



The Conservation Status of Asian Elephants: Issues and Challenges

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There are only two living representative of Proboscidea, the African Elephants (*Loxodonta Africana*) and the Asian Elephant (*Elephas maximus*) are still living in the blue planet even after a prolonged evolution of the species since the Eocene. The Great Elephant Census of 2016 conducted in the 18 African countries estimates that only 352,271 Great Elephants left in the savanna of Africa. Whereas the conservationists believe that the number of the African savanna elephant was as high as 20 million prior to the European colonization. In 1979 the number reduced to 1.3 million and still declining rapidly.

The elephants like all other animals struggling to survive fighting an unequal battle against the ever expanding human civilization. The elephant has had a glorious and an infamous association with the human in all over the world. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) have enlisted the both the elephants in the Red list of Threatened Species as 'Endangered Asian Elephants' and 'Vulnerable African Elephants'. The government adopted policies to protect the elephants in their habitat and the elephant corridors. In Africa, the elephants are the target for the hunter for ivory. In Asia they are symbol of the God and also the burden for the people.

South Asia is the roaming ground of almost 50% of wild Asian Elephants. Prior to the foundation of the settlements an extended elephant corridor existed from the foot hills of Himalayan foothills of Bhutan, North Bengal to the eastwards into the state of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya, to Bangladesh and Burma. The habitat in North Bengal is highly fragmented due to various development activities like conversion of forest into tea plantations, settlements, agriculture and exploitation of timber. Human expansion in the fragmented landscape it causes has increased the level of human wildlife conflicts.

The jungle of the Orient regarded as the obstruction for the expansion of the civilization. In colonial mind it was a hiding place for the games, full of danger, disorder and vegetative access. Jungle acquires negative connotations through their association with diseases especially through the malaria fevers. The wild elephants and the other furious beast were projected in colonial mind as an 'enemies of improvement'. In general in European mind orient was 'a place of romance, exotic beings, hunting memories and landscape, remarkable experience'. But in contrary to that the Terai was 'a dread belt of fever- laden forest' or a 'zone of malaria and black water fever'. This region had always been dreaded by the Europeans.

When a Haileybury educated newly appointed young British official came to India, they already learnt how to deal with the wild beasts in India. The knowledge and experience of their predecessor helped them to dominate the wild animals including the elephants in their own jungle. Knowledge about the wildlife give them the power to dominate the savage beasts. In late 19th century an average 400 elephants were captured or killed in the surroundings of Eastern Duars and Assam. In 1916-17 total 621 elephants were killed or captured in Goalpara and Bengal. Gunning wrote 'Elephants, which are increasing in numbers in the district, are very trouble- some; the trample down and destroy young trees, interrupt work and do much trouble in the forest villages. The forest offences are neither numerous nor serious, the majority being cases of cattle trespass.'

The Government of India launched 'Project Elephant' in 1992 by Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change. The National Elephant Conservation Authority (NECA) was created under the project. The Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change and Ministry of Railway working together to protect the elephants from getting hit and killed by the railways. International bilateral initiative 'First Indo-Bangladesh Dialogue on Trans-boundary Conservation of Elephants held on 19-20 August, 2015 at Kolkata to facilitate natural migration of elephants between two countries through identified elephant corridors.

Elephant is included under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The Central Government is providing financial assistance to States under the Centrally-sponsored Scheme Project Elephant since 1992, for protection and management of elephants and its habitat. There have been no reports of killing of elephants for ivory with the indirect help of forest officials. Many initiatives have been taken by states such as forming committees at the village level for protection of elephants by involving local communities, watch tower and solar fencing for better protection and management of elephants.

The human animal conflict in all over India is increasing year after year. The increasing population growth in the forested enclaves in Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and West Bengal is responsible for rapid rise in the human elephant conflict. In every year, these four states have the record number of death of human caused by elephants. In these states, habitat fragmentation, communication infrastructure through the forest, agricultural fields, human settlement within the forest responsible for the growth of man-elephant conflict. During the seasonal movement, the elephant herds and bulls destroyed vegetation of the villagers who developed their villages in the land once covered with forests. The elephant herds now have a crop-riding behaviour. In many areas people disrupted the free movement of the elephants by throwing stones, fire crackers or beating drums. The conflict intensified in the harvesting season when villages aggressively tried to protect the crops from the destructive herd of elephants.

