the Kaziranga forest upon flooding," says wildlife expert Robin Eastment, who is preparing an elephant management plan for the APPL.

This move will also help reduce human-elephant conflict, as jumbos are also responsible for crop damage and attacks on labourers.

To allow free movement, Apeejay has decided to make the passage, used by elephants through the Sessa Tea Estate in Sonitpur, a formal elephant corridor.

To facilitate the movement of elephants between the Kaziranga forest and the Karbi Anglong hills, the APPL is also planning to set aside a part of the Hatikhuli and Diffloo tea estates for use as corridors. Once ready, these corridors 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 the increase in incidents of human-animal conflict, a big headache for those working in tea estates.

Dipankar Ghose, Director (Species and Landscape) WWF-India, said on an average 400 people get killed in

India every year in conflicts with elephants. — PTI