

Seeing the Elephant in the Room: Human-Elephant Conflict and the ETF Report

M D MADHUSUDAN, PAVITHRA SANKARAN

The report of the Elephant Task Force acknowledges the gravity of human-elephant conflicts, and makes a set of potentially far-reaching and forward-looking suggestions to alleviate them. The spirit of most of them is admirable and positive, but the devil, as always, is in the implementation. Managing conflict is as much about protecting farmers and farmlands from elephants as it is about reducing our footprint on the elephant's domain. The first of five articles that discuss the Elephant Task Force report.

The giants of our land – the Asian elephants – live in troubled times. Over the last century, their numbers are thought to have declined by half, and our remaining elephants today face daunting challenges to their survival. Their story is an achingly familiar one. Be it to fuel our enviable gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate or simply to put food on the plates of our people, the demands we as a nation place on the land and resources that sustain these creatures are slowly but surely pushing them towards the brink. But, if we have been the architects of their decline, surely, we could be the architects of their recovery as well. It is in this spirit that the ministry of environment and forests constituted a task force in February 2010 to understand and analyse the challenges facing the Asian elephant in India, and to advise the government on ways and means of addressing them. The Task Force on Project Elephant (or the Elephant Task Force as it came to be known, ETF for short) submitted its report on 31 August 2010 in which it made wide-ranging recommendations to the government on securing the future for Asian elephants in India.

Among the diverse challenges to the Asian elephant that the report identifies, direct conflict with humans is one of the most serious. Since time immemorial, wherever the habitats of humans and elephants have overlapped, they have clashed over space and resources, affecting each other adversely. While this principal conflict remains largely unchanged, what has increased considerably in recent times is its intensity. Elephant habitats in many areas have simply been consumed as sectors of the economy, ranging from agriculture and energy to transport and communication have seen expansion and

intensification. In the resulting patchwork of habitats that remain, humans continue to harvest a wide range of forest produce from fuel wood and fodder to coal and minerals. Seemingly harmless activities such as collecting firewood and grazing cattle in forests take a slow but serious toll, given that an estimated 150 million Indians still depend on forests, many of which are elephant habitats, for their livelihood. Thus, as the forests that provide for elephants are slowly whittled down by local communities feeding their cattle or cooking their evening meals, elephants are increasingly pushed to seek food in adjoining farmlands.

So, everywhere, elephants are progressively forced to come into closer and closer contact with humans. Such close encounters leave in their wake more than 400 human and 100 elephant fatalities each year. More chronic, but no less severe, is the loss of crops to elephants. Although no rigorous countrywide data exist, the agricultural damage by elephants is estimated to affect a staggering eight to 10 million hectares of farmland annually (Bist 2002). Farm produce ranging from subsistence food crops such as paddy, millets, pulses and some oilseeds to commercial crops such as sugar cane and banana are most commonly targeted by elephants. This is hardly surprising given that all elephant habitats in the country abut on farmlands with crops, which are as attractive to elephants as they are nutritious to humans. In essence, this interface between farmland and forest is where the most important living drama unfolds everyday between endangered elephants and marginal farmers.

Impact on Agrarian Society

Such continuing friction between elephants and farmers has had a colossal knock-on impact on the productivity, food security and farm incomes of marginal cultivators, aggravating poverty and agrarian distress. Farming families around wildlife reserves in southern India may lose, on an average, about 15% of their annual produce to elephants (Madhusudan 2003). Even more importantly, they invest large fractions of their meagre

M D Madhusudan (mdm@ncf-india.org) and Pavithra Sankaran (pavithra.sankaran@gmail.com) are with the Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore.

incomes and a great deal of time protecting their crops, seldom getting the returns they deserve. Rarely are these expenses or exertions ever acknowledged, let alone fairly valued, in calculating the impact of elephants on farm livelihoods. For instance, assuming that two-thirds of the 30,000 families that live within a five-kilometre radius of Bandipur National Park in Chamarajanagar district, Karnataka, practise rainfed farming over the five-month kharif farming season, the labour cost of each family posting just one of its members to guard fields overnight – when valued at Rs 100 a night – adds up to a staggering Rs 30 crore.

But Bandipur is just one among many dozen national parks and wildlife sanctuaries with elephants. Scaled across the country then, the costs of living with elephants are simply humongous. And these costs have all along been borne, often with remarkable stoicism and grace, by some of our poorest and most marginalised communities. While an understanding of conservation and support for it sees heartening growth in urban India, which treasures wild creatures from a safe distance, positive sentiments about wildlife are being dangerously eroded in our countryside precisely because conservation's burgeoning costs are placed on the frail shoulders of the elephant's rural neighbours who can least afford it. This is unjust, but as long as elephants are unwelcome to their neighbours, their future is in serious jeopardy.

