

## Elephantine threat: Assam considering sedation, relocation of aggressive animals

Two herds of aggressive elephants and a lone rogue may be sedated for a sobering effect and relocated.

Assam wildlife officials are keen on replicating their Uttarakhand counterparts' jumbo-relocation experiment for reducing man-elephant conflicts in western Assam. But the job is easier said than done, as other elephant habitats and corridors in Assam are under stress.

About half of 58 elephant corridors in the northeast, comprising 35% of the country's, are in Assam. More than 15 of these corridors, used by an estimated 9,350 elephants, are under the Northeast Frontier Railway.

### 'Stadium without exit'

Human habitations and barriers such as electric fences and trenches have blocked some of these corridors that once enabled movement of the two herds comprising 40-50 elephants between Assam's Goalpara district and Garo Hills of Meghalaya. With nowhere to go, the elephants have virtually been confined within a small area that forest officials likened to a stadium without any exit.

"The elephants have become like football, kicked around from one part of the stadium to the other. The fact that scores of reserve forests and proposed reserve forests in the district are fragmented and interspersed with villages and illegal fishermen controlling a 50 sq km wetland called Urpada Beel, which the elephants used to wallow in, have complicated matters," Dev Prakash Bankhwal, Principal Chief Conservator of Forest (Wildlife), told *The Hindu* on Tuesday.

### 17 people killed

Goalpara has 103 reserve forests, covering 20% of the district's landmass. Most of the elephants have been forced to move about in a 300 sq km area for more than two years now.

Cornered, the herds and a lone makhna – male without tusks – have turned aggressive, raiding villages and killing at least 17 people this year.

More worrying for wildlife officials and activists is the fact that conflicts are happening throughout the year, instead of winter months as in the past.

The gravity of the problem in Goalpara made the State forest department call all wildlife officials and veterinarians for a meeting on Monday to work out strategies.

"The Brahmaputra Valley is very narrow and does not have space for so many elephants and humans to coexist without conflicts. This is an intractable problem since elephants find their movement blocked almost everywhere," Mr. Bankhwal said.

One of the strategies discussed was translocation of the rogue loner and other 'troublemakers' in the herds. Officials said they have been encouraged by a similar experiment near Rajaji National Park in Uttarakhand.

An aggressive male near Rajaji was sedated and relocated 40 km away across a river. It eventually returned to its old haunts but was "sobered" by the displacement, officials said.

"That elephant has become less aggressive, maybe because of some kind of fright that it might be

captured again and sent elsewhere. We are thinking on those lines, but the biggest challenge is finding suitable locations for translocation,” Mr. Bankhwal said.

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