

News Briefs

Compiled by the Editor

1. Police complete probe into wild elephant smugglers (Vietnam)

Vietnam News
December 29, 2008

HCM CITY - The HCM City Environmental Police Department said last week that it had completed its investigation into the illegal trading, transporting and maintenance of two wild elephants in Cu Chi District. Lieutenant Colonel Lam Hieu Nghia of the department said the two elephants were being kept by the Dang Vinh Construction, Trading and Services Ltd Co, in Phuoc Vinh An Commune, Cu Chi District.

Investigations showed that the two elephants were captured by H'Mong ethnic people in the forests of southern Binh Phuoc Province in 1971-1972. The elephants were then kept by Dieu Cuoc, a resident of Binh Phuoc's Bu Dang District. In 2004, Dang Vinh Co bought the pachyderms for VND160 million (\$9,411) and used a truck to illegally transport the animals at night to Cu Chi. A contract had been signed to effect the illegal transaction, the police said, adding that due action would be taken against the culprits.

2. Rise in jumbo count worries dept (India)

The Statesman
January 2, 2008

JALPAIGURI - An increase in the elephant population in the forests of Jalpaiguri district in particular, is soon becoming a matter of concern for the forest department officials. To add to their problems, there is little or no scope to expand the forest areas, which is possibly the only solution to prevent them from venturing outside the forests and add to the growing number of man-animal conflict incidents.

According to the state forest minister Mr Anata Roy, the increasing number of elephants is also

leading to an increase in the number of unnatural deaths of elephants. Explaining the situation, the CCF north Bengal Mr S Patel said that the forest areas are not increasing in ratio with the elephant population growth. "Earlier we extended the area of the Garumara National Park a few square kilometres. But such expansion is not possible everywhere as controversies regarding land would crop up.

Total 68 elephants died unnaturally in the past two years in the forests of the Dooars. "At present there are around 350 elephants in our forests. The number of elephant herds have increased drastically and their raids in the adjoining villages and in the tea plantations also increased this year," Dr Patel said.

Food has become scarce for the elephants, as the herbivore population has increased in the forests in general. Other animals like deer, rhino, bison consume a share of the vegetation, which forces the elephants to stray out of jungle ultimately leading to unnatural deaths.

3. Elephant problem solvable if illegal logging stopped (Indonesia)

Bernamea
January 3, 2009

BANDA ACEH - Wild elephant incursions into human settlements in Aceh will continue if nothing is done to stop illegal logging in forest areas, Antara news agency reported quoting a local nature conservation official. "The problem will persist unless illegal logging is stopped," Andi Basrul, head of the Nanggroe Aceh Darussalam Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA), said here Saturday.

During December 2008, wild elephants had invaded a number of villages in Aceh, damaged a few houses and injured several people. Basrul said his agency could not do much to stop the animals'

incursions because they were merely reacting to the damage being done to their habitat.

Villagers were known to have tried to fight the elephants by poisoning them but Basrul said the villagers' actions would not be effective and only cause the elephant population to shrink. The root cause of the present conflict between elephants and humans was the damage done to the animals' habitats by illegal logging, he said. The only way to solve the problem, according to Basrul, was the consistent implementation of the Aceh provincial government's moratorium on forest logging.

4. New survey finds more than 600 Asian elephants (Malaysia)

LiveScience
January 14, 2009

A new survey of dung has revealed a population of hundreds of endangered Asian elephants living in a Malaysian park. The animals could be the largest-known set of these pachyderms in Southeast Asia.

The researchers counted dung piles to estimate that there are 631 Asian elephants living in Taman Negara National Park — a 4343 km² (1676 square mile) protected area in the center of Peninsular Malaysia. This result confirms the largest-known population of elephants remaining in this part of the world, according to the New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and Malaysia's Department of Wildlife and National Parks (DWNP), which partnered to study the elephants.

Counts of elephant dung piles to estimate population size are a scientifically proven technique that produces accurate figures. There were no previous scientific population surveys for Asian elephants in Taman Negara National Park, the researchers said. "The surveys reveal the importance of Taman Negara in protecting wildlife especially those species that need large home ranges. DWNP will continue to safeguard this national park, which is the crown jewel of Malaysia's protected areas system.

Researchers were unsure of how many elephants lived in the park before this survey, although there were good reasons to think that the population was substantial, said Melvin Gumal, director of the WCS's conservation programs in Malaysia. The park, which contains one of the world's oldest rainforests, dating back 130 million years, also supports tigers, leopards, dholes, numerous monkey species and 350 types of birds.

5. Borneo pygmy elephants, planters battle for land (Malaysia)

Reuters
February 23, 2009

SUKAU - Deprived of access to his favourite food, a pygmy elephant trumpets furiously and charges at wildlife officials, a manifestation of this rare species' battle against Malaysia's key palm oil industry. Some herds of pygmy elephants, an endangered species according to conservation body the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF), are thriving on the fruit of palm oil plantations that encroach on their domains on Borneo island.

