

Casualties increase as humans, jumbos cross paths

Vanishing boundaries: Experts say there is an urgent need for long term mitigation plans to contain human-elephant conflict. Special arrangement

Thirty-two people have been killed by wild elephants in West Bengal in the past six months, between April and September 2017. While these figures indicate a decline in the trend of human-elephant conflict for the year 2017-18 when compared with earlier years, the State is still grappling with this jumbo problem.

In a reply to a question raised by Rajya Sabha member N.L. Panchariya, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change on March 20, 2017, presented figures which made it clear that West Bengal recorded the highest human deaths in attacks by elephants in 2014-15 and 2015-16.

During the year 2016-17, 84 people died in elephant attacks, while the number of human deaths in 2015-16 was as high as 112.

West Bengal Forest Minister Binay Krishna Barman said that a drop in human deaths between April to September 2017 is a result of a number of steps taken by the State government. On October 13, 2017, Mr. Barman launched four special vehicles named Airawat for tackling human-wild conflict in north Bengal. Four such vehicles, with facilities for tranquillising animals and tracking their movement, are already working in south Bengal.

Raman Sukumar, Bangaluru-based elephant expert and Professor at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science (IISc), said that, till the 1980s, there was no elephant population in south Bengal, except in a few border areas.

Not a natural habitat

The problem arose with the increase in the elephant population, and conflict mitigation became more challenging, particularly in south Bengal. He added that the fragmented forests of south Bengal are not a natural habitat for elephants.

S. Kulandaivel, Chief Conservator of Forests-West Bengal, said that in south Bengal, elephant herds have changed their food habits and now survive on agricultural crops, juicy vegetables and fruit crops. Among a number of initiatives that the State Forest Department has taken to mitigate the conflict, Mr. Kulandaivel lists planting trees like bamboo and sal in the forests of south Bengal as elephant fodder.

Monitoring movement

The State Forest Department has also set up an Elephant Movement Coordination Committee (EMCC), where updates on the movement of elephant herds are given via bulk SMS alerts.

The data of the State Forest Department reflects some success in districts like Bankura, where 35 human deaths were recorded 2015-16, 13 human deaths in 2016-17, and three human deaths in the first six months of 2017-18.

The latest figures provide some hope to forest officials in south Bengal, where, from 71 human deaths in 2015-16 and 36 human deaths in 2016-17, the number has come down to 10 human deaths in the first six months of 2017-18.

The situation in north Bengal, however, remains unchanged with 41 human deaths in 2015-16, 47 human deaths in 2016-17, and 22 human deaths in the first six months of 2017-18.

“We are hopeful that we can take this success forward. Moreover, the State Forest department has placed a lot of emphasis on sensitising people over the past few years, and now people have become more aware of how to deal with elephants who stray away from herds,” Mr. Kulandaivel said.

However, experts like Mr. Sukumar, who have been working closely with State Forest Department and have suggested steps to manage the elephant population in south Bengal, said that there is an urgent need for long-term mitigation plans to contain human-elephant conflict.

“I am happy with the outcome but we should not be under any illusion as the elephant population is increasing in West Bengal. If the elephant population continues to rise, we have to try other forms of management like contraception, and capture and relocation of elephants to other States,” he said.

West Bengal recorded 682 elephants in the 2017 census.

The number of human-elephant conflicts here is much higher than in States like Karnataka, which has 6,049 elephants in the 2017 census, almost ten times the number of elephants in West Bengal.

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