Making Way for Elephants

What is the issue?

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- Elephants making news for dying on rail tracks is on the rise in recent days.
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- The incidents remind of the duty of protecting the forests where elephants thrive.
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How is the casualty scenario?

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- **Tracks** - More than 100 elephants had died on the tracks during 2001-10.
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- The frequency and number of train kills have, in fact, been rising.
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- Across India, average annual casualties jumped from 9 during 2000-09 to 17 over the next 7 years.
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- **Others** - Trains are actually a minor killer.
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- Poisoning, poaching, and electrocution together kill more than four times as many elephants.
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- During 2009-16, more than 500 elephants died this way as against 120 killed on the tracks.
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What is the threat?

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- Only the richest and widest of forests can support elephants.
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- Elephants migrate long distances along ‘corridors’ that are usually marked by similar vegetation.
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- Once-contiguous elephant habitats are now fragmented by mines, rail lines and human settlements.
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- This largely interrupts their transit zones and lead to clashes and casualties.
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- Elephants thus pay a heavy price as one of the worst victims of India’s development.
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What are the limitations with protection?

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- India’s 668 **Protected (forest) Areas** cover less than 5% of the country’s area.
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- India’s 32 **elephant reserves** (ERs) are spread over 65,000 sq km.
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- But only less than 30% of this area is legally protected forests.
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- Centre’s **Elephant Task Force** recommended declaring the entire ER area as ecologically sensitive under the Environment Protection Act.
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- This would make another 46,000 sq km out of bounds for miners and developers.
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- The Task Force also recommended setting up of 10 **elephant landscapes** around the 32 ERs.
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- This would require **judicious land** use in another 45,000 sq km.
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- But there is reluctance to treat the Protected Areas as sacrosanct.
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- Attempts to make these stretches as **no-go zones** are seen as an impediment to growth by many.
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What are the other concerns?

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- National Highways run through 40 of India’s 88 identified elephant corridors.
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- Putting **curbs** on speed or night traffic along the ever-expanding linear network makes little economic sense.
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- **Speed restrictions** are feasible only in short, singular stretches. E.g.
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i. 11km near Berhampore in Odisha
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ii. 8-km segment through Jharkhand’s Palamu
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iii. 4-km in the Palghat Gap in the Western Ghats that connects Kerala’s Palakkad and Tamil Nadu’s Coimbatore
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- However, speed restriction is not an option on **steep gradients**.
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- E.g. in Assam’s Karbi Anglong, where to climb, trains must accelerate
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- In North Bengal, the night speed limit once applied to a total of around 17 km.
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- It was applied for a **series of short stretches** of 1-3 km each, in an 80-km segment between Siliguri and Alipurduar.
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- But since 1-3 km does not cover even the **braking distance**, trains ran slowly over the entire segment.
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- Slowing down trains for hours at a stretch would disrupt **rail traffic** over a large part of the network.
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What could be done?

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- **Speed restrictions** - This could work better when guided by real-time inputs on elephant movements.
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- A protocol put in place in Rajaji National Park (Uttarakhand) helped avert elephant casualties for many years.
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- Followed rigorously, it can be replicated in short stretches elsewhere.
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- **Realignment** - There are places where a track, or road, cuts across several wildlife corridors over a longer stretch.
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- The solution for these junctions could be realignment.
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- Where realignment is not possible, tracks have to be elevated with underpasses for elephants.
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- **Railways** - Not all forest routes can be realigned or elevated overnight.
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- The Railways must thus prioritise, and balance efficiency and safety while planning projects or expanding existing ones.
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- Expertise and experience available to find site-specific, science-based solutions for key corridors should be made use of.
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- **Political will** - The test lies in the will to implement those remedies irrespective of the cost.
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- It will take a lot more to secure the elephant's fragmented and shrinking home, such as giving up on sizeable coal reserves.
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- **Provisions** - Elephants mostly travel for water.
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- Periodic de-siltation of their watering holes will keep them in their areas.
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- **Besides**, WTI (Wildlife Trust of India) is testing an automated solar-powered device, **EleTrack**.
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- This can detect large animals near the tracks and issue a loud, flashing warning for train drivers.
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Source: Indian Express

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