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Asian Elephants Specialist Group

NEWSLETTER

No. 1 May 1986

Dear Members and Friends,

We, like the Elephants we are pledged to conserve, apply ourselves to any task with ponderous determination and esprit de corps, yet are somewhat modest and unobtrusive (isn't even crop damage seen only the next morning!) about our accomplishments. Again, like elephants we must have a "family bond".

This was the consensus at the meeting held at the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, Karnataka, India from 5th - 9th November 1985, to review the work done on WWF Project 1777. In fact, so much had been done by both Task Forces and individuals that the far-reaching results presented came as a surprise to members as close as in neighbouring States, let alone countries.

The lack of communication was regretted, for there was so much more scientific material and technical know-how available since the Colombo and Jaldapara meetings that could have been utilized in the implementation of other Action Plans. For example, Dr. Sukumar's work on the Biology and Ecology of the Elephant in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, and Dr. Mohamed Khan's fantastic success in the immobilization and translocation of 48 elephants in Malaysia, on specially constructed rafts, across water, have such built-in practical application that a day should not be lost in putting them to use in other countries.

And so members present were unanimous that the AESG should immediately commence publication of a Newsletter on a regular basis.

Accordingly, it is my privilege to inaugurate such a Newsletter, which I consider to be a life-line among members of any organization. Although members assigned the task to me, it is obvious I cannot do it alone. I appeal to all of you, therefore, to send me news about elephants in your respective area, progress reports on Projects, successes and failures of Action Plans, suggestions and recommendations, indeed, anything "newsy" about elephants or work being done for them.

The next Newsletter is scheduled for August, so please send me your contribution by 15 July.

Thanking you,

Yours in conservation

Lyn de Alwis
Chairman.

Bandipur Meeting

A meeting of the outgoing membership who undertook projects under WWF Project 1777 for the period ending July 1985 was held at the Bandipur Tiger Reserve from 5th — 9th November 1985.

Parts of the proceedings have already appeared in the WWF "Monthly Report" for December 1985 and January 1986, written up by Mr. Peter Jackson. He is currently engaged in preparing a more composite report which, hopefully will be summarized in the August Newsletter.

For the present, I would like to lose no time in expressing our deep gratitude to Mr. J.C. Daniel, our outgoing Chairman (whose charm, energy and enthusiasm I hope he has passed on to me with his files!), who coordinated the presentations. Equally, we are indebted to Mr. M.K. Appayya, Chief Conservator of Forests, Karnataka State and his staff and associates for the wonderful hospitality we enjoyed at Bandipur. Mr. Appayya always gave me the impression that most of the problems that came up, were dissolved by his disarming smile which was a reflection of his resourcefulness. No wonder Bandipur is today the dynamic yet safe refuge it is for both Tiger and Tusker. To individually acknowledge all those who made us visitors happy and welcome would be impossible, but I must, on behalf of the Group, also thank Mr. K.R. Venkatesan, Chief Wildlife Warden, Tamil Nadu, Mr. Rajgopal Shetty and Dr. V. Krishnamurthi (the Elephant Doctor) and their staff for the very fruitful day spent at Mudumalai.

Coming to the actual presentations made at the meeting. There were very interesting and informative reports on the Indian States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala, Andra, Nagaland and Uttar Pradesh, and country reports on Malaysia, Indonesia (Sumatra), Sri Lanka and Thailand. In addition, Mr. Reggie Davidar waxed eloquent as he pressed further his views on elephant corridors, whilst there were forceful and thought-provoking presentations by Mr. Shahi on Project 3030 "Status and Ecology of Wild Elephants in Bihar and Orissa" and Dr. Lahiri-Choudhury on Project 3031 "The Elephant and its Ecosystem in N.E. India."

Dr. R. Sukumar's dissertation on Project 3032 "Ecology and Conservation of Elephants in South India" which was the first paper on the Agenda, indeed set the pace for the rest of the meeting. The quality of the work, the quantifiable data on elephant movement, etc., the perception with which the material was presented were admirable. That he earned a Doctorate for his work was no surprise. We congratulate Dr. Sukumar, thank him for his contribution and wish him success in many more projects.

All in all, the meeting was both timely and useful and it is hoped our 1986 meeting with a fuller number of colleagues will be equally productive and will write another chapter in our efforts to preserve the Asian Elephant.

Next Meeting of AESG

A great deal of excellent and very important work is in progress in Sumatra as we heard from papers read at Bandipur by Rayleigh Blouch and from reports by Santiapillai and Suprahan on WWF/IUCN Project 3133. Undoubtedly, it would be

worthwhile and mutually beneficial if members had the opportunity of personally looking at some of this work and perhaps making recommendations regarding new Protected Areas, if a fully representative group meeting could be held in Sumatra.

The Chairman has approached the Government of Indonesia to see its way to hosting such a conference, through the good offices of members, Drs. Sudjono Survo and Atmawidjaja Rubini, Director-General of Wildlife Conservation. He has also made a request to USAID to sponsor such a meeting. IUCN is extending its fullest co-operation to achieve this end. Such a setting will no doubt attract new members to our group such as China and Laos, Sabah, Kampuchea and Vietnam.

More news on that later.

