

STATUS OF ELEPHANTS IN THE SATHAYMYAUNG ELEPHANT CAMP, MYANMAR (BURMA)

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The elephant is the backbone of Myanmar's Timber industry. The use of trained elephants in Myanmar in the extraction of teak (*ectona grandis*) is allong established practice, which is now recognized by conservationists the word over to be environmentally friendly and ecologically and economically sustainable. Such a mode of extraction causes the least amount of damage to the soil and forests. There are about 6,000 elephants in captivity, which belong to the Myanma Timber Enterprise (MTE) and the public. The MTE maintains a number of elephant camps where the domesticated elephants are cared for and used in the logging industry. One such camp is the Sathaymyaung Elephant Camp situated north of Taungoo, the ancient capital of Myanmar. There are 32 elephants and 49 mahout families to look after them. The elephants are used both during the dry and wet seasons in the extraction of timber. In an year, each elephant extracts about 200 tons of teak, which works out to be between 150-250 logs. The elephants usually rest during the summer. The teak logs are transported by lorries from the extraction site to the Sittaung river - a distance of 40 miles - and then rafted. The river flow is usually powerful enough to bring the logs from the place where they were skidded to Yangon in a mater of 1 to 2 weeks, across a distance of 175 miles.

Myanmar has long ago recognized the fact that the wild elephants are a useful resource especially when they are trained in forestry operations. They are better than machines and could be used in all weather conditions, come rain or shine. They are especially ideal in boggy areas, and steep mountain slopes where no machines can operate. Depending on the size of the elephant, a timber load of 1-3 tons can be easily skidded over a distance of 1 km (Han, 1984). The MTE utilizes its elephants with great care so that the animals are not unduly harassed and over exploited. They are usually employed for about 7 months of the year, and extract between 150-200 log tons. In contrast, privately owned elephants are over utilized and are made to extract up to 300 tons (Han, 1984). According to Caughley (1995) in Myanmar, the official allowable intake of elephants is 200 per year. But the recruitment of elephants in captivity is much less than this and hence wild elephants are captured - about 120 animals per year (or about 4% of the wild elephants). Soon after capture, the elephants are trained and put to work. Not surprisingly, mortality can be high at times (Evans, 1961). But with improved veterinary care, the elephants in MTE camps are very well managed to minimize losses. Wild elephants are protected in Myanmar ever since the Elephant Preservation Act of 1879.

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