

## In Assam's tea estates, how do we find a way to save both people and pachyderms?

Assam is synonymous with some of India's finest teas. But it comes at a bitter cost: serious human-elephant conflict. The situation is particularly grim in Sonitpur district, where, between 1996 and 2009, 206 people and 131 elephants died (more than half of them in tea estates).

"Death and grievous injury to residents, damage to tea plantations and company infrastructure, and loss of productivity were just some of the consequences," says Renu Kakkar, Director of Corporate Social Responsibility at Apeejay Surrendra Group, which owns four tea estates in Sonitpur.

So how can we find a way to save both people and pachyderms? The question brought Apeejay and the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF-India) together. They initiated the Human Elephant Conflict Management Project in 2015 in Sonitpur's Sessa tea estate, where the clashes were particularly high.

Noticing that wild elephants used this corridor when moving between the Sonai-Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary and Nameri National Park, the company decided to devote it to the pachyderms. People were trained to leave the passages for the elephants to use and bio-fences of thorny bamboo are now being created to prevent elephants from venturing into human-dominated areas.

Dark areas have been lit up with solar lights to avoid sudden confrontations; *kumkis* (trained captive elephants) are employed to drive away wild elephants; and elephant raid routes are constantly mapped to monitor their movement.

Through street plays, village meetings, orientation programmes for the Anti Depredation Squad and film screenings, the team has demonstrated non-confrontational conflict management to the villagers, such as using chilli smoke and firecrackers to frighten off the animals.

Now, apart from nine kilometres of biofence that continues to grow in Apeejay's estates in Sonitpur, WWF-India's successfully tested single strand solar fences (14.4 km-long) are in use here; around 80 km of solar fences are used in nearby estates as well. "Apeejay Tea and WWF-India plan to develop Sessa as a model tea garden with all vulnerable areas secured by solar-energised fences and bio-fences," says Anupam Sarmah who heads the North Bank Landscape and Kaziranga-Karbi Anglong Landscape Programmes (WWF-India).

What began as a landscape-level CSR initiative is now being extended to other tea estates (including small-scale tea growers and large companies such as McLeod Russell). Apeejay will also extend it to estates in the Dibrugarh and Sibsagar districts.

According to Kakkar, four of Apeejay's estates have seen a drop in conflict. "Training and consistent counselling have made workers less hostile towards elephants and made them understand that their presence in tea gardens cannot be completely avoided," she says. "And that they must be given the right of way."

Jaggi Vasudev's Rally for Rivers claims they will, but this is not based on the most nuanced science

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