World Wildlife Fund Conservation Stamp Collection

As members are most probably aware, one of WWF's major international promotional activities is the Conservation Stamp Collection based on series of normal postage stamps issued by different countries, featuring a species that is threatened in the country of issue, and carrying the panda symbol. It includes philatelic items such as First Day Covers and mint stamps as well as a text illustrated with colour photographs.

Members will be happy to learn that one of the countries which will be issuing a set of stamps for the Stamp Collection this year is Sri Lanka, and the stamps will feature the Asian Elephant.

The scheduled time of issue is June — July 1986. So please make a note to purchase some stamps and help both Asian elephants and WWF.

Asian Elephants in Captivity

With comparatively recent successes in breeding Asian Elephants in captivity (where earlier Zoo administrators were terrified of keeping bulls in captivity!) many Zoos worldwide are making concerted efforts to contribute to knowledge about this endangered species.

We are all aware of the long lines of successes at the Washington Park Zoo, Portland, Oregon, USA through natural mating. Now Dr. Mike Schmidt of the same Zoo and a member of our group writes of his success in collecting semen from bulls (even in musth) for artificial insemination.

"We have developed a method of ejaculating bull elephants with the bull standing upright in a crush, using a narcotic sedative. After the ejaculate is collected, we can 'wake-up' the bull by reversing the sedative, so this is quite a safe and reliable method for obtaining semen from bull elephants and works well even when they are in musth."

I was able to see this crush when I attended a seminar on Asian Elephants held at Portland in 1983 at the kind invitation of the former Director of the Portland Zoo, Dr. Warren Iliff, and I must say it is quite a safe (though costly) device, but one which

would enable Zoo Directors to sleep more peacefully at night even if they have truculent Asian Elephants around. The Calgary Zoo in Alberta also boasts such a crush and last year I was happy to see the two "baby" elephants that colleague Peter Karsten took from the Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage (Sri Lanka) quite definitely pregnant having been "through the crush" with their bull.

Any member requiring more information on Dr. Schmidt's new and bold step forward may write to him direct at the Portland Zoo.

A somewhat different study is being undertaken by the Detroit Zoological Park, Michigan, USA, as this communique from member Steve Graham, Director indicates.

"The Asian Elephant SSP is working on a project with the purpose of comparing recognized subspecies of the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), using electrophoretic analysis. Most of the blood samples needed for the project can be obtained from animals of known origin in North America. However, there are only 9 elephants in North America of the Ceylonese subspecies, *Elephas m. maximus*, known to originate from Sri Lanka.

The Detroit Zoological Park, in conjunction with the Asian Elephant SSP, is working on the mechanics of obtaining and importing blood samples from Ceylonese elephants in Sri Lanka, with the assistance of Lyn de Alwis, Chairman of the Asian Elephant Specialists Group. Once obtained, the blood would be analyzed by Dr. Oliver Ryder of the San Diego Zoo. The major obstacle is the actual shipment of the blood in a timely fashion to ensure arrival in a suitable state for analysis. It is hoped that efforts can be co-ordinated and executed for this worthwhile project.

Katherine Latinen
Curator of Mammals
Detroit Zoological Park

1 April 1986

The whole question of Captive Breeding Asian Elephants has also been taken up by both the AAZPA (American Association of Zoological Parks & Aquariums) which has a special Species Survival Programme and also by IUCN's Captive Breeding Specialists Group (CBSG). The main concern of extending captive breeding elephants of course, centres round the question of re-introduction. (More of that in later issues).

Nearer home, it was with great joy that we heard of the birth of twins, a male and a female, to Valli, a 40-year old cow elephant belonging to the Tamil Nadu Forest Department in January this year. It must have been a great day also for Dr. Krishnamurthi, one of our members who told us all about the pregnancy during our Bandipur meeting. Congratulations Doctor!

Functions of the Group

For the benefit of our new Members, some of whom have asked me to enlighten them on the Terms of Reference of the AESG, I give below the list of what is expected of the Group:

- A. The distribution and numbers of all remaining Asian elephant populations should be known as accurately as possible.
- B. The pressures on all known populations should be assessed and monitored as far as possible by regard to the following indicators:
 - (i) Sufficiency of natural habitat. Is there enough? If so, at what rate, and in what is it being reduced? How serious is this for elephants? Is there, and of what type, man-induced competition for elephant-important resources?
 - (ii) Poaching for ivory. The existence and seriousness of this is to be investigated. Efforts should be made to acquire annual records for legal/illegal imports/exports/confiscations/sales of ivory from the Government agencies concerned.
 - (iii) Deaths and captures. Records should be acquired of exact numbers known to have been removed from the wild population annually through human agency and the reason given. Diseases and epidemics should be recorded.
 - (iv) Crop damage. This should be monitored and localities noted and its annual cost and seriousness assessed. Any deterrent activities (or lack of) by public or authorities should be recorded so that the Group can advise accordingly.

Additionally, there is now the distinct possibility of bringing in an element of ex-situ Conservation into Action Plans because such vast studies have been made on Captive Breeding. The availability of captive-bred animals in fair numbers will certainly reduce the demand for capture from the wild for timber extraction, logging and cultural uses. Sri Lanka is a case in point where the domesticated population has declined from 600 plus in 1969 to about 375 in 1981. The demand here is for use in temples, not so much in logging.

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