This has intensified the challenges to a mainstay of the economy in this South East Asian country of 27 million people, and the aggression the elephants show against humans. "He's angry because they have been chased away from a plantation. They want to eat more oil palm hearts," said Sabah wildlife department official Hussien Muin who has tracked elephants for nearly 11 years.

The Kinabatangan River, the largest in northeast Sabah state, opens out into a floodplain, which totals 4000 km² (1544 square miles), an area around seven times the size of New York City. The WWF estimates Sabah is home to 1500 pygmy elephants, who were once seen as the descendents of a private zoo kept by the Sultan of Sulu but are now viewed as a subspecies of larger Asian elephants.

Male pygmy elephants grow as tall as 2.5 metres (8.2 feet), half a metre shorter than Asian elephants. They have babyish faces, larger ears and are tubbier and less aggressive than their

cousins. They journey 1-2 km a day and eat about 200 kg of grass, palms and bananas but as their feeding ranges get cut off by villages, roads and plantations, traveling distances can triple, a WWF study using satellite tracking showed.

To protect their oil palms, planters have worked with wildlife bodies to erect low-voltage electric fences and bamboo cannons laced with gunpowder that scare the elephants away without harming them, minimising direct conflict. In some parts of the lower Kinabatangan, poisoning and shooting still goes on. Even as humans use new methods to protect their crops, elephants show that they too can learn. "These elephants are very cunning. Just few days ago, this male elephant pushed another one through the electric fence and broke it," said Don-don, an Indonesian worker guarding a plantation.

6. Tonnes of elephant tusks smuggled into Vietnam

Agence France Presse
March 7, 2009

HANOI - Vietnam customs officials have uncovered up to five tonnes of elephant tusks smuggled in from Tanzania, state media said Saturday. The tusks were found hidden in around 114 boxes of plastic waste after being transported from Africa through Malaysia to Vietnam's northern Hai Phong port, said the Tuoi Tre newspaper.

It was not yet clear if the tusks were for selling in Vietnam or if they were smuggled in for onward movement, the papers said, but officials were chasing the owner of the goods. Ivory and ivory-based products sell well in Vietnam, with the main buyers including Chinese, Thai and local and overseas Vietnamese, wildlife trade monitoring organisation Traffic said last month.

According to a Traffic survey, ivory prices in Vietnam could be the world's highest, with tusks reportedly selling for up to 1500 dollars per kilogram and small, cut pieces selling for up to 1863 dollars per kilogram.

The trend has put elephants in Indochina under increasing threat, it said, adding that wild elephant numbers in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia dropped from an estimated 6250 in the late 1980s to 1510 in 2000. Vietnam outlawed the ivory trade in 1992 but shops can still sell ivory dating from before the ban. This allows some to restock illegally with recently-made carved items, the organisation said.

7. Fresh steps to curb elephant deaths (India)

Deccan Herald
March 13, 2009

The proposed measures, including habitat management & awareness programmes, were based on recommendations to mitigate the problem of elephants raiding crop fields and their brutal killings. Stung by reports that over 250 elephants had died in the State's jungle in just two years, the forest department is finally ready with an action plan. Its recipe for conservation: exclusive flying squads, translocation of pachyderm populations, elephant prevention trenches, and many more short and long-term measures.

The proposed measures, include habitat management and awareness programmes. After all, about 700 elephants had died between 2001 and 2007, a shocking state of affairs that only aggravated in the last two years. To prevent the outbreak of diseases like foot-and-mouth and anthrax, the department plans to immunise cattle with the help of the veterinary department. Also on the agenda are an elephant prevention trench, solar fencing, and scaring camps during harvest seasons.

For the first time, the department will establish flying squads to drive away elephants from the fields. These squads, to be set up on experimental basis, will be stationed initially at Mysore, Chamaraj Nagar and Bandipur forest areas at strategic locations. Equipped with dedicated jeeps and communication devices, these squads headed by a forester will be dispatched to the affected areas on the receipt of information on elephant movement or any damage.

8. Elephants' future truncated (Thailand)

Bangkok Post
March 13, 2009

The plight of Thailand's elephants has reached a crisis point with the current herd of captive beasts expected to disappear in the next 14 years, conservationists say. But the national committee in charge of protecting the welfare of elephants has not met since 2003 and is badly in need of reform.

Thailand is one of 13 countries where Asian elephants are born in the wild. It is thought to have a population of 3000 animals. Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary Park in Uthai Thani is home to the biggest population, with 700. Permanent secretary for natural resources and the environment Saksit Tridech said the birthrate among captive elephants had plummeted and their survival rate was diminishing.

