

PROJECT ELEPHANT'S AT STEERING COMMITTEE: ENVIRONMENT

NEWS: Project Elephant review: Census ph-I completed in N-E, over 3,000 km rly lines mapped to prevent collisions

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

The Union Environment Ministry reviewed Project Elephant, focusing on population estimation, rising elephant deaths from train collisions, and conservation measures, while also advancing DNA profiling of captive elephants and expanding species recovery efforts

Context and Recent Developments

- The Union Environment Ministry conducted a review of Project Elephant's progress at its Steering Committee meeting, focusing on population census, railway-related elephant deaths, conservation measures, and welfare initiatives.
- The meeting also included a session of the National Board for Wildlife's (NBWL) Standing Committee, which recommended further species recovery efforts.

Elephant Census and Population Estimation

- The last official elephant census in India was conducted in 2017, estimating 29,964 wild elephants.
- The census is usually conducted every five years under Project Elephant.
- An interim report (2022–23) titled "Status of Elephants in India" was prepared but subsequently shelved due to delays in data collection from northeastern states.
- The shelved report indicated a 20% decline in elephant numbers compared to 2017.
- Phase-I of synchronized elephant population estimation has been completed for northeastern states.
- Over 16,500 elephant dung samples were collected as part of the population estimation process.

Railway-Related Elephant Deaths and Mitigation

- Between 2019–20 and 2023–24, 73 elephant deaths were reported due to collisions with trains.
- 77 high-risk railway zones have been identified for targeted measures to prevent elephant-train accidents.
- Regional action plans were discussed, focusing on Southern and Northeastern India, to tackle rising human-elephant conflict in rail corridors.

Standing Committee of NBWL

- The Standing Committee of NBWL functions as an independent body chaired by the Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
- It operates as a project clearance body, while the NBWL itself serves as a policy advisory body guiding the central government on wildlife protection measures.
- In the latest meeting in Dehradun, the Standing Committee recommended including Sloth Bear and Gharial in the Species Recovery Programme.

DNA Profiling and Captive Elephant Welfare

- As part of efforts to improve identification and welfare of captive elephants, 1,911 genetic profiles have been completed across 22 states.

About Project Elephant

- Launched in 1992 as a Centrally Sponsored Scheme under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change.
- Provides financial and technical assistance to 16 key elephant range states, including Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Odisha, Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal.
- **Objectives:**
 - Conservation and protection of wild elephants.
 - Protection and management of elephant habitats and movement corridors.
 - Mitigation of human-elephant conflict.
 - Welfare and management of captive elephants.

Other Major Conservation Initiatives under Project Elephant

- **Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) Programme:** Launched in 2003 to track and reduce poaching.
- **National Elephant Corridor Project:** Initiated in 2005 to secure elephant movement routes.
- **Hathi Mere Sathi Campaign:** Started in 2011 to raise public awareness about elephant conservation and human-elephant coexistence.

Elephant Statistics and Status in India

- As per the 2017 census, the top five Indian states by elephant population are: Karnataka, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha.
- Elephants have the longest gestation period among mammals—22 months. Females generally give birth every 4–5 years.

- They live in matriarchal herds led by adult females, while adult males are mostly solitary or form small bachelor groups.

About Asian and African Elephants

- **Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*):** Include three subspecies—Indian, Sumatran, and Sri Lankan.
- The Indian subspecies (*Elephas maximus indicus*) has the widest range and is found across India and neighboring countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, and Malaysia.
- The Indian elephant is India's National Heritage Animal.
- IUCN Red List: Indian elephant is classified as 'Endangered'.
- Legal Protection: Listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and Appendix I of CITES.
- **African Elephants:** Include two subspecies—Savanna (Bush) Elephant and Forest Elephant.
- IUCN Red List: Savanna Elephant is classified as 'Endangered' and Forest Elephant as 'Critically Endangered'.

Conclusion

- The Ministry's review highlights ongoing challenges in elephant conservation, such as mitigating railway-related deaths and addressing human-elephant conflict.
- Strengthening scientific monitoring, habitat protection, and collaborative conservation strategies remain crucial to ensuring the long-term survival of India's elephants.

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