

## **Human-animal conflict and challenges of wildlife and biodiversity conservation in the Indian subcontinent**

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Human-animal conflicts have been turning into major tragic incidents across the Indian subcontinent. The regular collisions and running over of wildlife (such as elephants, bisons, leopards etc) by passenger and goods train is alarming. It is frustrating to note that the coordination between the forest departments and the railways has not worked favorably to implement safety regulations for protecting the defenseless wildlife. There is absolute need for implementing stringent monitoring, surveillance and legal actions for those responsible for the wildlife massacres. While plans have been accepted for introducing extensive railways tracks connecting NE India, rich in wildlife and biodiversity; it is worrisome what could be the probable consequence on the safety of animals crossing such tracks if no successful long term approach is adopted to avoid the unfortunate incidents. The shocking, macabre and sickly incident of local goons mercilessly killing three helpless spotted (axis) deer to satisfy the crushed ego of a local politician on the outskirts of the Betla Reserve, Palamu district, Jharkhand reported in October, 2014 clearly portrays the poor situation of wildlife conservation in the country. The incident reported in Indian media sent shockwaves among wildlife enthusiasts of the world. News of poaching of highly endangered rhinos is quite common from NE India. But recently, poachers are surfacing in north Bengal with over four incidents of rhino poaching reported from the region. The poaching of rhinos and other endangered wildlife in north Bengal was anticipated to increase due to increased security, monitoring and surveillance in the NE.

The anticipation turned true with more news of rhino poaching surfacing from north Bengal taking advantage of the lack of economic opportunities in the region and a poorly organized and ill equipped forest department; more such sad news will be appearing in the media in the not so distant future. There is a grim possibility that the forest department is hiding more poaching reports on rhinos and wildlife from the region to avoid being targeted by the media, NGOs and the public for their failure in securing protection of the defenseless wildlife in this highly vulnerable eco-region. The region being economically ill developed with lack of credible employment; there is high risk that several poor youths from the region will be targeted as porters, trackers, couriers and

in providing local intelligence and temporary accommodation for the highly organized poaching units from NE. The local state forest department together with the local administration neither has the technology and available intelligence network; nor funding and manpower to effectively counter this insurgence in remote rural reaches of the state. The result could be devastating with rapid deterioration of vulnerable wildlife from this majestic yet extremely fragile ecosystem. Unless a highly coordinated surveillance and back up unit is raised in close collaboration with the NE states (particularly Assam) and the Central Government there could be massacre of wildlife being soft targets for highly organized poaching units operational in these regions.

The human-animal conflict with respect to elephants for the past three decades has turned into a serious problem not only in West Bengal; but also in the adjoining states of Jharkhand, Orissa and Assam and in the neighboring countries of Nepal and Bhutan as well. Although the general belief is that the elephant population has increases beyond the carrying capacity of the local forests; the fact is quite different. The population density of elephants have increased in some pockets of WB in the north, west and the southern belts along the border with adjoining states and along the international boundaries with Nepal and Bhutan. However, one has to keep in mind the illegal encroachments by local inhabitants over decades into the forested land, expansion of illegal agricultural lands, tea gardens and human settlements dangerously close to forest fringes and subsequent degradation of the forest habitats due to rapid forest fragmentation and destruction of the traditional migration corridors of the helpless animals. This is not just the story of West Bengal or Assam, but for the entire region where this majestic species have their habitats devastatingly fragmented. Census need to be conducted throughout the habitat in eastern and NE India and neighboring countries to get a clear understanding of their population dynamics, migration patterns and habits of the elephants. In addition, a survey of the habitat quality is also important to asses and comprehensively understands the problem to develop suitable and sustainable, long term strategies to address the human-animal conflict and deal with the anthropogenic issues for better wildlife management and conservation in future. A sincere, dedicated and coordinated effort is therefore necessary from all the stakeholders involved for a long term and sustainable solution.

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