

Notes from the Co-chairs IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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In May 2011 four elephant range states each from Asia and Africa met in India with the objective of giving a new impetus to elephant conservation. The invitation to the SSC Chair and to one of the Co-Chairs (SH) was at very short notice and hence they could not attend the meeting, one of us (AAD) was however able to attend as he was already invited in his capacity as a member of the Project Elephant Steering Committee.

'Elephant – 8 Ministerial Meeting' held on 24th May 2011 in New Delhi, was a follow up on one of the recommendations of the Task Force set up to upgrade elephant conservation in India. The Government of India initiated a preliminary meeting of eight elephant range states (4 Asian and 4 African), which represent 60–80% of the remaining global wild elephants. This meeting of eight range states was attended by representatives from India, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia, Botswana, Kenya, Tanzania and Congo (Brazzaville). These countries issued a joint statement agreeing to work towards bring all elephant range states together to prioritize elephant conservation and to work towards conservation and management of elephants in a cohesive and cooperative manner. In course of the meeting three technical sessions were held to identify key areas where action would be needed in future to facilitate improved elephant conservation and management. The three technical sessions were:

1. Elephant Science & Conservation (identification of research needs to facilitate elephant conservation and management)
2. Elephant Management & Conservation (identification of key management issues related to elephant conservation and management)
3. Elephant Conservation: A Cultural and Ethical Perspective (identifying our moral obligations and cultural links to the species and justification for its conservation)

The primary objective of this meeting was to get the eight major elephant range states to work towards the larger goal of bringing all African and Asian range states together in 2013 so as to agree on prioritizing elephant conservation and to draft a strategy to effectively conserve elephants. The strategy would identify and address most major conservation and management issues related to elephants. This preliminary meeting identified a number of issues that would need to be addressed to conserve elephants in future. The list of issues would be expanded based on additional concerns of other range states once the discussions begin.

Hopefully this initial meeting will be suitably followed on and bring about increased impetus to elephant conservation. It would also be useful in bringing about increased interaction between African and Asian countries resulting in a sharing of ideas as also bringing about increased understanding of each other's problems and difficulties. The two specialist groups (African and Asian) should play a major role in helping the range states formulate such strategies. But for that to happen we (AsESG) would clearly need to increase our outputs from the various Task Forces so that key issues are identified, discussed and debated resulting in establishment of clear guidelines on addressing various issues and also state the position of the group on various issues.

Major management and conservation issues identified in the E-8 meeting are, problems and issues related to management of elephant populations that lie outside protected areas; the use of corridors to enhance the conservation potential of fragmented populations; the need for bringing about integrated or cross-sectoral approaches to land use and development planning in and around elephant habitat; using landscape level approaches for planning conservation and management of elephants; valuing elephants and their habitat as resources for humans (consumptive and non-

consumptive uses); addressing issues related to the conservation, management and protection of trans-boundary populations; managing growing populations or local overabundance; securing and managing genetic diversity; managing non-viable populations; dealing with dispersing populations; using integrated or multi-agency approaches to address poaching and illegal trade in elephant products; incorporating technology to monitor, investigate and stop, poaching and trade in elephant products; developing and applying improved monitoring mechanisms to stop trade in live animals; improving legislation to bring about better protection of elephants; improving infrastructure and capacity for managing and protecting elephants; developing tools to manage human-elephant conflict by addressing causative factors, problems inherited from the past and to contain conflict in the interface area between elephant habitat and human use areas; involving local communities in HEC mitigation efforts and in benefitting from the elephants and their habitat; addressing the need for developing suitable capacity and infrastructure for wildlife health monitoring and management in elephant landscapes; addressing the threat of emerging

diseases; captive elephant issues relating to policy, management strategies, monitoring, humane treatment and the role of western zoos in supporting elephant conservation.

The AsESG can help on most issues as it has the necessary expertise. What is needed is for the Task Forces to move forward and start identifying issues and to start discussions on these issues (which some have) so as to develop solutions, strategies or guidelines (limited progress has been seen on these). The opportunity is huge so we need to move forward. We as co-chairs will help to initiate the next step in working towards an Action Plan using the new criteria developed by IUCN/SSC.

In another development, the Red List status of the Sumatran elephant is set to be changed from Endangered to Critically Endangered. The Sumatran elephant (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) is facing serious threats to its survival due to habitat loss and the resultant removal (legal and illegal) of elephants from areas cleared for human use. Studies of mtDNA variation suggest that the Sumatran subspecies is monophyletic (Fleischer *et al.* 2001), and consequently this taxon could be defined as an evolutionarily significant unit (ESU). Conversion of elephant habitat into agroforestry plantations (mainly oil palm and soft wood plantations) is resulting in rapid and steep decline of the elephants' range and population in Sumatra. Close monitoring of elephant populations in Lampung and Riau Provinces have shown that the majority of populations identified in mid-1980's have become extinct or are on the verge of becoming extinct locally.



Wild elephant bull in Thailand
Photo by Mattana Srikrachang

An assessment of habitat decline since the mid-1930's, increasing fragmentation leading to the creation of numerous unsuitable habitat patches and the overall trend in habitat loss all clearly indicate that the Sumatran elephant meets criterion A2c for Critically Endangered (CR) of the IUCN Red List. Data and analysis necessary for listing the Sumatran elephant as Critically Endangered was put together by several conservationists/scientists and NGOs working in Sumatra. This change in Red List status will help bring about greater protection to the elephants habitat as it

would now qualify for consideration under the High Conservation Value Forests. This however is only one more step in the efforts to save the Sumatran elephant, and conservationists and the government will have to do much more to secure adequate and representative habitat patches across the island to ensure its long term survival.

The change in the Red List status of the Sumatran elephant should initiate more discussion and thinking within the group about the status of Asian elephants in other parts of Asia. Should we consider the mainland elephants as a single unit or population for assessing its status or in conservation planning or should we distinguish between India with a large population (25,000+) and Vietnam with a highly endangered population (less than 200)? And even within India should the elephants in northeast India be treated as more threatened (due to severe habitat loss and poaching pressures) than the south Indian population (relatively less threat)? Such discussions become important because conservation status of elephants within a country and between countries is highly variable. Although the outcome of such discussions and

evaluations may not affect the Red List status at the species level they will have significant bearing on conservation planning at the national or regional level.

Conservation requires that a species be saved within all representative habitat types within which it occurs naturally. It also requires that the evolutionary potential of the species be retained. While ideal situations where representative populations are conserved in areas sufficiently large to support long-term conservation requirements may not be possible within all representative areas efforts to do so should not be lacking. We need to work towards saving the best of what we have left so that future generations can build on that. Given the economic aspirations of the Asian people and their governments, elephant habitat across Asia is likely to come under increasing pressure. So pragmatic assessment of what can be saved and what cannot be saved becomes equally important as what should or needs to be saved. This will call for a fine balancing act if one is to pass on the best of what we have to the next generation.



Elephant herd in Southern Sri Lanka
Photo by Prithiviraj Fernando