

ELEPHANTS: UNWITTING VICTIMS IN SRI LANKA'S CIVIL WAR

Jayanthi Alahakoon

National Zoological Garden, Dehiwela, Sri Lanka

Charles Santiapillai

Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Publicity about human - elephant conflicts in Sri Lanka tends to be rather emotional and one-sided, with much attention focussed on the plight of the farmers whose crops have been destroyed by marauding elephants. However, elephants have also borne the brunt of people's wrath and have been maimed or killed by irate farmers. The casualties of the on going civil war in Sri Lanka, between the Government and the guerrillas of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) are not only the people in the north and east of the country, but also wildlife, especially the large mammals such as elephant (*Elephas maximus*) and leopard (*Panthera pardus*), who given their large home range needs, are often caught in the cross fire.

The New Scientist (19 November 1994) highlighted the plight of the elephants that were falling victims to land mines. Since then, the peace talks have failed, and the conflict has resumed with a vengeance. Even while the peace talks were going on, the land mines that were laid earlier continued to kill and maim elephants in the conflict areas. In 1994 perhaps up to about 20 elephants might have fallen victims to the land mines in the war zone, of which one animal, a young female less than 10 years of age (Fig. 1) was rescued by the Armed Forces and handed over to the National Zoo at Dehiwela, where it was being looked after. She had stepped on a land mine, but was lucky to have escaped death. She however lost her right front foot, during the blast. The wound healed, thanks to the care given at the Zoo, but she could barely move about using her other three legs. Then it was decided to fix a Jaipur foot to restore balance and normal locomotion. Today, as can be seen in the Fig 2, the elephant has been successfully fitted with a Jaipur foot, and the animal can move about with least discomfort. This is perhaps the first time, the Jaipur foot has been attached to an elephant!

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Jayanthi Aratjison

National Zoological Garden, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Charles Sandhu

Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Practically about fourteen - elephant conflicts in Sri Lanka tend to be rather emotional and one-sided, with much attention focused on the rights of the elephants and one-sided with much attention focused on the rights of the elephants.



*Fig 1: Elephant that was maimed by a land mine in Sri Lanka
(photo: Asoka Jayathilleke)*

While the human population has increased from about 7 million in 1950 to over 17 million today, the forest cover has declined from more than 50% to less than 20 % at present. By the year 2000, Sri Lanka is expected to have a human population of 20.8 million, with a density of 318 individuals per km². No wonder the incidences of human - elephant conflict have escalated. Between 1990 and 1993, a total of 165 elephants were lost in the wild, from an estimated population of about 3,500 animals. 57% of the animals died as a direct result of gun shot injuries (Santiapillai, 1994). In 1994 alone, at least 96 elephants were lost in the wild, from poachers and land mines. Much of the low country dry zone forests where elephants occur are in the conflict areas where mines have been laid. Thus, the future of the elephant in Sri Lanka depends entirely on man. Today we find the elephant with his back to the wall. Elephants, like human beings, need some place to live and something to eat: both are becoming scarce in Sri Lanka.

Whatever is done to save the elephant in Sri Lanka, some animals will certainly be lost in the wild, as they live outside protected areas where they are vulnerable to poaching, land mines and habitat loss. The Department of Wildlife Conservation has enlisted the assistance of experienced veterinarians to rescue and treat some of the injured elephants. But the Department alone cannot safeguard every elephant in the country, given the current political reality and the difficulty of access in some areas. The best hope for elephants and people in Sri Lanka lie in the speedy resolution of the country's tragic conflict.

REFERENCES

- Santiapillai, C.1994. Elephant mortality in Sri Lanka. *Gajah*, 12: 48-45