

Creating Awareness Among School Children for Wild Elephant Conservation

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Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island of 65,000 km², a human population of 20 million people and around 5500 wild elephants. In many developing countries exploding populations necessitate the clearing of forests for human settlement, agriculture and development. Sri Lanka is no exception.

Wildlife–human conflict is a major threat to the survival of many species. Such conflict is of conservation and socio-economic significance, where potentially dangerous species, that in addition to depredating resources, threaten human morbidity and mortality. Human–elephant conflict (HEC) is a case in point (Fernando *et al.* 2005).

Conflict management essentially requires the involvement of the groups of people affected by these conflicts. In conflict mitigation and conservation changing people's attitudes is a very effective long term measure. For example, in HEC management, the people caught up in the conflicts are those who especially should have an awareness of the elephant and its ways. If they are to participate in conservation, awareness raising would help them to look at the wild elephant in a more educated and understanding light. They have to realize that the elephant cannot be blamed too much since humans have, maybe with a certain degree of justification, come into elephant habitats. We need to work with communities that share habitat with elephants, and provide them benefits through conservation, so that they will be more agreeable to sharing resources with elephants (Fernando 2010).

If such awareness creation can be coupled with compensation for losses sustained due to these conflicts, elephant conservation would be more

effective. The compensation need not necessarily be monetary.

Over ten years ago I carried out a survey on HEC that was prevalent throughout the island. In the course of this survey I found that the villagers living in the conflict areas were lacking in knowledge and understanding of the elephant. It was noted that the villagers should essentially be aware of the elephant and its ways. Therefore, through the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust, I decided to launch a campaign to increase the awareness of the local regarding elephants. My experience in working in the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Program showed that the best way to get a message across to the adults, be it on health, agriculture or elephant conservation, was through the children. The children not only tell the parents about what they have learnt and what should be done, but they also insist that the parents do what is necessary and right.

The attitude of the children living in these conflict areas, towards the wild elephants, is different to that of children living in urban areas. The wild elephant does not impact directly on the lives of the urban children. Therefore they are not sensitive to the various problems caused by wild elephants in the villages. The Schools Awareness Programs are carried out by the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust, as planned, in the schools in the areas where there is HEC. The program has been ongoing for the last nine years.

Though there has been a very long association between man and elephant in Sri Lanka, these relationships are now greatly strained due to these conflicts. Through our presentation we make an effort to reduce the animosity that the people have developed towards the elephant. The children are subtly told that even though it is not their

fault, humans have invaded elephant habitats. The conflicts have started when elephants come back to their former habitats and find houses and agricultural activity. It is emphasized at these sessions that it is essential that humans live in harmony with elephants. We are then assured that the school children have got the messages that we are trying to convey and eventually the knowledge will trickle down to the families.

Most conservation education programs do not have a post evaluation component. Such evaluations are essential to monitor the effectiveness of the programs and to make modifications to the ongoing work. Through a post evaluation survey coupled with the program, we have observed a significant improvement in the attitudes of our target group and subsequently their families. The evaluations have helped us to develop further the content of the program, over time.

The objective of the Schools' Awareness Program is to create awareness amongst the children living in the areas where there is HEC on: a) The value of elephants, b) Their ecology, biology and physiology, c) Their role in the religion and culture of the country, d) That only a few elephants cause damage to crops and houses, and cause human fatalities, e) Of the need to conserve elephants for the future as part of their and the world's heritage.

With the knowledge that is imparted to the children, they have a better understanding and appreciation of the problem of HEC and know in greater detail about the natural and socio-cultural history of the elephants. This will reduce the negative attitude towards the elephant by the local communities, especially among the younger generations, so that eventually some of them can then be persuaded to take a more positive role in the conservation of elephants.

Methods

Logistics

HEC is spread over eleven districts, most of which are in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. The schools were selected from these districts (Fig. 1).

In 1997 we discussed the proposed Schools Awareness Program with the Ministry of Education and obtained their approval to start the program from 1998. We also got the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Central Environment Authority involved in the program, since they are the key environmental authorities in Sri Lanka. We felt that the participation of these stakeholders was very important in order to make the program more effective.

Schools for the proposed program were selected in consultation with the district and zonal education authorities and subsequently with the principals of the participating schools. Every year we chose ca. 150 schools from 7 districts where there is HEC. Over the last eight years a given school was visited only once except for a few schools where we have returned after 6 years to cater to a new

