

Elephant Conservation Challenges

Alex Rübel (Editorial Board Member)

E-mail: alex.ruebel@zoo.ch

In February this year I had the chance of visiting Nepal. On this visit I went to the Royal Chitwan National Park, the first park established in the country. I was greatly impressed by the attitude of the conservation community in this country in their caring for their last rhinos, tigers, wild and tamed elephants. I was also impressed by their habitats as well in this part of the foothills of the Himalayas. It also amazed me to find out how many elephant management issues there are in a range country, which are similar to those in our western zoos. I realized that there is much we can learn from each other in this regard, with personal contacts or our common journal *Gajah*.

Chitwan is primarily well known for its rhino population, which has grown over the last few years to over 500 animals. It is a place where 125 adult wild tigers and a population of around 60 wild elephants live. The elephants often travel from India into the park. For many years now, the conservation authorities have fought the poaching of rhinos and tigers. The spoils from this poaching are smuggled from Nepal over the passes to China. This well coordinated fight proved to be very effective. In 2011 there was zero rhinos poached in Chitwan, a major achievement of conservation community and Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) Nepal.

A major attempt is also dedicated towards the management and conservation of wild and captive elephant populations. Elephants are used traditionally in Nepal to go through the dense forests and which is often the only way to get to remote places in Chitwan. All of the 50 guard posts in the Chitwan National Park have two elephants to patrol their range. They are used to capture wild rhinos that are translocated to create a viable family group in other parks and to control the wild elephant population. Additionally an

even bigger number of elephants are used to carry tourists into the community forests and the park.

Despite the successes, the population of the wild elephants, as well as the ones which are used by humans, face several challenges. Lately, a big tusker named 'Dhrube' has been identified as a man-killer. It has killed 15 people in the last month and in years before that. Nepal has witnessed a rising number of human deaths and property losses caused by wildlife. Even in a large park such as Chitwan it is difficult to keep the elephants inside the forest since their range is often bigger. Human-elephant conflict (HEC) is an issue, which needs increasing observation and attention. The most welcomed growing wild herds need observation and measures to control potential damage by them. Also follows adverse effects towards the elephants by the local communities. Nepalese officials understand that there is a need to limit several populations of endangered wildlife including elephants, rhinos and tigers.

Capturing and breaking in wild elephants for human use was often cruel and is not the state of the art anymore. New know-how and techniques regarding HEC and population control, which have proven themselves in other places as well as in captivity, have to be introduced.

A serious matter is that in the captive elephant population, which is used for patrolling or tourism, there is no breeding. The population is becoming old and tuberculosis amongst them is wide spread. Measures have to be taken to make sure that in the longer term there are still elephants available for duties in the forest. Reproduction is now planned in the elephant breeding facility at Khorsor. The centre was built in 1988 and now the first elephants have been born and are growing up at the centre.

However the centre faces the same issues as many zoos did and do over the last few years. Breeding and raising elephants is best done and most successful in a matriarchal family group. Several European zoos have built up such groups over the past decade. As the elephants in the centre have come from different sources, these groups have to be built up over time. Cooperation with other countries may be necessary to stabilize the actual population.

Another challenge is the widespread tuberculosis in elephants. The phenomenon of tuberculosis in captive elephants is well known in zoos around the world. Most of the affected elephants seem to be raised in a human environment and have acquired tuberculosis from humans or through infected cow milk. In Nepal now, a research group, under the leadership of Susan Mikota and

in collaboration with DNPWC and the National Trust for Nature Conservation, is evaluating and tackling these problems and has screened a large number of elephants to bring this problem under control.

Conservation of our mega vertebrates has become more challenging over the last decades due to human population growth and land use. Despite buffer zones the pressure towards the conservation areas is still increasing. On the other hand the elephant population, used for tourism and conservation zone patrolling, is dwindling. The dilemma suggests that it is imperative that we put our knowledge regarding HEC together and work with local communities in disease control, population control in the wild and reproduction in the captive population to secure our last elephants on this planet.



Announcement

Gajah Goes ‘Peer-review’

Jayantha Jayewardene (Editor)

Gajah will have a ‘peer reviewed section’ from the 40th issue on. Peer reviewed papers will carry a notation to that effect. Peer reviewed papers will be handled by an editorial board member. They will be sent out for review to those with expertise in the relevant area and the authors informed of the reviewers’ comments and recommendations. The editor will make the final decision on whether to publish or not, based on two or more reviewers’ comments.

Only original research papers will be considered for the ‘peer reviewed section’. Papers submitted for consideration can be up to 5000 words in total with an abstract of a maximum of 150 words. The main sections of the body of text should be:

Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion. Tables, Figures and References should follow the general guidelines for *Gajah* articles listed in the back cover in each issue and downloadable from <<http://www.asesg.org/gajah.htm>>.

Contributing authors to *Gajah* are requested to specify that they are submitting their paper to the ‘peer reviewed section’. Papers submitted without such request will be handled as per current process, where members of the editorial board will send comments to authors and work with them to make the paper of publishable standard in *Gajah*. We encourage authors to submit their papers to *Gajah*’s new peer-reviewed section.