

MINUTES OF INDO-NEPAL MEET ON FINALIZATION OF THE ACTION PLAN FOR
CONSERVATION OF ELEPHANTS IN TRANS-BOUNDARY (WEST BENGAL-NEPAL)
REGION AND MITIGATION OF HUMAN-ELEPHANT CONFLICT

(Siliguri, 19th Feb 2013)

The meet opened with the welcome address by Dr. S. Sen., Director, WWF-India, WBSO. She thanked profusely all the officers of the Forest Department, Govt. of West Bengal and Govt. of Nepal for their positive attitude and cooperation with WWF in undertaking the study through a series of stakeholder consultations over a period of two years commencing from 2011. Such stakeholder consultations, she mentioned has led to drafting of the suggestive action plan. This draft action plan was circulated amongst all the participants of the earlier meet and the participants of the present meet seeking their comments. No comment was received till the date of the proposed meet. Therefore she felt that the present meet would give an opportunity to elicit comments from all the participants and it would be possible for the WWF-India to develop a final action plan to be placed before both the Governments. She also expressed her happiness in declaring that Mr. A.M. Singh, IG (Forests) & Director, Project Elephant of the MoEF shall be joining this meeting prior to lunch session as his flight from New Delhi was delayed.



Participants in the inaugural session of the meet

This was followed by a quick round of self introduction by all the officials/representative of NGOs of both countries.

Mr. S. B. Mandal, PCCF Wildlife and CWLW, Govt of West Bengal congratulated WWF for taking up the study and in facilitating development of the draft action plan. He pointed out that the deep fragmentation of elephant habitat in this tract for a variety of reasons has been primarily responsible for raising the level of man-animal conflict resulting in loss of life and properties in Northern West Bengal. The elephant population, he mentioned, is rising at the rate of 3% over last two decades. This, he attributed, to the large number of breeding females in the population. A part of this population, he felt, was made up of migrants from Assam across the Sankosh border. The stoppage of anchored 'Mela Shikar' in early 80's may have triggered this. He was of the firm opinion that the time is now ripe for taking resort to measures for control of elephant population in this tract. An experiment started in 2006 for control of captive elephant population had to be abandoned because of the departure of the Doctor initiating the study.



Officials of West Bengal Forest Department & CWLW

He further stated that during the last decade about 2 to 3 elephants have been killed annually or succumbed to serious injuries caused by gunshots in the territory of Nepal. This was primarily restricted to crop depredation seasons in the eastern Terai of Nepal. They had dialogues on this issue with the Nepal counterparts and the Govt. of Nepal had assured to look into this problem and take measures to stop this.

He referred to similar increase in population of resident elephants in South-West Bengal after their coming in from Dalma side since 1987. He remarked about the intelligent behavior of elephants in utilizing nutrient rich crops even without extending their zone of influence. However he explained that with the increasing number of elephants crossing from Dalma and the increase of resident population of elephants, expansion of their range has occurred over the years negotiating the rivers like the Kangsabati, the Shilabati, the Dwarakeswar, and then the Damodar. He firmly stated that elephants will continue to raid crops from agricultural fields in

search of easy and nutritious food. He strongly held that habitat improvement works coupled with a feasible and durable measure of control of elephant population may only yield measures in mid-term. Finally Mr. Mandal thanked the WWF- India for taking up this study and formulates a draft action plan for adoption by the State Governments of both the countries in consultation with the Ministry of Environment & Forests. He also expressed the hope that with the valuable inputs from the participants of the present meet the final action plan will be drawn up.

Mr. M. K. Nandi, the Principal Investigator of this trans-boundary project first expressed his sincere thanks to Mr. Mandal for putting forward his views sharply on the genesis of the man-elephant conflict in this region and suggestions for mitigatory actions on the mid-term. He also pointed that easternmost terai in Nepal across the Mechi River has been a part of the home range of some elephant herds of the northern part of West Bengal as is evident from the records of the District Gazetteer of Darjeeling covering the early part of the twentieth century. The recent study (2006) of home ranges by the Centre of Ecological Sciences, Bangalore through radio-collaring also supports this. Elephants in this region use almost 2000 sq.km of forests in the terai, duars and foothills of North Bengal.

