

# India, Nepal and Bhutan plan task force to protect wildlife

Kanchenjunga Landscape, spread across the countries, to be monitored

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The governments of India, Nepal and Bhutan are actively considering having a joint task force for allowing free movement of wildlife across political boundaries and checking smuggling of wildlife across the Kanchenjunga Landscape, a trans-boundary region spread across Nepal, India and Bhutan.

The development comes after forest officials and representatives of non-governmental organisation of the three countries visited parts of the landscape and later held a meeting at Siliguri in north Bengal earlier this month.

Participants from India and Bhutan, who attended the meeting, told *The Hindu* that setting up of a joint task force was a key requirement in the road map on achieving the objectives of free movement of wildlife and checking smuggling.

The landscape stretches along the southern side of Mount Kanchenjunga and covers an area of 25,080 sq km spread across parts of eastern Nepal (21%), Sikkim and West Bengal (56%) and western and southwestern parts of Bhutan (23%).

From India, Ravinkanta Sinha, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests, West Bengal, participated in the meeting, whereas Nepal was represented by G.P. Bhatta-



**Crossing paths:** Between 1986 and 2015, 425 people were killed by elephants, while 144 pachyderms were killed between 1958 and 2013.

rai, Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation. The Bhutanese delegation was led by Tashi Tobgyel, Department of Forest and Park Services. Representatives of the South Asia Wildlife Enforcement Network, an inter-governmental wildlife law enforcement agency, which held its first ever meeting in India in May 2018, were also present during the meeting.

## Severe loss

According to the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), a regional knowledge development and learning centre, 1,118 sq km of riverine grassland and tree cover were lost in the landscape between 2000 and 2010. Around 74% of the area was converted into rangeland and 26% to agricul-

tural land. Other than seven million people, the Kanchenjunga Landscape is also home to 169 species of mammals and 713 species of birds.

Studies by ICIMOD suggest that between 1986 and 2015, as many as 425 people were killed by elephants (an average of 14 human deaths every year) and 144 elephants were killed between 1958 and 2013 (an average of three elephants every year).

S.P. Pandey of SPOAR, a north Bengal-based wildlife organisation, who also participated in the discussion, said that every few months there were cases of elephants, rhino, gaurs and other mammals crossing over political boundaries, triggering panic among locals across the border and also posing a danger to the wildlife.