

From Conflict to Coexistence: Media's Role in Shaping Public Perception on Human Wildlife Interactions



7TH FEB, 2025



GUWAHATI

The ClimateRISE Alliance partners- **The Coexistence Consortium, The Corbett Foundation, Aranyak and Dasra (the Secretariat) collaboratively organised a media roundtable in Guwahati.** The event highlighted critical issues surrounding human-wildlife interactions (HWI), particularly in Assam, where such instances are escalating. Experts from civil society, academia, community representatives and media professionals gathered and reflected on the complexities and nuances of HWI – how interactions with wildlife are perceived, the myths that shape public perception and role of media in addressing these issues.

Journalists from prominent national and regional publications like **Assam Post, Meghalaya Guardian, The Sentinel, Asomiya Khobor, Purvanchal Prahari, Dainik Asom, Vikshit Bharat Samachar** and more than 10 other publications participated in the discussion.

PANELLISTS



Dr. Alolika Sinha

Aranyak

Dr. Alolika Sinha is a senior wildlife biologist with the Elephant Research and Conservation Division at Aaranyak. Her research focuses on species-habitat relationships and the conservation of tropical grasslands and their fauna.



Amir Chhetri

The Coexistence Consortium

Amir Chhetri is a field-based conservationist with deep expertise in community engagement and research techniques. He is currently a fellow at The Coexistence Consortium.



Dr. Anupam Sarmah

World Wildlife Fund (WWF), India

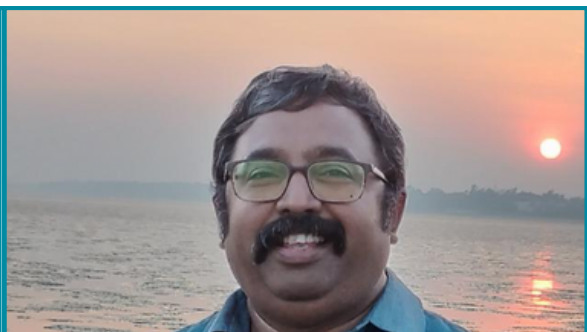
Dr. Anupam Sarmah is the Team Leader for WWF's Brahmaputra Landscape Program in Assam. With over two decades of experience, he leads conservation efforts for elephants, rhinos, and tigers, focusing on habitat protection, human-wildlife conflict management, and community-led conservation.



Ashish Thoke

The Corbett Foundation

Ashish Thoke is a wildlife conservationist specializing in human-wildlife conflict mitigation, ecological restoration, and community conservation. As Programme Officer – Wildlife at The Corbett Foundation in Kaziranga, he leads projects on conservation education, habitat restoration, and capacity building.



Dr. Bibhuti Lahkar

Aranyak

Dr. Bibhuti Prasad Lahkar is a renowned conservationist and ecologist with over two decades of experience in elephant research, habitat management, and human-wildlife coexistence strategies.



Seema Lokhandwala

The Coexistence Consortium

Seema Lokhandwala is an engineer-turned-elephant biologist with extensive experience in wildlife conservation, specializing in elephant communication, behavior, and ecology.

ROOT CAUSES OF HUMAN WILDLIFE INTERACTIONS



The discussion began by experts, deep-diving into the root causes of HWI, in the local context of Assam. The following were some of the key elements that emerged:

1

HABITAT FRAGMENTATION DUE TO INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Large-scale projects like highways and railway lines dissect traditional elephant corridors, preventing herds from following their natural migratory routes. As a result, elephants enter human settlements in search of passage, food, or water, leading to conflict.

2

DEFORESTATION AND WATER SCARCITY

Elephants require vast amounts of food (approximately 300 kg per day) and water. The depletion of forests and drying of water bodies forces them to venture into human-dominated areas. Agricultural fields, which offer a steady food source, become unintended conflict zones.

3

ENCROACHMENT INTO WILDLIFE HABITATS

The expansion of human settlements, particularly revenue villages into forested areas, has significantly reduced the space available for elephants. This brings elephants into direct conflict with human activities, especially during harvest seasons.

4

ELECTROCUTION AS A CONFLICT RESPONSE

In some areas, farmers install illegal electrified fences to protect their crops, leading to a significant number of elephant fatalities. This exacerbates tensions as communities retaliate against perceived threats rather than addressing the root causes of the conflict.



KEY THEMES & INSIGHTS

1

Enhance media's role in shaping public perception

Ashish Thoke, from The Corbett Foundation touched upon media's current approach to reporting on Human Wildlife Interactions. He suggested that many articles on the issue tend to sensationalize the issue rather than build awareness or sensitivity among readers. Seema Lokhandwala built on this by sharing the example of using connotation heavy labels to name animals.

After a few rounds of questions from the journalists the discussion took a turn to address some practices that can be adopted to ensure holistic reporting on this issue. Some of the suggestions that emerged included- **use of neutral terminology, sticking to facts, speaking with conservationists and other experts and developing guidelines for ethical reporting.**

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“Elephants are often named in ways that reflect their actions, such as ‘Laden,’ to highlight destructive behavior, while others, like the ‘Maharaj,’ are idolized. This tendency to label too quickly can shape perceptions unfairly. The media has the opportunity to use neutral language when addressing such situations, allowing for a more balanced and thoughtful perspective.”