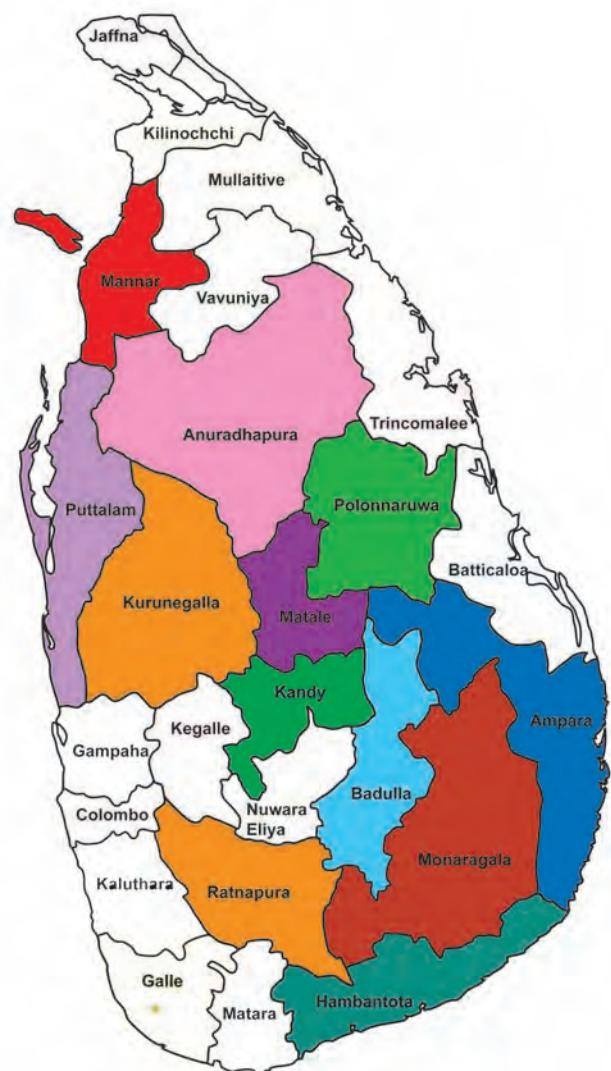


Figure 1. Map of the districts where the schools program was conducted.

batch of students. So far we have visited 1201 schools, reaching 9622 teachers and 111,243 children (Table 1). The average attendance at each session is about 93 children and 8 teachers.

Program outline

The following program is carried out in each school. The outline of the topics covered is as follows:

- The importance of elephants in terms of biodiversity and conservation
- The ecology, biology and physiology of elephants
- The role of the elephant in the religion and culture of the country
- Nature, causes and symptoms of conflict (i.e. that only a few elephants cause damage to crops and houses, and cause human fatalities) and possible mitigatory measures

Each session in a school starts with a short introduction by the principal of the school or a teacher. There are two lectures per session. One lecture is on the biodiversity of Sri Lanka and the other on the elephant and its conservation (Fig. 2). These lectures are aided by multimedia projections. These lectures are followed by an address by the local Wildlife Department official. A video presentation, on the elephant, a question and answers session and a general discussion, focused on showing how these could lead to some positive action in the future, follow. Finally a set of books is presented to the school library.



Figure 2. Schools program lecture attended by students and teachers.

Table 1. Annual numbers of schools, teachers and students the program was carried out for.

Year	Schools	Teachers	Students
2003	150	865	13,072
2004	150	1276	11,422
2005	151	1277	16,114
2006	154	876	12,043
2007	152	1049	12,610
2008	150	1876	22,482
2009	146	1246	11,558
2010	148	1157	11,942
Total	1201	9622	111,243

After each session, children who are interested in follow up action are given details of whom to contact i.e. the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust. The lecturers who participate in these sessions are carefully selected, not only for their knowledge of the subject, but also for their ability to communicate their knowledge to the students. It is important to build the mindset that as outsiders, we are not trying to impose our ideas, but to work together with them to find a solution to the problem and also that we are genuinely concerned about the welfare of the people.

Survey

Evaluation of the outcomes of the schools programs is carried out in order to assess whether the objectives of the programs have been met. It also assists them to make improvements to the program. The evaluation is carried out also to make parties who are interested in the program, aware of the outcome of our programs. The survey forms once completed are passed to independent evaluators for an unbiased opinion. The evaluation is conducted using two methods:

A. Instantaneous evaluation: Based on relevant comments made during the question and answer sessions, discussions with the principal, teachers and, if possible, any parents present, are taken into consideration. They are supplemented by the comments written in our book, at the end of each session, by the principal.

B. Post evaluation: Twenty-five schools are selected at random, from each of the 11 districts

covered every year. This is a representative sample since it is not feasible to evaluate all the schools considering the time and expense involved. They are evaluated three months after the conclusion of the program. This is in the new academic term and is considered long enough for the teachers to observe the impact of the program on the children.

The evaluation is conducted through a questionnaire and personal interviews with the principals of the schools, the subject matter teacher, who attended the program and some of the participating school children. A minimum of 10 questionnaire forms were given to each school. We also take into consideration some of the relevant comments made during the question and answer sessions.

Results and discussion

These awareness programs were carried out in schools in many districts in Sri Lanka, in the two ethnic languages Sinhala and Tamil. The programs have had significant results and have also given us much experience in conservation education. Almost all principals of the schools, where these sessions were held, expressed their satisfaction with the program. Initially although we requested the principal to give us written comments in the form of a letter, there were only a few letters in response to this request. We then requested the principals to write down their opinion of the program in a book we carry with us. These comments are written after each program was concluded. Every principal, without exception, has expressed comments that have been positive coupled with requests to return for subsequent programs.