Under conditions of such a forced and fragile coexistence, both humans and elephants spiral down a vortex of losses. Desperate farmers across the country have begun to resort to extreme ways of ridding themselves of crop-raiding elephants – the toll of poisoned and electrocuted animals is steadily rising. At the same time, repeated losses to wildlife are making agricultural communities less and less able to cope with each passing year.

Report's Recommendations

Yet, this has not been for want of effort on the part of the government. Ironically enough, this situation has prevailed even as two out of every three rupees spent on elephant conservation in the Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002-07) went, directly or indirectly, towards the mitigation and

management of human-elephant conflict (ETF 2010: 71). So, why have these large investments in the reduction of human-elephant conflicts by governments over long periods of time continued to yield such poor results? And how can conflict alleviation or management be more effective and sustainable? These are the big questions concerning conflict that the task force tries to tackle in its report.

To address these questions substantively, the report sets out three very reasonable premises that underlie the ability to manage conflicts effectively. One, conflict resolution efforts must be led more by a sound understanding of the origins, nature and extent of conflict in a particular ecological and social setting, and less by uninformed good intent. Two, conflict resolution efforts must be implemented with the involvement of the affected people themselves. Three, conflict management must be based on a more democratic process of prioritisation and planning than as a response to administrative expediencies.

The report presents and analyses facets of elephant ecology, behaviour and social organisation as the essential foundation for conflict management, and develops several broad recommendations on how elephants must be managed in varying contexts of conflict. These include principles to guide the application of techniques such as capture, removal, translocation, driving, reproductive control and culling. While being important in a national document guiding elephant conservation policy, many of these collate ideas and approaches that have figured widely in public and professional forums.

Interestingly, one of the most far-reaching recommendations that will

affect long-term conflict prevention, reduction and management does not feature in the chapter on conflicts, but instead appears as a chapter of its own called "Securing Elephant Landscapes" (ETF 2010: 40-70). With their clear social hierarchies and spacing behaviour, elephant clans are unable to shift their vast home ranges even to adjoining habitats when portions of it are lost, fragmented or degraded. Even relatively small disruptions within the home ranges of elephants can precipitate serious conflicts elsewhere. It makes the most sense to say that conflicts with elephants have to be managed at the level of an entire landscape that includes wildlife reserves, elephant habitats in other legal land categories, and privately-owned land. The task force presents a suite of key measures for planning land use for facilities such as roads, mines and power lines, the rationalising of administrative and ecological boundaries, as well as efforts to secure corridors for elephant movement. To achieve large-scale and long-term reduction of human-elephant conflict, there is no escape from implementing these measures seriously.

Where the task force report breaks fresh ground is in its thoughtful linking of the conservation needs of elephants with emerging opportunities for greater public involvement. In a setting where wildlife conservation has traditionally remained disengaged from the democratic polity, these moves are pioneering and progressive. To begin with, the report recommends the creation of conflict management task forces (CMTFs) in high-conflict regions, which will create a formal mechanism for the representation of local communities as well as their elected representatives. These task forces will also

Institute of Applied Manpower Research

Sector A-7, Institutional Area, Narela, Delhi-40
(under the aegis of Planning Commission, Government of India)

Expression of Interest for engagement as Young Professionals in IAMR.

The Institute requires the services of Professionals having Master's Degree (not less than 55% marks) in Economics/Statistics for engagement as Young Professionals for providing research support on issues including employment, social security and skills of the work. Last date for receipt of application is 16-12-2010.

For further details, please visit our website: <http://iamrindia.gov.in>

(Raj Kumar)
Administrative Officer
011-27787039

bring on board a wider set of skills and concerns by encouraging the participation of social scientists, biologists, veterinarians, media persons and even revenue department officials. In particular, the report recommends that the CMTFS hold public hearings twice a year for their focal regions. Before the start of kharif season, the first hearing is to chart a strategy for conflict management in the coming season, make allocations of resources, and assign responsibilities to various stakeholders. After the season, the second hearing is to serve as a means of review and redress to help identify both successful measures and areas for improvement.

