

## Appreciation

Mr. J. C. Daniel (1927 - 2011)

*By Ajay A. Desai*

One of our founding members and the first Chair of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group Mr. J.C. Daniel passed away on 23. August 2011, in Bombay. His passing away was a big loss to conservation and to all those who knew him. When I sat down to write this obituary I thought that I could easily give the readers a very clear and detailed understanding of him and his work as I had worked under him and knew him for decades. Yet when I sat down to write I realized that I was privy to only a small part of his life and work, such was his overarching influence in the field of conservation and natural sciences.

His work was recognized in India and internationally, the awards he received speak for themselves, Peter Scott Award for Conservation Merit (1988), Award of Kerala Agricultural University (1989), Indira Gandhi Paryavaran Puraskar (1997), Sanctuary – ABN Amro Lifetime Service to Conservation Award (2000) and Distinguished Service Award from Society for Conservation Biology (2007). But that really tells you very little. He was an integral part of an era, which truly laid the foundation for the conservation movement in India. This period was witness to the start of wildlife research, establishment of protected areas based on research with some targeted for specific species, introduction of professionalism in wildlife management and the introduction of technology in wildlife research; he was a part of all that.

He also contributed to building institutes in addition to helping Bombay Natural History Society grow. He was instrumental in helping establish a wildlife/environmental research institute 'Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History' and he was on the governing council of 'Wildlife Institute of India'. He was also on the Indian Board for Wildlife, which formulated wildlife policy. He also served as Vice-Chairman, Species Survival Commission,

Chairman and was a member of the Executive Committee of World Congress of Herpetology.

He will be most remembered for his role in Bombay Natural History Society where he served as its Director till retirement, later as its Honorary Secretary and finally as an active Executive Committee member. He encouraged peoples interest in nature and wildlife science. There would certainly be very many people whom he touched and brought into the world of conservation and research. A part of his legacy will be these numerous people working for conservation in various places. He leaves behind this lesson for all of us – encourage others, help build the next generation, which will take over from us.

His work in Asian elephant conservation was significant, in addition to being the first Chair of the AsESG, he was also responsible for initiating the first countrywide assessment and mapping of elephants in India with major roles played by Dr. D.K. Lahiri-Choudary, Mr. E.R.C. Davidar and Mr. S.P. Shahi (all members of AsESG). His strength lay in not trying to do everything himself or in trying to do everything through the institute he worked with but in encouraging and facilitating everyone and every institute to do its bit. Through the BNHS he initiated the first (in the early 1980's) long-term study of Asian elephant behaviour, ecology and conflict. This project also included the first successfully completed study using radio-collars in India (the use of telemetry was pioneered and initially field tested by Dr. J B Sale and Mr. Vinod Rishi. He realized that conservation is a hard fight and we need everyone and all institutions – the more we have the stronger we are.

His love for elephants was immense; he would be up at 4 am when we were doing the radio-collaring operations unmindful of the hardships

and long hours in the field despite his age. From those days in the field I saw two things; first he recognized talent and knowledge in others and respected it. I have never seen him trying to tell an expert what to do – to him the tracker, the elephant biologist, the veterinary doctor, the forest official, all knew their respective jobs and he as the manager was there to ensure the smooth functioning of the operation and it was not his job to tell them what to do, when he knew they were competent enough to do it! And he had the ability to see such qualities (where they existed) in people at every level, from an uneducated tribal tracker to a highly experienced veterinary doctor. This quality along with his other quality of talking to people at all levels, showing them respect and appreciating their skills/knowledge and contribution made him very loved. Although we did the initial chemical immobilization of elephants over two and half decades ago, the tribals, the elephant mahouts and the forest staff who participated still talk of him with great love and respect. A Range Forest Officer who retired recently reminisced of those old days saying “... he was a real gentleman, he never interfered with your operation but fully supported it and he interacted with all of us and recognized everyone’s contribution, you don’t see people like him anymore”.

Least I make you believe that he was elephant centric, he was not. His major contributions were in the field of herpetology although he had publications or made contributions to all fields, birds, mammals and insects. His research work covered species like the Asian elephant, Indian Wild Buffalo, Blackbuck, Tiger, Nilgiri Tahr, Saltwater Crocodile and Golden Gecko. He authored and edited various books at BNHS such as “The Book of Indian Reptiles and Amphibians”, “Cassandra of Conservation”, “Petronia”, “A Century of Natural History”, “The Leopard in India”, “The Asian Elephant – A Natural History” and “A Week with Elephants”, “Birds of the Indian Subcontinent – A Field Guide” and more which I cannot recall. He was diverse, be it initiating the documenting of trees in the Mumbai region or a major study on elephant, to him it was all about conservation.

He respected every approach, be it the writings of a naturalist or a scientist, he would see merit and opportunity for learning and for conservation. Being a taxonomist he certainly was a hardcore scientist but he also recognized the various levels of science from detailed studies to short term observations. To him science was for conservation, the end result mattered and not the academic debate, I remember him saying “... tell me if there are 50 or 51 elephants and what I need to do about that. Don’t tell me there are 50.5 elephants ( $\pm$  whatever) and then nothing about what I need to do”. We do sometimes forget what the purpose of research is and we do forget that all knowledge can be used for conservation if we are intelligent and committed enough.

He encouraged people to write not just scientific papers but popular articles so that we can reach the masses. He appreciated good photographs and saw them as a tool to reach the general public and generate support for conservation. To him nature was the most beautiful thing and an endless treasure trove of knowledge and something that we need to fight to save for our future generations. I and my wife will always remember him trying to get our little two year old son interested in tortoises with hilarious results. He touched one and all and I that is why I feel we will miss him and can only hope that other will learn from him and continue with the good work.



In the photo are elephant mahout Chinna kali, Range Officer Mr. Krishnamurthy, Dr. Jacob Cheeran, Mr. J.C. Daniel. Dr. V. Krishnamurthy (behind Mr. Daniel) and elephant kavadi Soma. This was taken during a collaring operation in 1987 in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary.