

Soil balls stuffed with bamboo seeds to grow a forest for elephants

09 August 2020



Forest officials throw seed balls in a forest area in Athagarh, Odisha.

Forest officials in Odisha's Cuttack are hurling soil balls stuffed with bamboo seeds into vacant areas inside a forest so that elephants can have their favourite food when they grow into plants and not raid nearby villages and agricultural fields.

The divisional forest officer (DFO) of Athagarh, Sasmita Lenka, told The Telegraph: "Elephants often enter human habitations for want of adequate food in their natural habitats. If we can solve the problem by creating a solid food base for them, they will stop raiding human settlements. So, we decided to launch a drive to create more bamboo forests. But shortage of labourers (to sow so many seeds) and funds amid the coronavirus pandemic was a major constraint."

The Athagarh forest division then came up with the idea to create bamboo clusters without needing too many hands or much investment.

"We decided to throw balls embedded with bamboo seeds into vacant plots inside the forest. Each orb, of the shape and size of a cricket ball, is made of 50 to 100 grams of good muddy soil and stuffed with 10 to 15 bamboo seeds," Lenka said.

"We also mix pesticides so that the seeds are not destroyed by insects. The balls are dried for up to 24 to 48 hours before being thrown into the barren forest patches," she added.

According to Lenka, there is no need to water the balls for the seeds to germinate as it is the rainy season.

"We hope that of the 10-15 seeds in each ball, at least five will germinate. Then shoots will come out within a month and bamboo bushes will grow within a year. Once they are fully grown, they will

remain there for a long time. We have already thrown 5,000 to 10,000 balls into the forest. At many places the seeds have germinated. We plan to throw 50,000 to 70,000 bamboo balls," she said.

The immediate trigger for the plan was the havoc caused by a herd of 21 elephants from the Chandaka-Dampada forest division, close to Bhubaneswar, that had come to the Athagarh division in search of food. They ate and damaged paddy of local farmers. Incidents of man-animal conflict are reported almost daily in the area. The habitat of elephants has been disturbed by the expansion of Bhubaneswar city, officials said.

"After a lot of deliberation we have come up with the plan of creating bamboo clusters. Once the plan is successful, we will submit a proposal to the forest department to create more bamboo forests using this method," said Lenka, adding that the forest department had bought one quintal of seeds from a government firm at Jashipur in Mayurbhanj district.

"Local people have also come forward to work as volunteers along with forest officials to prepare the bamboo balls and throw them into the forest. There is no need to look after the balls. The seeds will germinate automatically. We will also throw the balls into elephant corridors through which the animals move from one forest division to another," Lenka said.

An elephant requires up to 150kg of food a day.

Biswajit Mohanty, the secretary of the NGO Wildlife Odisha, said: "Odisha elephants live a life fraught with danger all the time due to poaching, poisoning, electrocution, train accidents and being chased by forest squads. Although Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Assam have much larger populations of elephants, the elephant mortality rate is the highest in Odisha."

Mohanty added: "As many as 1,497 deaths have been recorded in the state since 1990."

Source: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/soil-balls-stuffed-with-bamboo-seeds-to-grow-a-forest-for-elephants/cid/1788621>