

V. Krishnamurthy (1929-2002)

With the death of Dr V. Krishnamurthy on 9 December 2002, India lost one of its most prominent and experienced elephant veterinarians. His death at the age of 73, leaves a deep void in the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) where his lively nature, sense of humour, boundless energy and a rich stream of ideas never failed to influence the people around him. He was arguably the most famous of all elephant veterinarians in India, and among the most influential. Those who came to know him referred to him affectionately as "Doc".

I have vivid recollections of my first meeting with Doc in 1987 at the Theppakadu Elephant Camp in the Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary (Tamil Nadu, India). By then Doc was already a legend, having worked for over three decades as a forest veterinary officer looking after the health and welfare of the elephants in Tamil Nadu. What struck me most was his humility despite his fame. He had a strong aversion for any form of outward show. I was fascinated by the ease with which he worked among elephants and his cautious but confident approach in dealing with bulls in musth. I had a foretaste then of what has remained with me as an abiding memory of Doc: his immense vitality, charm and boundless energy. To work with him was indeed a privilege. I have been extremely fortunate in my friends; among them, one of the most important and influential was Doc.

Doc started his long career in 1952, following his graduation from the Madras Veterinary College, when he joined the Madras Animal Husbandry Service as Veterinary Assistant Surgeon. He retired as Joint Director of Animal Husbandry in 1987. At his first post as a Veterinary Assistant Surgeon at Kambam, a small town in Tamil Nadu close to the Kerala border, Doc had ample opportunities to perform postmortems on the numerous elephants killed by poachers for ivory in the nearby Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary. He built his career on his own merits and strengths and was richly rewarded by the recognition he received both within India and abroad. But he never craved for power or glory despite his remarkable expertise and international standing. During his long stint as the Forest Veterinary Officer, Doc treated over 300 elephants and delivered more than 70 calves. The Elephant Camp at Theppakadu was particularly successful at breeding elephants in captivity during his time. Between 1950 and 1983 about 74 calves were born to 37 captive female elephants in Tamil Nadu. Such recruitment was possible given that elephants were maintained by the Forest Department in groups and let out to feed at night inside the reserves where the estrous females could be mated by wild bulls. In this way, wild genes were introduced into the captive population.

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After his retirement, Doc worked as Project Officer in the Bombay Natural History Society's Elephant Research Project from 1988 to 1991, and subsequently at the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History, at Coimbatore until 1993. He was involved with the study of elephants in captivity with the scientists from the Smithsonian Institution – a very productive time for him in working with some of the best in the west. His collaboration with (Betts) Rasmussen (from the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology at Oregon Health and Science University, USA) and Heidi Riddle (of the Riddle's Elephant and Wildlife Sanctuary, Arkansas, USA) led to the discovery of the use of mood-altering secretions by excited bull elephants to smooth out social interactions. Their findings, which were published in the prestigious scientific journal *Nature*, London (415:975-976, 2002) may help formulate a deterrence programme against crop-raiding wild elephants, most of which are male and are often in musth. Doc held a position in the Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre in Bangalore where he spent his twilight years, during which he wrote several chapters for a manual on the care and management of elephants in captivity. Unfortunately, like the two greatest teachers in the European tradition, Socrates and Jesus, Doc never wrote a book. Nevertheless, he influenced many.

Doc was a man endowed with great enthusiasm and blessed with an inquiring mind. By chance, he moved away from treating pussy cats, poodles and ponies to caring for pachyderms, which he loved so much. Working with elephants demands patience and Doc had ample measure of it and the right temperament as well. He shared his knowledge willingly with anyone who worked with him. Doc possessed the virtues of a true Tamilian: cheerfulness and good humour. To us Tamils, cheerfulness costs nothing while humour is a gift. Doc was also very fond of Indian classical music, and enjoyed the spectacle of the Indian classical dance or Bharata Natyam. He was among the most courteous and considerate of men; he evoked great admiration, affection and loyalty in friends and colleagues. Doc was the most ebullient, experienced, energetic and endearing personality in the AsESG. He was also one of the "founding fathers" of the AsESG and his presence always had a sobering effect on the conduct of some of the more contentious and cantankerous members of the Group during meetings, symposia and conferences. There is always a sense of drama and theatre about the AsESG meetings where personalities clashed and egos crashed, but Doc never failed to defuse the tension through his ready sense of humour, which earned him many an admirer even among those who disagreed with him.

But success and respect were no match against the wiles of some scurrilous animal rights activists who pilloried Doc rather unfairly in the press over the famous Moorthy Elephant case in Mudumalai. Doc was very hurt and badly shaken at the perfidy of these animal lovers, who usually exploit the emotions of the public to attract international funding for their dubious projects by playing on people's sensitivity against cruelty to animals. Like dentists, they too thrive in decay. But in the end, Doc was greatly elated when Prof. Raman Sukumar, the Chairman of the AsESG came to his defence, and the

Tamil Nadu Forest Department stood by him, while Sally Walker provided wide coverage in **ZOOS' PRINT** on his behalf. That year, Doc was awarded the Venu Menon Animal Welfare Award by the then President of India!

Doc came to Indonesia to help manage the elephants in captivity at the Elephant Training Centre at the Way Kambas National Park in Sumatra. It was here that I was able to spend more time with him as I was based in Sumatra at that time. He made a number of recommendations for improving the management of captive elephants and introduced much gentler methods of training elephants than those adopted by mahouts brought from Thailand. He never liked the use of hooks by mahouts. He recommended that the mahouts should gradually be weaned from the practice of using hooks and learn to control their charges with sticks only. He introduced the provision of a balanced diet to the elephants in captivity, but being a strict vegetarian found it almost impossible to get a balanced diet for himself from the Indonesian kitchen. So he began to cook for himself and in the process converted a few die-hard carnivores to adopt a strict vegetarian diet, by making

his curries spicy and hot. One or two Indonesian mahouts got stoned on his curries.

Doc is one of those rare human beings who really have to be experienced to be appreciated fully. He was, above all, a wonderful human being, who asked for nothing but gave everything he had. He had a reputation for generosity. Anyone who admired something of his, was quite likely to be given it. This was how I acquired a copy of G.P. Sanderson's "*Thirteen Years Among the Wild Beasts of India*"! He was a deeply religious man who put his beliefs into practice in all what he did. He was loved and held in deep affection by all. He will be sadly missed by those who had the good fortune to have known him. But his work will endure. He has bequeathed to us warm memories of a man modest to a fault, a man of the highest personal integrity, and one whose friendship brightened our lives. He was the most unselfish of men I ever met. He had that rare gift for communicating with anyone his unbounded enthusiasm and he bestowed innumerable kindnesses even on strangers. He is survived by his wife Saraswathi and four daughters and a son.



Dr. Krishnamurthy in the field (photo: courtesy Prof. Raman Sukumar)