He also brought out vividly factors responsible for major changes in the landscape of this region. A lot of grasslands have disappeared through cultivation of tea gardens and coming of human settlements primarily of migrants from adjoining countries. 1962 aggression of the China was followed up with a spurt in infrastructure development both in the rail and highways sector causing deep fragmentation of the elephant habitat whereas the worst flood of the region in 1968 brought in copious changes in the landscape resulting in disappearance of vast stretches of grasslands almost on all river banks because of embankments raised. Conversion of grasslands to raise productive monoculture plantations also accelerated such erosion of habitat for large herbivores.

He felt strongly it will not possible to sustain this elephant population under the present situation with an alarming growth rate of 3% per annum. Habitat degradation is not the only reason of HEC. Intensive agriculture of growing nutritious crops on fringes areas and even in forest enclaves over the years have been primarily responsible for change in foraging practices by the

wild elephants resulting in the worst scenario of man-elephant conflict. Such conflict dates back to 80's but over the years, this has worsened with the expanse of crop fields in close proximity of forests used by elephant herds in this region. Only control of population coupled with habitat improvement programme is not going to solve the problem. Such programme has to be supported by provisioning of physical barriers to deny access of elephant herds to such crop fields and weaning away the fringe population from cultivating crops like maize and paddy and providing the technology of growing cash crops through development of agro-horto- forestry models for this region. All these efforts may, he hoped, bring down the degree of man-elephant conflict in this region.

The present draft action plan was developed under this project considering the experience of conflict management in this tract and practices all over India and other countries. There is nothing revolutionary in items conceived to mitigate this problem. He was sure that participants in the present meet have a lot of exposure to this problem, may be of lesser intensity, in different landscapes of the country and with their valuable suggestions in the meet or thereafter, it will be possible to finalise the action plan and take the same forward through the Government of two countries for implementation.

In the next deliberation, Dr. S Mitra, Coordinator WWF-India, WBSO and co-investigator in this project briefly described the objective, workplan and activities undertaken during last two years. She also pointed out to the observations made while undertaking this study and about the various mortality factors of elephants, pressure of land use in various ways on the habitat of elephants in Northern West Bengal, which is also directly related with this trans boundary movement of elephant and conflict with man. In her words the first recorded request of Nepal authorities to drive back Elephants to Indian territory came during 1977-78. But the problem intensified during last 9/10 years. She further mentioned about the pressure of grazing and collection of fuelwood in this habitat. She cited an instance, when a female killed 12 persons in India and Nepal, in retaliatory action before it was declared rogue and eliminated. According to her because of ongoing incorrect practices in control of elephant depredation intensity of man–elephant conflict is rising. There is growing animosity between the great roving pachyderm population and the

people in the transboundary region and if we continue to look at this problem with an attitude of 'all is well' we will be doing a disservice to the conservation of this population.

Dr. Christy Williams representing WWF-International made a brief presentation on the practice of immuno-contraception in bringing down the growth rate of African elephant population. The procedure stimulates the production of antibodies against an essential element of the reproductive process thereby preventing pregnancy. This technique is applied by vaccinating female elephants targeting the zona pellucida proteins on egg cells. This in turn produces an antibody response by blocking the entry of sperm cells and fertilisation of egg. He further mentioned that the hormonal contraception method was used in Kruger National Park, South Africa in 1996 which was largely unsuccessful. But the present method of immune-contraception has very high efficacy and this keeps treated breeding females infertile for one year. The method is cost effective and safe too. The cost of medicine is minimal but the application of the medicine through darting and subsequent monitoring of individuals treated adds to the cost. Dr. Williams was prepared to help the Govt. of India & the Govt. Of West Bengal in organisation of a workshop on immuno-contraception by roping in the services of experts.

In his presentation on use of energised fences, he was against the use of donor model, as under this model the beneficiaries do not have the required motivation for proper maintenance. Hence he felt that the Governments should encourage raising of such barriers with the involvement of communities affected. It would be a happier situation if some business interests get involved in the process ensuring local procurement of materials and manufacture of components enhancing the employability of local skilled/semiskilled labour.

Mr. Ajay Desai, an eminent elephant specialist and a Consultant of the WWF-India deliberated on some key considerations prior to finalisation of any action plan. He stressed the need of an analytical study of the crisis and designing any plan for long term use with a policy based approach and its likely impact. It is important to decide whether there is a mandate for allowing the elephants to increase the zone of influence or not. There should be proper understanding about the habitat, dispersal and viability of elephants. He cited the example of Karnataka where zones like elephant zone, co-existence zone and public and community/people zone have been marked to manage elephants. Any plan also will also require long accessibility by the

people and the Governments. Lastly any suggestion of action plan should also fit into the overall national and state level policies.



