

Triumph and tragedy for the Assam Haathi project

In Assam lies a village called Deepaline. Nestled next to a tea garden, Deepaline villagers know the habits of elephants far better than they would like. Elephants don't like tea. But they do like tea gardens, which provide shade and refuge for them during the day and make excellent bases from which to venture out into the crop lands, feeding on the rice paddy, emptying grain stores in houses and generally creating a great deal of havoc at best, and injuring people at worst.

Deepaline's unlucky location makes it terribly prone to such nightly elephant crop-raids, and the villagers had begun to take to desperate measures to protect themselves. Fearful of sleeping in their houses, they had built platforms into the trees in their villages, where they would keep vigilance and sleep at night when elephants were near. They had also stopped cultivating crops altogether, their rice field having laid fallow for over four years, reducing this community's income to complete dependent on occasional day labourers' wages from the tea garden.

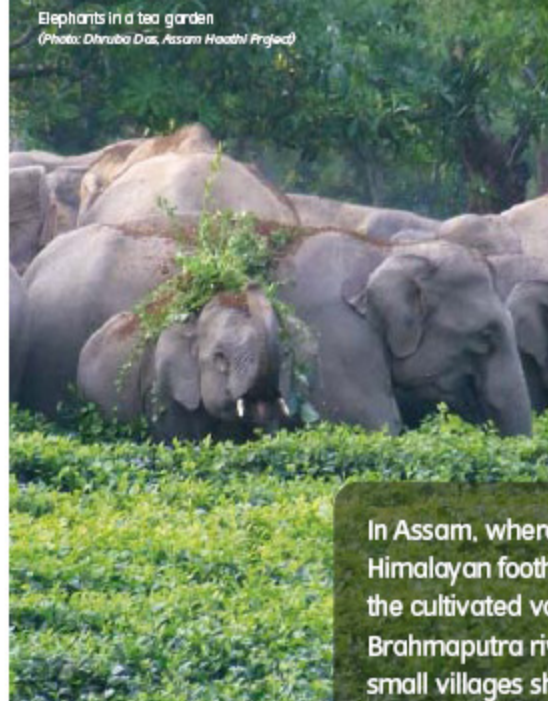
Hearing of this desperate situation, the Assam Haathi Project offered its help. Our district Site Coordinator, Dibakar Barua and his field team, and Project Manager Nandita Hazarika installed a trip wire system – a simple one-strand wire fence strung at elephant-shoulder height between bamboo poles, around the periphery of the village. This wire is attached to an alarm – a loud doorbell or an old car alarm. When an elephant bumps into the fence, it triggers the alarm and the villagers have time to get up and shine the searchlights we have given them at the elephants, which invariably makes them go away. Dibakar continued to work with the villagers of Deepaline and a number of other villages in his district, while also overseeing the field tracking team – community members who follow and record the locations of elephant herds, so that we can anticipate their presence, study their ecological needs, and plot and analyse their movements with computer-based mapping tools here in the UK. He showed the villagers further tricks and ideas, helped them grow chillis for chilli smoke and fences (also effective methods for keeping elephants at bay) and answered their questions about elephants. The trip-wire alarm was a success and the villagers were able to sleep in safety in their houses again.

The next step was to find a way to protect their fields. Under Dibakar's guidance, villagers and the project team together built a two-strand electrified fence and for the first time in years, this community has been able to harvest rice again.

The core concept of our project is to combine direct, practical and innovative outreach to communities while at the same time monitoring and studying elephants and planning solutions for the long-term. Key to our success is that we do not separate science and community-based work, villagers get involved in everything from building a fence to tracking elephants, and discussing the results of our analyses later on. It is perhaps this concept and the little successes like those at Deepaline that earned the Assam Haathi Project two major awards in 2007 – first, one of the most prestigious grants in conservation, the Darwin Initiative award, which ensures that the project can continue and expand its work for at least another three years, and second, the top award from the British and Irish Association of Zoos (BIAZA), a recognition that appeared even in the Assamese local press and brought tremendous delight and pride especially to the Indian-based project team.

In the midst of our jubilantly enjoying the recognition of the BIAZA award, tragedy hit the project team. On 15 December we received the unbelievable news that Dibakar had died in a terrible road accident near his home. All of us in the project family were devastated. Dibakar had been one of the earliest members of the project, he helped to build it, and had worked tirelessly with those communities worst-affected by elephants and begun to make real progress in re-building their tolerance and respect for these animals. He also meticulously collected a vast amount of information about elephants and crop-raiding and was certainly one of the most knowledgeable people about elephant conflict in Assam. His dedication, patience and hard work were exemplary and brought great hope to the communities struggling to co-exist with elephants. Dibakar's community leadership has left a legacy, his work achieved international recognition and, foremost, his efforts not only in Deepaline but also in other villages undoubtedly saved lives. He is very much missed by all of his colleagues in Assam and at Chester Zoo.

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Elephants in a tea garden
(Photo: Dhruva Das, Assam Haathi Project)



Dibakar and the Deepaline villagers
building an electric fence.
(Photo: Assam Haathi Project)

In Assam, where the forested Himalayan foothills descend into the cultivated valley of the Brahmaputra river, hundreds of small villages share the land with vast tea gardens that produce one sixth of the world's tea; and they share the land with wild elephants, which roam between the forests and the river.



Dibakar being honoured by the villagers of Deepaline
(Photo: Assam Haathi Project)



Electric fence protecting crops
(Photo: Assam Haathi Project)