Number of human deaths caused by elephant from 2013-14 to 2016-17¹

Sl. No	State	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017 (Upto 9.2.17)
1	Andhra Pradesh	2	2	NA	-
2	Arunachal Pradesh	7	1	1	-
3	Assam	87	54	31	69
4	Chhattisgarh	23	32	59	67
5	Jharkhand	56	53	66	42
6	Karnataka	33	38	26	-
7	Kerala	7	20	INA	-
8	Maharashtra	0	3	0	0
9	Meghalaya	10	3	9	-
10	Nagaland	0	1	1	-
11	Odisha	67	64	63	-
12	Tamil Nadu	52	31	47	-
13	Tripura	0	1	0	2
14	Uttar Pradesh	INA	INA	INA	-
15	Uttarakhand	INA	INA	INA	-
16	West Bengal	69	89	112	65
Total		413	392	415	245

In West Bengal and Assam, the number of the accident of elephant is highest in India. Most of the railway tracks in these regions developed during the colonial time. So the death of the elephant in the railway tracks is not new. The Sub-Himalayan region is extended in Bengal, southern part of the Bhutan and Assam, known for the existence of large herd of elephants in the forest. The expansions of the communication infrastructure introduce a new dimension in the human animal conflict in the foot hills as well as in the other parts of the *terai*. The trees were cut to construct road and railway. Soon the grain loaded bullock cart became their target of attack. In late 1916, a driver of the line came across a tusker and two female elephants at the tenth mile. To drive them off the line, he blow the whistle and it irritated the male who tore up the mail post and was about to charge the train when a bright thought flashed across the mind of the driver, *viz.*, blow of as much steam as possible from the blow-off cocks of the engine. The harsh sound forced the elephants to move away from the track and escape in the hill side as quickly as possible.

¹ The chart has been prepared accumulating information from different reports published by the Forest Department and State Governments.

ELEPHANT CASUALTIES IN TRAIN ACCIDENTS

State	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16
Assam	5	5	7	1	3	3
Jharkhand	1	1	1	1	0	0
Kerala	1	0	0	0	0	0
Odisha	0	2	11	1	0	1
Tamil Nadu	Information not received					
Tripura	1	0	0	0	0	0
Uttar Pradesh	0	0	0	1	0	0
Uttarakhand	0	0	2	0	0	0
West Bengal	12	3	4	13	3	5
Total	20	11	25	17	6	9

TOTAL ELEPHANT MORTALITY FROM 2010-2014

State	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
Andhra Pradesh	2	0	0	1	2
Arunachal Pradesh	0	0	0	0	INR
Assam	12	14	23	14	3
Chhattisgarh	3	4	4	INR	INR
Jharkhand	2	4	4	4	0
Karnataka	20	15	14	5	15
Kerala	7	4	4	0	3
Maharashtra	0	0	0	0	0
Meghalaya	1	4	9	6	4
Nagaland	0	0	0	0	0
Odisha	36	23	31	18	9
Tamil Nadu	Information not received				
Tripura	1	0	0	0	1
Uttar Pradesh	0	3	0	1	0
Uttarakhand	0	1	5	0	0
West Bengal	16	7	6	23	INR
Total	100	79	100	72	37

The mortality rate of the elephants can be stop if a better co-ordination was established between common people, government and the organizations which are working for the protection of the wildlife. The electric fencing must be stop in the agricultural fields, as it harmful not only for the large animals, it also dangerous

for the small animals like rabbits, birds, porcupines and snakes. The animals came out side of the forest in search of food and that lead to the conflict. The plantation of the non food bearing trees increased the scarcity of the food within the forest. The plantation of the food bearing trees like guava, jackfruit, elephant apple, banana, Indian Blackberry is essential to maintain the source of food within the forest. For the promotion of the tourism within the forest, the resorts, hotels and home stay sometimes have evil impact on the overall forest environment. The tourists came to forest for their personal enjoyment with friends and families. Sometimes they ignored the environment related issues within forests. In many areas people dump their plastic garbage which is harmful for the wildlife. To protect the wildlife from the human, it is essential to spread awareness among the common about the need of the protection of the wild.

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