

Case Studies of Tranquilizing Captive Elephants in Rampage in Sri Lanka

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Summary of incidents

A number of examples of captive elephants going out of control occurred in the last few years where we had to intervene to bring them under control.

In 2001, a 40 year old male elephant in Balangoda, immediately after musth, got loose from chains and ran on to the main road. Passing the city he entered a patch of jungle approximately 8km away from home and stayed there not allowing anybody to get near.

In 2008, a 30 year old male, twice during a two month period, disobeyed the keeper, got loose with no chain on the body, while on elephant-back safari in Habarana. Though he did not harm or injure anybody or destroy property, he could not be re-captured and restrained.

A 30 year old tusker ran riot in Kandy injuring the keeper, while he was on his way walking to attend a cultural festival. The keeper had to be rushed to hospital by the villagers to save



Figure 1. Anaesthetized elephant after running riot during a procession.

his life. The tusker was tied with a weak chain to a milepost on the road with difficulty, by the assistant keeper.

A 30 year old male Indian tusker, ran riot in Balangoda, around 9 pm, smashed four three wheelers, a motor bicycle and two temporary shops erected by villagers. He created a severe commotion among people though he did not injure or harm anybody. The same elephant two days later when brought to Kandy in a lorry, refused to get down and started attacking the lorry.

Management intervention

In all the above occasions, the elephant involved was tranquilized using 0.8 ml Immobilon LA injected intramuscularly using a Palmer Cap-Chur gun from approximately 40-50 m distance except in one occasion in which a jab-stick was used when the animal was in a lorry. After 25-55 minutes, the darted animal could be approached, tied properly with chains and was immediately brought to the stable or home, walking without any other drug being administered. None of them went into lateral recumbency and the antidote to Immobilon was not injected to any of the animals.

Though ideally the volume of Immobilon to be injected should be decided on a subjective assessment of anger, acidosis and dehydration, 0.8 ml appears to be safe general dose for an adult captive elephant for bringing it under control without inducing anaesthesia. This approach avoids complications and logistic difficulties of infusing volumes of normal saline and other supplements to a sedated elephant in lateral recumbency.