Panel: India must secure elephant reserves

September 1 2010, By NIRMALA GEORGE , Associated Press Writer

In this April 9, 2007 file photo, a herd of wild elephants play at the Deepor Beel Wildlife Sanctuary on the outskirts of Gauhati, India. India unveiled an ambitious plan Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2010 to save its dwindling elephant population with a multi-pronged strategy including creating new reserves, improvement of habitats and strict norms for elephants in captivity. "Elephant corridors" which the animals use to move across forested regions straddling different states would be secured and protected by law to prevent encroachment by mining, irrigation or industrial projects leading to the destruction of the habitat Jairam Ramesh, minister for environment and forests said while declaring the elephant India's "National Heritage Animal." (AP Photo/Anupam Nath, File)

(AP) -- India should protect its elephant population by securing its wildlife reserves, curbing poaching and restricting development in the corridors they use to travel between forested areas, a panel recommended.

Poaching for ivory and increased conflicts between people and elephants due to their dwindling habitat are key problems faced by India's wild elephant population, estimated at around 26,000.

The Elephant Task Force recommended setting up a national elephant conservation authority, better management of elephant reserves and protecting 88 corridors that the animals use across the country from mining, irrigation and other industrial projects.

The report's lead author, Mahesh Rangarajan, said elephants have not received the same attention as tigers and other endangered wildlife, partly because their rate of decline has not been as dramatic. The numbers of wild elephants in India have stayed about the same over the past decade, but their habitat has continued to decline.

"With the elephant it is not a crisis of extinction, but a crisis of attrition," he said.

Environment and Forests Minister Jairam Ramesh said India was declaring the elephant its "National Heritage Animal" to raise awareness of the issue.

The panel also said Tuesday that India needs to curb poaching by using trained forest guards with modern communication equipment.

Only male Asian elephants have tusks, and the poaching of males for their ivory has drastically skewed the ratio between male and female elephants in India.

"In some places, the ratio is down to one male elephant for every hundred females," Rangarajan said.

Vivek Menon, a wildlife expert with the Wildlife Trust of India, said the panel's recommendations are a step in the right direction.

"If implemented in full, these are more than enough to save the elephant," he said.

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