Seema Lokhandwala

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2

Responsibly leverage social media for greater impact

In recent times, we have seen noticed two big changes- an overload of information and shortened attention spans of people. These two have greatly impacted people's ability to consume news. People have instead started turning to shorter formats of content like reels than reading long form articles.

Dr. Anupam Sarmah proposed, that this shift presents an opportunity for media and organisations to work closely and create content that is accessible, reliable and accurate. Aspects like causes of human wildlife interactions, realities of people most affected by it and mitigation efforts at grassroots to address these instances need to be visiblised and described. Another big concern in the social media era has been the circulation of fake news. In order to tackle the far reaching negative impact such news can have, there need to be dedicated efforts to counter fake news.

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“Social media plays a significant role—it can support or hinder progress by spreading fake news and shaping opinions. The media must collaborate closely with organizations to ensure accurate information is shared.

Dr. Anupam Sarmah

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3

Importance of considering cultural context of coexistence while shaping solutions

Assam and many other parts of India have a long standing history of revering elephants, which offers a potential model for peaceful coexistence. One of the journalists said, “Some communities continue to see elephants as sacred beings, referring to them as *Ganesh* or *Mahakal*, but there are others who associate them with destruction due to economic losses. Media has the power to frame elephants from the lens that encourages people to respect them.

In some Assamese communities rituals like *Dangoria Puja* are performed to honor elephants and seek their goodwill. **Such traditions can be integrated into conservation strategies to build empathy and reduce conflict.**

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“Elephants are often electrocuted during the harvesting season as they walk through areas where they once roamed freely. Tragically, they are then blamed for crop damage. In some regions, a certain level of coexistence exists between humans and wildlife, but broader collaboration is needed to expand this model. This is an issue that requires the involvement of all stakeholders—government, media, NGOs, and local communities—because no single entity can resolve it alone”

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Amir Chetri

4

Implementation of government response around HWI needs to be strengthened

A key aspect in ensuring well rounded perception around HWI across the board of stakeholders, is of government policies. Over the years, we have witnessed a major gap in execution and accountability pertaining to these policies. The journalists in the room brought up the idea of inconsistent compensation mechanisms with regards to families affected by HWI related damages.

While there are policies like “*One Nation, One Compensation*”, in reality- **delays, inconsistencies in reporting, and bureaucratic hurdles make it difficult for people to receive timely compensation.** Another element of concern is that of judicial delays in resolving conflict related cases. Slow legal proceedings frustrate communities. Unresolved disputes lead to worsening human-wildlife relations, with **many individuals taking matters into their own hands** by poisoning or killing animals in retaliation.

To address these concerns, we need to ensure conservation efforts **do not follow a siloed approach.** Integration diverse stakeholders like forest departments, law enforcement, people in agriculture and allied activities, media, local NGOs should all coordinate and work collectively on mitigation strategies.

Empowering communities most affected by HWI

To address this issue in the long term, it is essential to **empower communities living near wildlife habitats with sustainable support systems**. Media can play a key role in building awareness around the initiatives in place to support them. Moreover collaborative efforts need to be taken to streamline compensation to families affected by HWI. Also, implementing early-warning systems that alert communities about elephant movements can prevent surprise encounters and property damage. These initiatives will in turn reduce probability of any form of negative HWI.

Another solution that can be adopted is enabling **diversification of income sources for people living in such areas**. Creating avenues for eco-tourism, government backed employee programs, etc., will reduce dependence of many on agriculture further minimising HWI.

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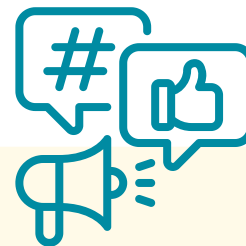
In the last five years, we've seen over 300 elephants killed, highlighting the severity of the issue. As more elephants are unable to move freely, the problem deepens.. The drying up of water bodies and the conflict over land are the root causes behind this conflict. Media coverage tends to focus only on death, but the injuries and their long-term effects on livelihoods need attention as well. These aspects must be covered, and we also need the judiciary to be more responsive in addressing these issues. It is important to understand from communities what interventions can support their livelihoods and stakeholders must assess how their income can be diversified.

Bibhuti Lahkar

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE MEDIA



1 **BALANCED REPORTING**

Avoid sensationalism and anthropomorphism when covering HWI and ensure that both the sides of the story are told.

2 **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

Reporters should focus on the "what, why, and how" to create solutions-oriented stories.

3 **LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY**

Use available technologies like camera traps and thermal drones to inform stories with accurate data.

4 **ENGAGE WITH EXPERTS**

Involve scientific bodies and experts in HWI stories to enhance credibility and counter misinformation.

5 **BE MINDFUL OF HEADLINES**

Ensure headlines are factual and not emotionally charged to prevent unnecessary fear mongering.

This comprehensive approach can contribute to a more informed public discourse on human-wildlife interactions, fostering coexistence and mutual respect between humans and the natural world.