The results of the evaluation of the schools program carried out in a representative set of schools, reveals that the program has been successful in terms of delivering awareness and knowledge to the children (Fig. 3). It also has successfully created some long term impacts that can be further strengthened through proper assistance. The continued implementation of some of the comments from the evaluation enables the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust to conduct a better program, monitor the success

of the previous program and also upgrade its services in terms of addressing the HEC issue.

The lectures, which are supplemented with high quality and relevant visuals, have a lasting impact on the children. The children ask relevant questions regarding these subjects and also for individual help in the wildlife and environment projects that they have. The objective of giving the children a lasting awareness of the elephant is achieved, judging by the reaction of the children themselves and their teachers. This is further fortified by their requests to visit them again with such programs.

With the knowledge that is imparted to the children, they get a better understanding and appreciation of the problem of HEC and get to know in greater detail about the ecology and biology of the elephants and their socio-cultural history. This reduces the negative attitude that the children and the local communities have towards the elephant, especially among the younger generations. Now some of these children can be persuaded to take a more positive role in the conservation of elephants.

We ensure that all our programs in the schools are held during school hours. However some principals try to get us to carry out the programs after school is over. Having the sessions during school hours ensures that all the children attend and give their full attention to the lectures (Fig. 4). Each program lasts three hours, which is about the maximum attention span of a school child for such a program.

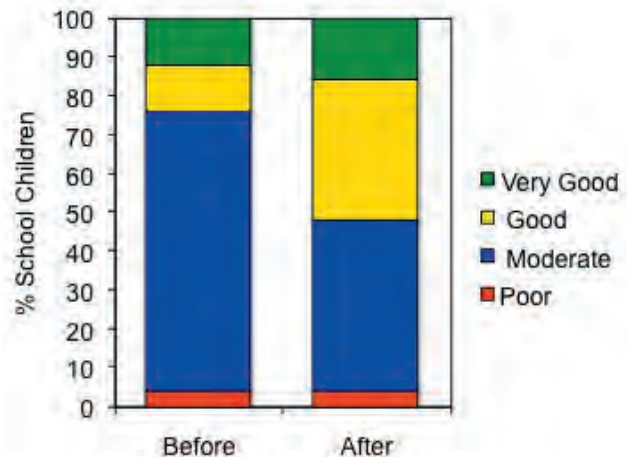


Figure 3. Students' knowledge of biodiversity and elephants before and after the program.



Figure 4. Students attending the program..

Future plans

We propose to carry out a follow up program at the divisional level where a selected representative group of children and teachers from each school that participated in our program would be invited and a suitable structured follow up program carried out. The participating group can go back and transfer the knowledge to their schools while the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust will get an opportunity to monitor the development they have achieved.

We were also able to identify inadequacies in the educational material and facilities for biodiversity related studies in the schools. BECT plans to create links with governmental and non-governmental organizations, which could provide the necessary support for these programs.

Future programmes

(a) ‘A Nature Diary’ contest, where children maintain a nature related diary, either individually or collectively. This would be very useful and has been proposed amongst the schools. It could be at a divisional level or a district level, with a final overall set of winners.

(b) The possible development of more handouts and study materials. A simpler and more pictorial, short presentation for the younger children.

(c) Field trips to national parks where the children will be able to observe elephants from a different perspective.

(d) Providing training opportunities for some of the young lecturers participating in the program to be more competent in conservation education. Employ people from conflict areas, probably students that were in early schools program who have grown up. This will also give an opportunity for young scientists to have a hands-on experience on being involved in actual conservation activities

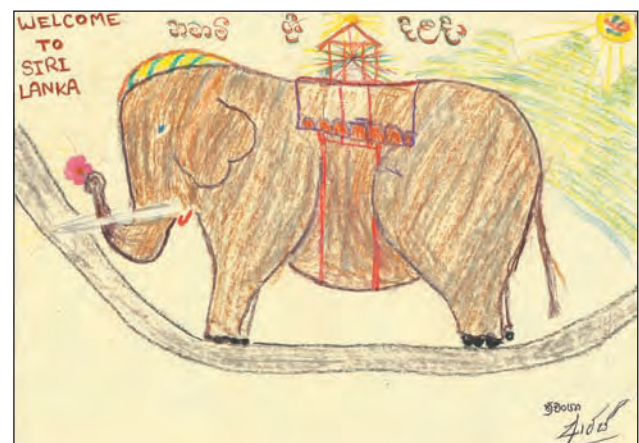
Acknowledgements

It must be gratefully recorded that we have been able to carry out these programs effectively in 150 schools each year for the last nine years due to the unstinting support of our donors. Their commitment to conservation education through these programs is vital. Their financial aid and their interest in what we are doing, has made the conduct of this program easy.

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