Mr. Ajay Desai, Christy Williams and Mohan Raj during the discussion

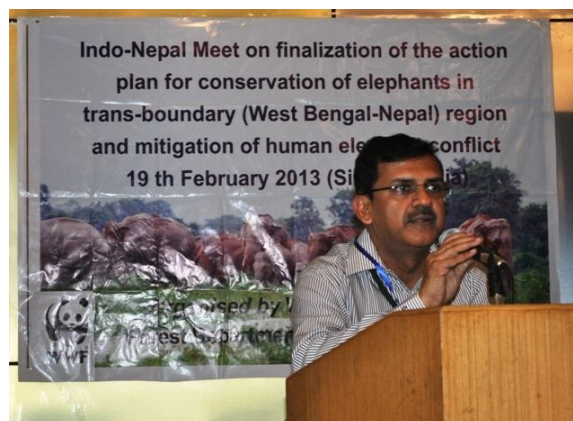
Mr. M. K. Nandi intervened at this juncture saying that elephant herds have the right of using their home range and any denial of access to such range will mean violation of rights of long rovers like elephants. Transboundary elephant herds have not been reported to intrude more than the limits of Jhapa District. At this juncture, expansion of territories by elephant herds may not be in their scheme of operations. It will also be useful to note that there is a small population of 15 to 20 in eastern terai of Nepal. It will therefore be proper to have such migration to ensure genetic exchange.

Mr. D. Ghosh, Additional PCCF, Wildlife explained the distribution of elephant population in areas marked by different major rivers of North Bengal. These are like between Mechi and Teesta, between Teesta and Diana, between Diana and Torsa, and between Torsa and Sankosh. He also raised the issue of installation of structured regime of payment of compensation in Nepal for loss of life, properties and damage to crops raise the level of tolerance of affected communities as the first action point to mitigate this problem. According to him a small part of elephant population of N. Bengal strays into Nepal crossing the Mechi and this is restricted to the two well-defined periods of crop harvests of paddy and maize. Mr. Ghosh also came out with a suggestion that the area under Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary should also be included for habit improvement work.

However Mr. B. P. Bhandari, DFO Jhapa explained that compensation procedures are already there in Nepal. He himself distributed 3 million NR to the affected people. He also pointed out that timely flow of finance is a serious constraint to payment of compensation. However there are constraints and limitations because of the absence of a structured order. He also agreed to suggestions made by Mr. Desai. However he mentioned his reservation against the alleged firing on elephants by Nepalese armed forces. He also objected to a remark mentioned in the Page 12 of draft action plan and wanted this to be removed during finalisation of the action plan.

On arrival of Mr. A.M. Singh, IG, Forests (PE), Mrs Sen of WBSO welcomed him and thanked him for sparing his valuable time in attending this meet in spite of his busy schedule. She also requested him to chair the post-lunch session of the meet and carry forward discussion on various items included in the action plan.

Mr. A. M. Singh, IG Forests (PE) while deliberating on the action plan point of 'Development of a Joint Protocol' was of the opinion that there is no need of such protocol. It would be wiser not to provide for joint driving operations during deprecation seasons as such empowerment is fraught with legal complications. Other two issues under this item can well be taken care of by taking resort to relevant provisions of the Protocol signed at Pokhra by the Govt. Of India and Nepal on transboundary conservation of bio-diversity held during October, 2011. This was attended by Field Directors of Project Tiger and other officers concerned with tiger conservation of both the countries.



Mr. A. M. Singh, IG Forests (PE) speaking in this meet

Mr. Sailesh Anand, DFO, Kurseong Division also felt that empowering people to cross international boundaries and participate in joint drive should be avoided. This was also supported

by Mr. M. Pandey, Addl. PCCF, North Bengal. It was also brought out by the DFO that issues arising out of elephant depredation problems were discussed in last meeting of September, 2012 of the Indo-Nepal Coordination Meeting on Border Management at Darjeeling. Such meetings were also attended by concerned officials of the Nepal Government. Issue of Govt. orders by the Govt. of West Bengal in consultation with the Govt. of India will also enable concerned officials of the Govt. of West Bengal to participate in future meetings as and when convened by Jhapa District Administration. Such forum may be used for evolving a system of periodic joint meeting to take stock of man-animal conflict in this region and the issue of control of fires, grazing and fuel wood collection from Kurseong Forest Division. This forum may also decide on the modes and methodology of transfer of information on man-elephant conflict between designated authorities of both the countries.

