

Notes from the Co-chairs IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

Simon Hedges and Ajay Desai

Firstly, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all the Asian Elephant Specialist Group's members for their service to the group and to Asian elephants in IUCN's last four-year period or "quadrennium". By the time this issue of *Gajah* is published, we should be well into the new quadrennium, which we hope will see renewed efforts by the group's members to secure a bright future for Asian elephants and their habitat.

The Asian Elephant Specialist Group is marking the start of the new quadrennium in a number of ways including the posting of all back issues of *Gajah* on the group's website (for which we owe a debt of gratitude to Jayantha Jayewardene and Hank Hammatt) and by organizing an international workshop on the mitigation of human–elephant conflict (HEC) in Asia to coincide with the Society for Conservation Biology's Annual Meeting in Beijing in July. The HEC workshop is being organized by the AsESG's Human–Elephant Conflict Task Force under Ravi Corea's leadership with financial support from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's Asian Elephant Conservation Fund to whom we are very grateful.

Looking back the editorials in the last few journals we see some really useful insights for the group that can guide us all towards better conservation. Jayantha Jayewardene states in his editorial in *Gajah* 27, "All too often conservation of elephants has been limited to treatment of the symptoms rather than addressing the root causes" and suggests that research "can identify and focus attention on the causes of problems rather than the obvious symptoms, which has been the main focal point of elephant conservation in most of the range states." We couldn't agree more with that, as conservationists we all need to understand the species and its ecological requirements and we need to understand the problems it faces and problems it causes in turn. Finally, we need to understand what implications all the above has for conservation and management. If we fail

to do that we will persist in dealing with the symptoms rather than address the real problems and also fail to capitalize on the conservation opportunities we have. With the increasing threats that elephants face and with the additional threat of global warming just around the corner we need to shift gears and move beyond symptoms to the root causes. Needless to say we cannot simply stop treating the symptoms but we need to move beyond doing just that.

Prithviraj Fernando in his editorial in *Gajah* 28 opens a new, important, and very productive subject for thought and discussion. It is not just the subject of his discussion piece but the concept that is important. We all need to start looking hard at where we are going. How do our ideas, concepts, and actions actually affect conservation? Do we need to follow a path because it was considered important or standard at some point in time? He calls upon us to start thinking 'outside the box' and consequently to take a harder look at our approaches to conservation. This is not to say we should drop all we have been doing but rather we need to review our approaches and actions in a more critical manner. Such a review and an outside the box style of thinking will help us find better approaches, or to improve our current approaches, to conservation and management.

Taking the above two points into consideration, Heidi Riddle's editorial in *Gajah* 29 becomes very relevant and important; that is to say she stresses the importance of communication. The various meetings we have had and are planning to have are all about communication, getting together to share information and collectively formulate better strategies for conservation. The Task Forces too are all about that, bringing our collective knowledge together for better understanding elephant conservation issues, to discuss and debate, and resolve issues (both simple and contentious), to collectively produce information and provide guidance that will help elephant conservation. The objective is to

put the best we have out there so that elephant conservation can benefit from it. With the forthcoming human–elephant conflict workshop we will initiate a process where everyone can contribute, even those who do not attend the workshop. The final product will strangely not be a final product but a living document that will be constantly revised based on the inputs we continue to receive. The same approach will be taken for all documents produced by all Task Forces. The documents will keep growing and improving as our own collective experience and knowledge grows with time. However, all this will be possible only if we communicate and take the time to contribute. We do realize that most of you have time constraints so the door to contribute will always be open and you can contribute at any stage or as many times as you wish. Communicating within and outside the AsESG is what will make us and the group more effective, or “better elephant conservationists” as Heidi aptly puts it.

We proposed an AsESG listserv/forum board early in the last quadrennium but the group’s membership thought that this was unnecessary (citing low participation in other related listservs). Nevertheless, we feel that it may be useful to review that decision as members are increasingly drawn into the group’s activities, particularly those of the Task Forces, and we would welcome your views.

On the funding side, of particular note as we begin the new quadrennium is a newly-available dedicated source of funding for species conservation, the Mohamed bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund, which should prove very helpful in our endeavours for Asian elephants. We encourage the group’s members to review the Species Fund’s requirements and to apply for funds for Asian elephant conservation projects; more information can be found here: www.mbzspeciesconservation.org. Two types of grants are available: those of US\$ 5000 and those of between US\$ 5000 and US\$ 25,000. Species Fund grants will be awarded based on

the applicant’s ability to meet a number of criteria and applications are made by following a simple online process.

We will continue to keep the group’s members informed of funding opportunities as they arise and would like to request that the group’s members also keep us informed of funding sources so that we can pass the information on to the wider membership.

Over the next quadrennium, we intend that *Gajah* will continue to be published twice a year, in June and December in both hard copy and electronic (PDF) versions available for download from the group’s website. We encourage you all to submit articles for publication in *Gajah* as its continuing success will depend on the willingness of the AsESG’s members to publish in their journal.

Co-chairs’ e-mails:

shedges@wcs.org

ajayadesai.1@gmail.com



Sunset in southern Sri Lanka
Photo by Prithiviraj Fernando