

Human-élephant conflicts on the rise in tea gardens across state

Naresh.Mitra@timesgroup.com

Guwahati: The tea gardens of Assam are increasingly turning into human-animal conflict zones. Of the 748 human and 186 elephant deaths between 2007 and 2017, over 70% of the casualties were in the tea gardens, an assessment by WWF-India shows. An estimated 5,620 elephants are in Assam. Conservationists observed that tea gardens over the years have become 'secondary habitats' for elephants. They spend most time of the year in the plantation areas, thereby coming in direct conflict with humans (garden workers).

Scientific intervention of mitigation measures in four tea gardens in Sonitpur district have shown that the conflict level can be brought down to a significant level. This prompted WWF-India to seek a formulation of conflict management protocol by Project Elephant so that the model could be replica-



A house destroyed by elephants at Nunaikhuti in Udalguri district earlier this month

ted in all the tea plantation areas in the country.

"The success we achieved in bringing down the level of human and elephant casualty in the four tea gardens of Sonitpur through mitigation approaches and community participation, calls for implementation of the model in other tea estates. We are going to move Project Elephant for a standard operating procedure (SOP) to deal with human-elephant conflict in gar-

dens," WWF-India's director of species and landscape, Dipankar Ghose, said. The four tea gardens—Borjuli, Ghoirallie, Dhulapadung and Sessa—are owned by Apeejay Tea.

WWF-India's Brahma-putra landscape team leader, Anupam Sarmah, said among the interventions put into practice to bring down conflict were a 15.5 km low-cost solar-powered fence covering 13 locations, a pool of 300 trained anti-depreda-

tion squads, early warning system for elephants, bio-fences using thorny bamboos and a series of awareness campaigns. Sarmah said the project—implemented between 2015 and 2018—also brought down financial loss by 74%. "In monetary terms, the financial loss in the four gardens was Rs 29 lakh in 2015. It came down to Rs 7 lakh in 2017 in the four tea gardens," he added.

Apeejay's corporate social responsibility director Renu Kakkar said meeting with other tea company owners is being planned so that the conflict mitigation model is implemented in other gardens of the district. "Apeejay Tea was perhaps the first tea company to fund an intensive conflict management strategy in Sonitpur. As a donor as well as a victim of human-elephant conflict, the success of our partnership with WWF-India has brought us valuable insights on solution," Kakkar said.