"We expect captive elephants to disappear within the next 14 years, which means wild elephants will again be under threat from hunters to serve the high demand in the market," Mr Saksit said. Department biologist Mattana Srikrachang said the birthrate among beasts born in the wild was about 10% a year, compared with less than 7% for domesticated elephants. "The possibility of the extinction of wild elephants is very low," she said. But the challenge is to educate people. "Elephants should live in the forest, not on a farm or on the streets. In Bangkok, over 200 stray elephants have been found, especially in the drought season."

9. Wild elephant attacks two tamed elephants (India)

The Times of India
March 16, 2009

MADIKERI - A rogue elephant attacked a team of two tamed elephants during a chase in an estate at Maragodu on Sunday, creating tension for sometime.

Harsha and Vikram had been engaged by the

forest department to chase a herd of elephants rampaging coffee estates around Maragodu. A team of about forty forest staff and public set out to chase the herd in the morning. The herd was successfully pushed to a high position of a peak from where they had to be led in the direction of Dubare elephant camp. After treading difficult terrains for kilometers the herd misled the chasing team, escaped in the thick jungle and came down to the original point where it had been camping since days.

The team decided to return as it was nearing dark and it started raining. However, they were shocked as a rogue elephant from the herd charged at them. The people ran helter skelter. Then the elephant charged at Harsha and Vikram. Harsha, known as the nation's best fighter, who can handle any kind of wild elephant with ease, along with its companion Vikram pulled the iron chain from its back and began to attack the wild elephant. Crackers and hoax guns were fired and the wild elephant rushed back to its herd.

10. 40,000-year-old elephant footprint found in Kathmandu (Nepal)

The Hindu
April 1, 2009

KATHMANDU - A team of experts from Japan and Nepal here have discovered 40,000 and 24,000-year-old footprints of elephants respectively, which suggest that the largest animal on the land lived in the Kathmandu Valley tens of thousands years ago.

Geologists and sedimentologists from Japan and Tribhuvan University, Nepal have discovered 40,000 and 24,000 years old footprints of elephants from two separate soil samples in Kathmandu, Kathmandu Post said.

"To our knowledge, nobody has found such imprints on soil sediments that old anywhere else in the world," said Mr. Tetsuya Sakai, sedimentologist from Shimane University in Japan, said. The discovery suggests that elephants lived in the Kathmandu Valley tens of thousands years ago, experts said.

They reached the conclusion after measuring the age of the footprints and sediments with carbon dating, an international instrument for measuring the age of materials. The experts, however, added that they needed animal fossils for more evidence for further confirmation of their interpretation.

11. Conservationists look to CSI for elephant counts (Cambodia)

Phnom Penh Post
April 7, 2009

A technique allowing scientists to ‘fingerprint’ elephant DNA from dung samples has revolutionised animal censuses. Wildlife conservationists have no idea how many wild elephants there are in Cambodia, but as DNA analysis becomes more affordable, conservationists are turning to the same techniques used by crime laboratories, to determine Cambodia’s wild elephant population. The main difference from forensic detectives is that conservationists gather their evidence from fresh elephant dung.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), WWF and Fauna and Flora International (FFI) are all using “fecal DNA capture-recapture surveys”, a simple and accurate method to calculate the elephant population that avoids the need to disturb elephants or put humans at risk.

The Forestry Administration and conservation groups send trackers to places where elephants are thought to congregate, but instead of looking for the animals themselves, they collect 1-cubic-centimetre samples of elephant dung and place them in a preservative, which are then sent to labs in Australia or the US.

After the elephants’ DNA is revealed by a lab, a statistical model is used to estimate the number of total elephants based on the amount of individual elephants “captured” multiple times in the samples.

For example, if there are 100 dung samples, but they are all from just two elephants, then there are probably only two elephants in the area, but if

the DNA analysis reveals the 100 samples come from 85 different elephants, then the population is likely much larger than 85.

WCS collected 255 dung samples from 81 elephants, allowing them to estimate a population of 116 elephants, making it one of the largest populations in the region. It was stressed that these first elephant censuses were only the beginning, and later counts would reveal if the population was increasing or decreasing.

12. Elephants attack cyclone-hit areas (Myanmar)

The Associated Press
March 23, 2009

YANGON - Local media says wild elephants that lost their habitats in last year’s devastating cyclone are destroying farmlands and attacking villagers as they forage for food. The privately owned Weekly Eleven journal said that wild elephants lost a swath of their habitat as Cyclone Nargis destroyed forests of the Rakhine mountain range in the southern tip of the Irrawaddy River delta.

The journal did not say whether villagers had been killed or injured in the attacks or if authorities were taking any preventive measures. The area was the first hit by the cyclone on May 2, which left nearly 140,000 people dead or missing in the delta and other areas.



Coconut plantation destroyed by elephants
Photo by B. M. A. O. Perera