

PRESS RELEASE

Aaranyak, Udalguri Administration partner with Forest Department to hold inception workshop on HEC mitigation

Guwahati, June 22: A multi-stakeholder's inception workshop was jointly organised in Udalguri by Aaranyak and Udalguri District Administration in partnership with Dhansiri Forest Division on 20 June to discuss how multistakeholder approach is essential to achieve human-elephant coexistence.

Udalguri district, with record of 190 human and 85 elephant deaths due to human-elephant conflict (HEC) incidents since 2010, is one of the HEC hotspots in Assam. In order to mitigate HEC and promote coexistence a multi-stakeholder, multi-dimensional approach is required.

“Given the ground reality in the district, this inception workshop acted as a platform to prioritise the issue, seek cooperation from all the line departments and public/private agencies to work towards common purpose of mitigating HEC,” said Dr Alolika Sinha, a conservation biologist in research-based biodiversity conservation organisation Aaranyak.

The workshop was graced by the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Udalguri District, Dr. Sadnek Singh who mentioned that consolidated and innovative approaches from the ground level with support from tea gardens, civil society members, and various line departments is needed as it is a challenging task to comprehend and mitigate Human Wildlife Conflict (HWC) that involves one of the most evolved animals-the elephants.

In a presentation from Dr. Bibhuti P Lahkar, a senior scientist with Aaranyak, he delved into the current HEC situation in Assam with particular emphasis on Udalguri and Aaranyak's multi-pronged approaches in reducing HEC and facilitating coexistence.

The Divisional Forest Officer of Dhansiri Forest Division, Dibakar Das said the need of the hour is to minimize negative human-elephant interactions. He mentioned about action-oriented approaches such as plantation of barren areas to create habitat, cooperation from tea gardens in supporting the Anti-Depredation Squads and in maintaining *Kunkis* one each in tea gardens to drive away the wild elephants, organise outreach campaigns to educate local people on elephant behaviour and what should be done while elephants are present in the vicinity.

The DFO further took up the topic of brewing local alcohol in the tea gardens which attracts elephants, and opined that the district administration, excise department, and tea gardens must collaboratively deal with the matter.

The Commandant of 61 Battalion SSB-Bhairabkunda, Raj kumar Xalxo assured his full support to reduce HWC, and his Response Relief Team (RRT) can help manage HEC. He extended a helping hand in jointly monitoring the power lines, and its illegal use by villagers which they tap to ward off elephants. While, Sarfaraz Haque, ADC, Udalguri emphasized the need to understand the drivers of HEC, and the use of corridors by elephants in order to aid in mitigating HEC.

During the interaction session with all other stakeholders, Jayanta Das, a wildlife activist reiterated the recommendations and suggestions that were provided during a meeting organised in 2014, and how those are still relevant to promote coexistence. While, Nabin Ch. Boro, Assistant General Manager, APDCL spoke on the how anyone can report any anomaly in power lines such as wire-sagging, and the department will act swiftly to fix it. ADC, Hoque added to this and mentioned about we must advocate for to install more animal-friendly infrastructure such as insulated electric wires, underground electric wires to avoid accidental electrocution.

The representatives from various tea gardens spoke on how they are always vigilant and deployed people to manage wild elephants when they visit their gardens. Dipak Medhi, the District Agriculture Officer discussed about the possibility of introducing high-tech agriculture such as hydroponics and use of beehives to generate income, and ensure food security which eventually leads to people's wellbeing.

The workshop was attended by Civil Administration, representatives from other Government Line Departments- Agriculture, APDCL, DRDA, Soil Conservation, Education, Irrigation, Sarba Siksha Abhiyan (SSA), Shasatra Seema Bal (SSB), ASRLM, Block Veterinary Officer, AEE, and officers from Majuli, Orangajuli, Bhooteachang, Nonoipara, Attarikhat, and Hatigor tea estates.

The workshop began with an opening remark from Aaranyak's Rabiya Daimary and Dr. Alolika Sinha moderated the workshop. This workshop was a part of the project supported by SBI Foundation. Aaranyak's other staff members- Anjan Baruah, Abhijit Saikia, Dibakar Nayak, Jiban Chetry, Pradip Barman along with interns Ajay Salve from Azim Premji University and Nipul Chakma of TISS, Guwahati were present in the workshop.

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