

State seeks Centre's nod for shifting elephants

The pachyderms that strayed from Nagarhole forests have been creating havoc in parts of Hassan

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BANGALORE: The Karnataka Government has embarked on what could be called an elephantine exercise in translocating a big herd of wild elephants from Hassan district to various other elephant habitats in the State.

Such an effort, involving wild elephants, is stated to be the first of its kind in the country.

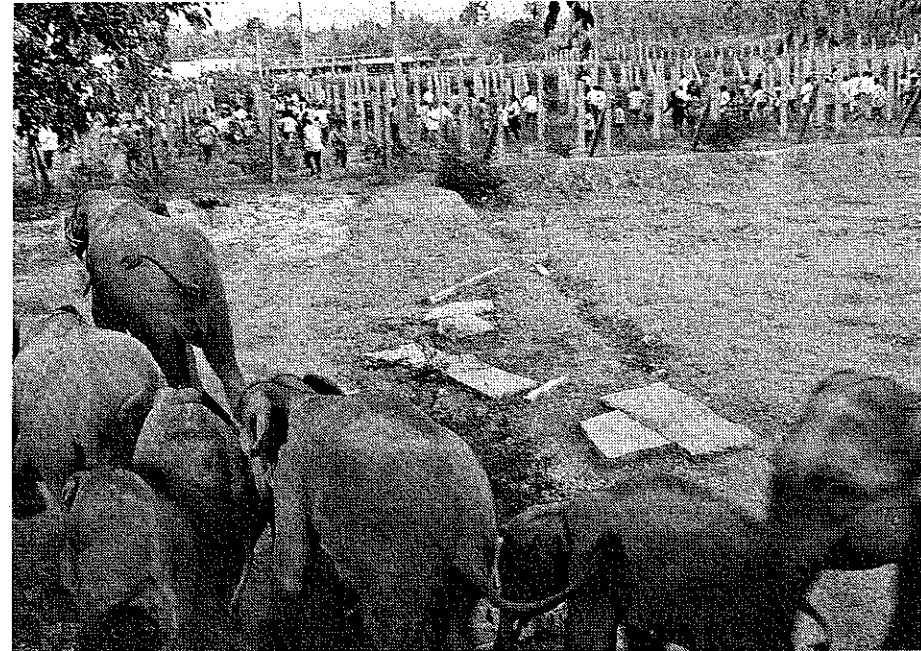
Destruction

The State Government has sought the permission of the Centre for translocating a big herd of wild elephants which have strayed from the Nagarhole forests and were creating havoc for several years in certain parts of Hassan region, resulting in the loss of nearly 10 lives apart from serious damage to commercial crops like sugarcane, coconut and banana, among others.

The last death was reported on December 15 when an adult elephant forming part of the herd trampled a villager.

Sources in the State Government told *The Hindu* here that the Union Government had deputed two members of the Central Steering Committee of Project Elephant to carry out a spot inspection on January 3 and 4 and on receipt of a report from them would grant formal permission to go ahead with the translocation programme.

Those deputed for the inspection were the former Principal Chief Conservator



AGGRESSIVE: A file photo of elephants marching into a vineyard in Hassan district

of Forests, Karnataka, M.K. Appaiah and naturalist Ajay Desai. The authorities would decide on whether to translocate all the elephants or to tame some of them for use by the Forest Department only at the fag end of the operation.

Big exercise

Asked on the translocation programme, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife) and Chief Wildlife Warden A.K. Varma said it was a big exercise and would take about a year for comple-

tion. The State Government had obtained permission to translocate two elephants from the same area in 2000 and the successful programme took around six months.

Unlike the "khedda" operations which have been banned for over three decades, the present operation comprising a large group of foresters, including veterinarians, specialised in elephant care would drive the herd to a corner from where they could not escape (preferably near steep hills).

The elephants thereafter would be tranquillised and chained. The next step would be to revive them, lift them in a kraal for a while before shifting them to a core forest area.

Attacks

Mr. Varma said that a large group of nearly 25 elephants, including two calves (obviously born after the herd shifted to Hassan), have been attacking coffee rich plantations in the taluks of Hassan, Yeslur, Arkalgud, Sakleshpur

• Elephants have damaged crops and caused loss of lives

• The Centre has deputed a team for spot inspection

and adjoining taluks for nearly five years. The menace has been persisting over the past 15 years following the completion of the Hemavathy Reservoir across the Hemavathy (a tributary of the Cauvery).

The Hemavathy Reservoir is right across the elephant corridor and elephants of the Nagarhole region who stray on to the other side of the reservoir have been trapped and unable to return.

In a way, the elephants have come to stay in the coffee plantations of the Hassan region and have made it their home much to the chagrin of the farmers.

The adequate availability of sugarcane, bamboo, coffee shoots and banana, apart from other crops, has apparently encouraged the animals to stay put in the Hassan forests abutting Kodagu district. What has prompted the authorities to take steps to shift out the elephant herd has been the increasing raids and damage to crops. While it was 400 cases of raids in 2003 and a loss of Rs. 7 lakh, it increased to 650 in 2005 and a loss of Rs. 14 lakh and 1,500 cases so far this year involving a loss of Rs. 26 lakh.