

Our home and theirs

Corporates' initiatives reduce man-animal conflict

APEEJAY

An elephantine task



A bio-fence for the jumbo

Apeejay Tea in partnership with WWF-India has taken steps towards finding lasting solutions to prevent and manage Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) in Assam by implementing an exhaustive management strategy that would lead to substantial reduction in conflict and mortality rates of both humans and elephants from those recorded in 2013.

The idea was to think beyond securing its tea estates from wild elephant attacks, but considering a holistic approach at reducing wildlife conflict in the most affected elephant landscapes of the state.

A matrix is being developed to calculate the quantum of loss that is usually borne by tea estates on account of damage to property, including tea bushes and shade trees, infrastructure and injuries among residents, to bring the HEC issue in strategic focus and attract attention and investment for a new agenda for adaptation and management that would benefit the region.

New paths have been mapped for elephants for the first time in the tea gardens. Securing elephant movement

path adjacent to Sessa, an Apeejay Tea garden in Sonitpur, will be the start point for tracking and early warning of elephants on the move. The route used by elephants through Sessa Tea Estate is being formalised as a movement corridor. The nurseries for growing thorny bamboo as a new kind of bio-fence will be inside the Apeejay Tea estates in Sonitpur.

The project was initiated in Sonitpur, the second largest district in Assam known to have historically borne the brunt of human-elephant conflict, recording the most human deaths and damage to crops in the state for years.

Apeejay Tea, one of India's largest and oldest tea producers, has four tea estates in the "hot zone" – Dhulapadung, Ghoirallie, Borjuli and Sessa – in Sonitpur district. WWF India had a very successful "Sonitpur Model" for the area.

The company had already been working with other NGOs and the Forest Department of Assam to conserve and protect wild life, including elephants as part of its approach of "our home and theirs". However, it felt the need for a better, stronger and sustainable

coexistence strategy as the forest habitats of elephants were depleting rapidly and more animals were seeking shelter in Apeejay Tea estates.

From 2001 to 2014, out of 245 people who died in Sonitpur due to human-elephant conflict, 128 people were from the tea estates. The large number of people killed by elephants escalated in 2001 leading to 32 elephants being killed in retaliation in a single year.

When the project was taken up, the conflict became more severe with large volumes of crops getting destroyed, people getting killed, and ultimately elephants being killed in retaliation. Thus the company partnered with WWF India for enhancing the scope and impact of the Sonitpur model with the focus on piloting new ideas for mitigating HEC.

There were problems in raising a thorny bamboo fence due to massive construction activity in the nearby industrial area.

Scaling up of the low cost power fence model (adopted by different forest divisions in Assam) has benefited about 200,000 people. A total of 61 km of low cost fence has been constructed in Assam, a WWF India innovation, as a landscape level investment towards minimising human-elephant conflict in the region. Nine km has been constructed in Apeejay's four gardens to protect the most vulnerable residential areas within the gardens and to reduce elephant inflicted loss to human life and property. It has saved about 200 hectares of paddy (worth ₹1 crore).

The firm has planted 9,457 saplings of thorny bamboo procured from various corners of India in nurseries created in two of its four HEC effected gardens, Sessa and Dhulapadung, and completed plantation of sapling for bio-fence, about 1 km, bordering the industrial area in Sessa – an area elephants used as a resting place as they moved to the other side.