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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Managing Coexistence in Human-Wildlife Conflict Zones

THE HINDU

13 May 2026 · ENVIRONMENT · GS3

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Managing Coexistence in Human-Wildlife Conflict Zones

 The Hindu 13 May 2026 **GS3**

TH The Hindu

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"Should compensation for wildlife conflict losses be made a justiciable right -- and would that distort the conservation ethic?"

EDITORIAL SUMMARY:

The Hindu argues that India's response to escalating human-wildlife conflict – evident in Wayanad's elephant deaths, Maharashtra's tiger killings and the recent tiger return to D'Ering in Arunachal Pradesh – must move from reactive containment to a coexistence framework rooted in community participation, habitat connectivity and ecologically literate compensation. Reliance on electric fences, capture operations and Section 11 "dangerous animal" notifications under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 offers short-term relief but corrodes both biodiversity and rural goodwill in the long term.

A CONFLICT THE FOREST CANNOT ABSORB

India hosts roughly 75 per cent of the world's wild tigers (3,682 as per the 2022 All-India Tiger Estimation) and the world's largest population of Asian elephants (about 27,312 per the 2017 Synchronised Elephant Population Estimation). The same density that makes India a conservation success makes the human-wildlife interface uniquely fraught. Government of India data tabled in Parliament show that more than 500 humans are killed annually by elephants and over 70 tigers and 250 leopards die each year in conflict-linked incidents.

Wayanad's elephant deaths in 2024-25, the recurring tiger conflicts across Maharashtra's Tadoba-Brahmapuri-Chandrapur landscape, and the 2026 return of a tiger to D'Ering Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh after years of absence are not isolated events. They are symptoms of a landscape under structural pressure – forest fragmentation, linear infrastructure cutting corridors, monoculture plantations replacing native scrub, and human settlements pushing into Eco-Sensitive Zones.

THE REGULATORY TOOLBOX AND ITS LIMITS

The Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 – which the 2022 amendment rationalised to four schedules from six – remains the governing statute. Section 11(1)(a) empowers the Chief Wildlife Warden to permit hunting of any wild animal “dangerous to human life” or which has become “disabled or diseased as to be beyond recovery.” In practice, this provision is used to authorise the capture or elimination of conflict tigers and elephants.

Project Tiger (1973), administered by the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), and Project Elephant (1992) provide protected-area scaffolding. The Eco-Sensitive Zone framework under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 buffers Protected Areas. CITES Appendix I and the IUCN Red List (Asian elephant: Endangered; Bengal tiger: Endangered) anchor international obligations. The MoEFCC’s Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation Guidelines, 2021 provide a structured advisory framework with 14 thematic guidelines covering early warning, response, compensation and prevention.

Yet the architecture struggles at the edges. Compensation rates set by state governments are slow to disburse and rarely match real economic loss. Crop insurance for wildlife damage exists in patches but lacks a unified national scheme. Linear infrastructure – highways, rail and transmission lines – cuts corridors faster than mitigation can keep up.

WHAT COEXISTENCE DEMANDS

A coexistence framework would shift the centre of gravity from “remove the animal” to “redesign the landscape.” Three principles follow:

- **Community as front line, not afterthought:** Joint Forest Management Committees and Eco-Development Committees must be empowered with budget heads and real decision rights, not consultative roles. Pench Tiger Reserve’s village relocation packages and Periyar’s eco-development model show this can work.
- **Connectivity over containment:** protecting and restoring the 101 elephant corridors identified by the Wildlife Institute of India and 32 tiger corridors mapped by NTCA is more durable than fencing reserves. Underpasses on NH-44 through Pench and the Kanha-Pench corridor are templates worth replicating.
- **Ecologically literate compensation:** a national, time-bound, parametric compensation scheme – modelled on PM Fasal Bima Yojana but designed for wildlife damage – can prevent the slow erosion of rural goodwill that today drives retaliatory poisoning.

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Key arguments:

- India's conservation success has created a structurally unavoidable human-wildlife interface that the current statutory toolbox manages reactively.
- Section 11(1)(a) of the WPA 1972 and the "dangerous animal" route address symptoms, not the habitat fragmentation that causes conflict.
- Community-led approaches (JFMCs, EDCs, eco-tourism revenue sharing) produce more durable conservation outcomes than perimeter solutions.
- Corridor protection under Project Tiger / Project Elephant and the WII-mapped corridors needs statutory backing beyond ESZ notifications.

Counterarguments:

- Coexistence frameworks demand institutional patience that conflict-affected communities, who bear immediate loss of life and crop, cannot afford.
- Compensation as a justiciable right risks moral hazard and frivolous claims without robust verification.
- Forest department capacity for community-mode governance is stretched; expanding mandates without funding produces paper compliance.

Keywords: Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 Section 11, NTCA, Project Tiger, Project Elephant, MoEFCC Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation Guidelines 2021, Eco-Sensitive Zone, EPA 1986, CITES Appendix I, IUCN Red List, Wayanad, D'Ering, elephant corridors, Wildlife Institute of India.

The Hindu's view is that India will not save its tigers and elephants by walling them off from villages – the geography forbids it. The next decade of conservation will be won or lost in the buffer landscapes, where forest meets farm. Treating local communities as conservation partners with stake and voice, rather than as collateral damage to be compensated, is the only path that respects both biodiversity and dignity. Coexistence is not a soft option; it is the harder, slower and only durable one.

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