# Human Animal Conflict – Elephants & Railway Tracks

## What is the issue?

\n\n

\n
- Elephants have no use for roads and trains.
\n
- And yet, at 10-20 deaths on tracks per year, over 100 elephants were killed by trains in the first decade of this century, according to Elephant Task Force.
\n
- The last five months have witnessed at least 15 elephant casualties on tracks.
\n
- On every occasion, locomotive drivers are accused of flouting the speed limit of 40-50 km/h in elephant corridors.
\n

\n\n

## Is the speed limit an effective solution?

\n\n

\n
- Of the **88 identified elephant corridors** in India, 40 have national highways running through them, 21 have railway tracks, and 18 have both.
\n
- It makes little economic sense to impose restrictions on speed or night traffic along such lengths of India's ever-expanding linear network.
\n
- Also, accidents can happen even at low speeds — due to human errors and the unpredictability of animal movement.
\n
- Speed restrictions are feasible only in short, singular stretches, such as the 11 km killer stretch near **Berhampore in Odisha**, the 8 km stretch that cuts through **Jharkhand's Palamu**, or the 4 km death trap in the **Palghat Gap**.
\n
- It is not an option on steep gradients, such as **Assam's Karbi Anglong**, where trains have to accelerate to climb the slope.
\n

\n\n

## What is an effective solution?

\n\n

\n
- Speed restrictions must be **guided by real-time inputs** from forest staff on elephant movements to help locomotive drivers.
\n
- Similar protocol put in place in Rajaji National Park helped avert elephant casualties for 12 long years.
\n
- But where a track or road cuts across several wildlife corridors over a longer stretch, **the real solution is realignment**.
\n
- e.g, It makes little sense to restrict the speed of trains along the 80 km Alipurduar-Siliguri stretch, when there is a less vulnerable alignment available through Falakata.
\n
- Where realignment of a longer stretch is not possible we need **elevated tracks with underpasses** for safe, unhindered animal movement.
\n
- This requires major investment, and all forest routes across the country can't be realigned or elevated overnight.
\n
- But the Railways needs to prioritise, and consider the aspects of speed and safety while planning new projects or expanding existing ones.
\n
- It isn't only about conservation either. Collisions with elephants almost invariably damage and derail locomotives, lead to temporary suspensions of service, impose costs on the exchequer and may lead to major passenger casualties.
\n
- These considerations should help offset the cost burden of route realignment or constructing underpasses.
\n
- Given their size, elephants do not venture into narrow, low passages.
\n
- They don't climb vibrating ramps to cross a highway or railway track either. Funnelling the animals towards designated passageways is also critical because herds stick to their traditional routes.
\n
- But since 2010, we have evidenced in India that adequately-built underpasses allowed regular herd movement.

\n
- When the NH 152 was ready in 2010, it offered two 30-foot high and 100-foot wide passageways, which elephant herds started using within months.
\n

\n\n

\n
- The solutions don’t have to be necessarily expensive. In many areas, it may be also possible to funnel elephants with fencing to designated level-crossing zones where they will not struggle to climb up or down the tracks.
\n
- But site-specific, scientific remedies need to be decided upon, and implemented irrespective of the cost.
\n
- 12th century Western Chalukya king Somesvara III in his Manasollasa, wrote that the healthiest forests were the ones in which elephants thrived, and it was the sovereign’s duty to protect those forests.
\n
- Eight centuries later it is still relevant.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

**Category: Mains | GS-III | Environment**

\n\n

**Source: The Indian Express**

\n\n

\n