By voting to entrust the management of conflict to a much larger set of stakeholders than merely the forest department, the task force's recommendations not only empower victims but also hold out the promise of greater transparency and public accountability. Notably, the report also calls for a moratorium on the single biggest drain on conflict mitigation funding, which has also seen high levels of corruption – the thoughtless creation of ineffective elephant-proof trenches, electric fences and other barriers. It seeks a thorough review of barriers, recommends that they be integrated into a landscape-level conflict mitigation strategy, and that their implementation mandatorily include local participation with the oversight of the CMTFS.

The ETF report emphatically states that “effective crop protection measures should be the priority” and that only where they fail despite sincere implementation should compensations – currently a very big arrow in the government's conflict-management policy quiver – be paid (ETF 2010: 87). This is an excellent proposal emphasising the primacy of protection over compensation – the reality is that any farmer would rather choose options that protect and multiply his investment and yield, rather than be compensated for the failure of such options.

As a means of follow up, the ETF makes an admirable suggestion of supporting farmers in protecting their crops by valuing their labour with payments. For the first time, a policy document acknowledges and values the effort of guarding crops (an all-night job that adds to the burdens of the day) and considers it an activity worth

supporting over the outmoded idea of compensating losses. Linking this to a well-funded formal rural employment programme such as the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGREGS) will no doubt give it greater means and help garner local support, provided there are safeguards against the leakages and grafts that appear to dog the largely central-funded scheme. While the concept is surely forward-looking, much of its value will depend on its implementation.

Two related suggestions that follow the establishment of sound first-level measures of crop protection – one of insuring crops against damage by elephants and the other of compensating crop losses, partly in grain and partly in cash (particularly for marginal cultivators) – are also commendable. The idea of a tiered compensation for crop loss to ensure social justice is also novel. But the proposal will require unprecedented coordination and cooperation between two of the largest and most unwieldy government departments – forest and revenue – to settle even simple matters like how much land a claimant owns.

Conclusions

In summary, the ETF report boldly acknowledges the gravity of human-elephant conflicts, and makes a coherent set of potentially far-reaching and forward-looking suggestions to alleviate human-elephant conflict. The spirit of most of the suggestions is admirable and positive, but the devil, as always, is in the implementation. Coming as it does when no immediate crisis has befallen the elephant, this is a document that is not afraid to look beyond band-aid remedies and suggest deeper surgery where needed. But it is the new National Elephant Conservation Authority (NECA) that will have to perform these manoeuvres. Much will depend on the constitution of the first NECA and the manner in which it implements the spirit, not the letter, of these recommendations. In the end, given the nearly eightfold increase in funding sought for elephant conservation, the NECA should have considerable potential to do good, but should things slip up, with increased resources at hand, there is also potential for great harm.

Managing conflict is as much about protecting farmers and farmlands from elephants as it is about reducing our footprint on the elephant's domain. Because the natural facts of elephant ecology cannot be changed, they offer us really very little by way of management options. They, however, are critical beacons that we must use to steer our conflict management options. The options themselves come from the complex workings of our diverse society. Conflict management then becomes, chiefly, a collective action problem involving individuals and institutions. Better knowledge, better technology, and greater authority and greater funding, critical though they are, cannot lead, only support, our quest to address this collective action problem. We need ways of actively bringing together a wide range of stakeholders and engage them in supporting a negotiated approach to problem solving. Democracy, rather than diktat, is by far the more sustainable way of achieving this.

In this light, the most important contributions of the ETF report to resolving human-elephant conflicts are the opportunities it opens for collective action by engaging and empowering previously silenced voices; providing them representation in decision-making; encouraging the use of democratic institutions to make decisions that affect large numbers of people; and promoting greater and more transparent access to information to bring about accountability in governance arrangements. These are evidently not short-term measures that will keep elephants out of farmlands, but should they be implemented sincerely, it is the best hope we have of not only making our forests safer for elephants, but also our farms more productive for farmers. And in so doing, the *gajah* will regain its cherished place in the world and the mind of the *prajah*.

REFERENCES

- Bist, S S (2002): “An Overview of Elephant Conservation in India”, *Indian Forester*, 128, pp 121-36.
- Elephant Task Force (2010): *Gajah: Securing the Future for Elephants in India*, Ministry of Environment and Forests, http://moef.nic.in/downloads/public-information/OM_%20Task%20Force.pdf.
- Madhusudan, M D (2003): “Living Amidst Large Wildlife: Livestock and Crop Depredation by Large Mammals in the Interior Villages of Bhadra Tiger Reserve, South India”, *Environmental Management*, 31, pp 466-75.