

Editorial

Jayantha Jayewardene

The conservation of a species necessitates the provision of all resources (habitat, security, food, water etc.) necessary to maintain a stable population into the long-term future. Conservation has two aspects; one is the protection of the species and the other, scientific management of the species and the resources necessary for its conservation. The continued existence of the Asian elephant in the wild is threatened not only by the actions of those whose interests are counter to elephant conservation, but also due to the non action or incorrect actions of those who are responsible for their conservation.

If Asian elephants are to be conserved each country needs to have a policy for elephant management and conservation. One of the first steps that have to be taken when revamping or stepping up a conservation programme is to take stock of the present situation. Therefore, obtaining baseline data on the populations in question is of critical importance. Based on such data, first one has to identify the problems facing the conservation of elephants. Then assess what the causes for those problems are, and the options that are available to address the causative factors. All too often conservation of elephants has been limited to treatment of the symptoms rather than addressing the root causes.

The behaviour and ecology of elephants may differ from country to country. Accurate data, for each country is essential if conservation efforts in those countries are to be successful. Hitherto management and conservation actions have been based on outdated beliefs handed down from earlier times. The non-availability of actual data on which to base management plans, has been a major drawback in most of the range states.

Research results are very important, because they may modify or disprove the assumptions, perceptions and beliefs that our conservation activities have been based on for a long time. They 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.

For instance in Sri Lanka elephant conservation has largely been driven by the need to mitigate the human-elephant conflict. Based on the belief that elephants live in forests, elephant conservation over the past few decades has focused on setting up protected areas and pushing elephants into them, where they would be safe and not come into conflict with people. Recent research in Sri Lanka has found that, the best habitat for elephants is not mature forest but disturbed or regenerating forest, which occurs almost entirely outside protected areas as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture, and that pushing elephants into protected areas by elephant drives and capture translocation does not work. Herds so driven and restricted decline and die off, while males so translocated simply do not stay. Based on these and other research results, a National Policy has been developed, which attempts to address the root causes of elephant decline and directs elephant conservation and management in a new direction. Heretofore, elephants will be managed *in situ* both in and outside protected areas, through integration of conservation and human activities that promote habitat suitability for elephants.

One of the major setbacks to the conservation of the Asian elephant, in almost all its range states, is the fact that it is the governments of those countries that have to play the major role. Given the scale of the actions that have to be undertaken to manage elephants, and the conservation politics in Asia we have necessarily

to deal with governments, if elephant conservation programs are to be effective. In the case of some governments the conservation of elephants is not a priority. Others lack the motivation, technical capacity and funds to undertake research, develop management plans, and implement them.

The need of the hour is for the Asian Elephant Specialist Group to step into fill the gap. To persuade governments to make elephant conservation a priority, to provide motivation where it is lacking, technical capacity where it is wanting, access to funding sources or canvassing for funds from international agencies where it is needed. We have to look at the scientific management and research needs of each country, prioritise them, seek sufficient funding and ensure the proper implementation of each project. A great effort by many from many places is necessary to ensure the continuance of the Asian elephant in the wilds.

The need of the hour is for all concerned to get together and make a concerted and cooperative

effort to save our elephants for their longterm future. Otherwise, as is happening now, whilst we are criticizing, bickering and fighting, elephants in the wild are dying by the day. We have to get away from our lethargy and take positive action toward successful conservation. However, from a pragmatic point of view, we must realize and accept the fact that every wild elephant in most of these countries cannot be saved. If we are to conserve the species we need to focus on the issues that threaten the survival of the species and we need to prioritize populations for conservation based on their conservation potential. While the welfare of individual elephants is important, we should not lose sight of the wood for the trees.

What we must strive to achieve, in our efforts at elephant conservation, is to ensure that viable populations of wild elephants will continue to flourish in adequate numbers, in different locations, that they will reproduce successfully, and that the survival of offspring would be sufficient to maintain their numbers into the future.



Two bull elephants next to the electric fence in the Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka (2006)

Photo by Jennifer Pastorini

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

Simon Hedges and Ajay Desai

Once again we would like to begin by thanking Jayantha Jayewardene for his time and efforts as the editor of *Gajah*. Following the first-ever simultaneous publication of *Gajah* in both print and electronic (PDF) versions in June 2007, we intend that *Gajah* will continue to be published twice a year: in June and December. As ever, 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 the group's journal.

As Co-chairs, we have continued to make sure that the group's members are made aware of the funding opportunities that are available for Asian Elephant conservation projects, and to inform members about people or institutions who wish to seek help from, or work with, the group. As ever, we would be grateful if members could continue to keep us informed of such opportunities so that we can circulate them to the wider group as appropriate.

This last six month period has also seen the AsESG sponsor several Asian Elephant specialists' participation in a number of international fora. To this end we have provided travel grants for Mukti Roy to present his work on the "Use of habitat by Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in the Buxa Tiger Reserve and adjoining areas of northern west Bengal, north eastern India" at the Society for Conservation Biology's Annual Meeting in South Africa in July; as well as travel grants for Govindaraj Kannan to present his work on "Testing the efficacy of chilli-based repellents to deter crop damage by elephants in India", N. Baskaran to present his work on the "Conservation of Asian Elephants (*Elephas maximus*) in southern India: a GIS analysis of the Anamalai elephant landscape", and C Arivazhagan to present his work on the "Population structure of Asian Elephants in Kaziranga National Park, Assam, India", all at

the International Elephant Research Symposium in Florida in November.

The last six months have also seen the creation of five AsESG Task Forces and one Working Group, namely the Wild Elephant and Elephant Habitat Management Task Force (co-coordinators Arnold Sitompul and Christy Williams); the Human–elephant conflict (HEC) Task Force (coordinator Ravi Corea); the Illegal Killing and Trade Task Force (coordinator Vivek Menon); the Captive Elephant Management Task Force (co-coordinators S. Wijeyamohan and Heidi Riddle); the Veterinary Task Force (co-coordinators Jacob V. Cheeran and Susan Mikota); and the Database Working Group (coordinator Simon Hedges). Creation of this working group and the task forces will, we believe, help the AsESG deliver a number of products and services including an Asian elephant database, a human–elephant conflict mitigation review, and new methods for the standardized registration of captive elephants all of which received range state government support at the Asian Elephant Range States' Meeting in 2006. We thank all those AsESG members who have volunteered their time and efforts for these endeavours and wish the whole group a happy and productive 2008 working to conserve Asia's elephants.

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