

TUSKERS OF RUHUNA NATIONAL PARK, SRI LANKA

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According to Deraniyagala (1955) there are four types of male elephants in Sri Lanka: the *Atha* or tusker, *Ek - Danteya* or single tusked male, *Aliya* or tush elephant, and the *Pussa* or male without even the vestiges of such teeth. Deraniyagala (1955) observed that only 11% of the adult male elephants in Sri Lanka were tuskers. By contrast, in some parts of Southern India the proportion of tuskers can be as high as 95% (Sukumar, 1989). But today, in the Periyar Sanctuary in Kerala State, the poaching for ivory is so intense that the adult sex-ratio of males to females has changed from 1:52 in 1990 to 1:100 (C. Santiapillai, pers. comm.).

At the turn of the century, the area currently known as Ruhuna National Park was the Resident Sportsmen's Shooting Reserve. It was a wild country reserved for the sporting pleasure of the British residents of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known. Tuskers were sought after by the resident "Sportsmen", and thus they have become a rare sight in Ruhuna National Park (RNP). Block 1 of RNP was established on 25 February 1938. The total area of the RNP complex is 126, 782 ha (IUCN, 1990).

A survey of elephants in the wild was carried out in June 1993 by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (see Hendavitharana *et al.*, 1994) in which it was observed that only 7.3% of the adult bulls were tuskers. But within the RNP, as a result of protection afforded to the animals, the number of tuskers appears to have increased somewhat. Today, there is firm evidence for the presence of at least 16 tuskers in the park (author's personal observations). However, the threat of poaching cannot be ignored. Some time ago, a tusker was shot by poachers near Katagamuwu tank, on the outskirts of the park. The largest tusker named "Raja" died of old age and his remains were found near Buttuwa, with the tusks intact. The two famous cross-tuskers are seen no more.

These tuskers need grater protection as they constitute a valuable component of our elephant population. With the demand by some Southern African countries (Namibia, Botswana & Zimbabwe) to down list the African elephant from Appendix I to Appendix II at the next CITES Meeting, for the purpose of allowing trade in ivory, it is feared that the poaching on Asian elephant tuskers might increase. The Asian elephant is a "flaship species" but the role of a tusker in Sri Lanka goes well beyond its charismatic charm. It is an integral part of the island's history, culture, religion, mythology and even politics! It wuld be difficult to imagine Sri Lanka without its elephants.

REFERENCES

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At the end of the century, the area currently known as Ruhuna National Park was the Product Game Reserve. It was a wild country reserved for the exclusive pleasure of the British residents of Ceylon, as Sri Lanka was then known. Tuskless elephants were sought after by the resident "sportsmen", and the only known tuskless elephant in Sri Lanka, "Black 1" of 1897, was shot in the area of the RNP complex in 1897. The total area of the RNP complex is 128,732 hectares (IUCN 1990).

A survey of elephants in the wild was carried out in June 1993 by the Department of Wildlife Conservation (see Hendavitharana et al., 1994) in which it was observed that only 75% of the adult bulls were tuskless. But within the RNP, as a result of protection afforded to the animals, the number of tuskless elephants has increased somewhat. Today, there is firm evidence for the presence of at least 10 tuskless in the park (author's personal observations). However, the threat of poaching cannot be ignored. Some time ago, a tuskless bull shot by poachers near Galgamulla tank, on the outskirts of the park. The largest tuskless elephant, "Black 1" of old age and his remains were found near Butulla, with the tuskless bull. The two famous cross-bred elephants are seen no more.

These tuskless elephants are being protected as they constitute a valuable component of the elephant population. With the demand by some Southern African countries (Zimbabwe, Botswana & Zimbabwe) to ban the African elephant from Appendix I of Appendix II at the next CITES Meeting for the purpose of allowing trade in ivory, it is feared that the poaching of Asian elephants might increase. The Asian elephant is a "tuskless species", but the role of a tuskless elephant goes well beyond its characteristic form. It is an integral part of the island's history, culture, religion, mythology and even politics. It would be difficult to imagine Sri Lanka without