On the point of 'Awareness Generation' this was agreed in general. However Mr.A.M.Singh felt that the aspect of sensitisation of armed forces of Nepal need be separately mentioned as this can be done under a properly designed capacity development programme.

Formation of voluntary squads was also discussed where Mr. Bhandari, DFO Jhapa expressed their lack of trained staff and equipments. It was suggested that there should be forests squad under control of DFO, Jhapa and voluntary village squads may be raised by recruiting local able-bodied youths in affected mouzas. All staff and labours recruited need to be trained and all squads have to be properly equipped. Mr. Anand, DFO ,Kurseong Division mentioned during this meeting of September,2012 it was suggested that possibilities of providing training Nepalese Forest Officials by Indian Forest Officials need be explored. There was also agreement on improvement of the road network in the affected mouzas of Jhapa district.

On learning that there was no response from the participants of the last meeting on this draft even after circulation of this draft and fact that the present circulation of this plan amongst the participants did not elicit any comments from the participants, Mr. A.M. Singh felt it would not be worthwhile to deliberate on other items of the action plan. It is more so, as this action plan needs adoption by the concerned Governments of both the countries. For finalisation of the action plan, he came out with following suggestions:

- The Minutes of the present meet along with adequate copies of the draft action plan may be submitted to the Heads of Forest & Wildlife Wing of the Govt. of Nepal and the Govt. Of West Bengal.
- Such Authorities, in their turn, will circulate the minutes of the present meet along with copies of the draft action plan amongst all participants of the meet and the concerned officials under their control eliciting comments. A 6-weeks' time may be allowed for this purpose.
- On receipt of comments within the period allowed, the action plan needs finalisation taking into account the comments and a final action plan has to evolve for adoption by the Govt. Of Nepal and the Govt. Of West Bengal. For finalisation of the action plan, the assistance of WWF-India may be taken, if necessary.
- All items included in the final action plan should be backed up by preliminary cost-estimates and a timeframe for implementation.
- The existing disconformity between no of items in the action plan and the items brought out in the time-frame for implementation need to be avoided in the final action plan.
- On completion of the exercises as suggested, the final document may be submitted to the Ministry of Environment and Forest by both the Governments of Nepal and the Govt. Of West Bengal.

Mr. A.M.Singh IG, Forests (PE) assured the participants that on receipt of final action plans from both the parties, he will convene a meeting in the Ministry to decide on the future course of action.

The meeting ended with a vote of thanks by Mr. M.K Nandi, Principal Investigator.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Mr. A. M. Singh	IG Forests, (PE) Ministry of Environment & Forests, GOI
Mr. S. B. Mandal	PCCF, Wildlife & CWLW, Govt. Of West Bengal
Dr. Deepak Ghosh	Addl, PCCF Wildlife, Govt. of West Bengal
Mr. B. P. Bhandari	DFO, Jhapa, Nepal
Mr. Rajendra Dhungana	Conservation Officer & Warden, Koshi Tappu WLR, Nepal
Mr. M. K. Nandi	EX-PCCF, GOWB and PI, WWF-India, WBSO
Dr. B. R. Sharma	CCF, Wildlife (North)
Mr. Makhan Pandey	Addl PCCF North Bengal
Dr. V. K. Sood	Conservator of Forests, Wild Life (North) Circle
Dr. Basavraj S. H.	DFO, Wildlife I
Mr. Shailesh Anand	DFO, Kurseong Divn
Mr. Bhupen Biswakarma	Range Forest officer, Panighata
Dr. Ajay Desai	Consultant, WWF-India
Dr. Christy Williams	WWF International
Dr. Narendra Pradhan	Coordinator: Development, Research and Monitoring, WWF Nepal
Mr. Mohan Raj	Policy Advisor, WWF-India
Mr. Hiten Baishya	Coordinator, Elephant conservation, NBL Landscape, WWF-India
Dr. Saswati Sen	State Director WWF-India, WBSO
Dr. Sangita Mitra	State Coordinator WWF-India, WBSO
Mr. Sandip Jana	Education Officer, WWF-India, WBSO
Mr. Samya Basu	..
Mr. Debashish Ghoshal	Asstt. Project Officer WWF-India, WBSO

