

CLEARING THE PATH: ON PROTECTING ELEPHANT CORRIDORS

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Degradation - Wildlife related issues

The Supreme Court's order to seal and close 27 resorts operating in corridors used by elephants in the Nilgiris is a necessary step to restore the ecology of these spaces. Weak regulation of ecotourism is severely impacting important habitats, and affecting animals that have large home ranges, like elephants. Fragmentation of forests makes it all the more important to preserve migratory corridors. The movement of elephants is essential to ensure that their populations are genetically viable, and help regenerate forests on which other species, including tigers, depend. Ending human interference in the pathways of elephants is a conservation imperative, more so because the animals are then not forced to seek alternative routes that bring them into conflict with people. Forests that have turned into farms and unbridled tourism are blocking their paths, resulting in growing incidents of elephant-human conflict. These encounters claim the lives of about 450 people and lead to the death of nearly 100 elephants in retaliatory actions every year on average.

A review of elephant corridors published by the Wildlife Trust of India jointly with the Environment Ministry's Project Elephant last year indicates that there are 101 such identified pathways, of which almost 70% are used regularly. Nearly three-quarters of the corridors are evenly divided among southern, central and northeastern forests, while the rest are found in northwest Bengal and the northwestern region. Some of these passages are precariously narrow, at only a hundred metres wide. These landscape characteristics, and the evidence that there are an estimated 6,500 elephants in just the Brahmagiri-Nilgiris-Eastern Ghats ranges, call for complete protection of the routes they regularly use. Surprisingly, the District Collector's report on 39 resorts in the Nilgiris points to their having come up right under the gaze of the Forest Department, the majority without the requisite permissions. This must be thoroughly investigated to check whether there was any wrongdoing. The grey area of mushrooming home-stay structures, which are just hotels on forest fringes, also deserves scrutiny. But more importantly, the effort should be to expand elephant corridors, using the successful models within the country, including acquisition of lands using private funds and their transfer to the government. Among the major factors affecting conservation, two need quick remedies: about 40% of elephant reserves are vulnerable, as they are not within protected parks and sanctuaries; and the corridors have no specific legal protection. Illegal structures in these pathways should be removed without delay.

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