

## Appreciation

Charles Santiapillai (1944-2014)

*By Raman Sukumar*

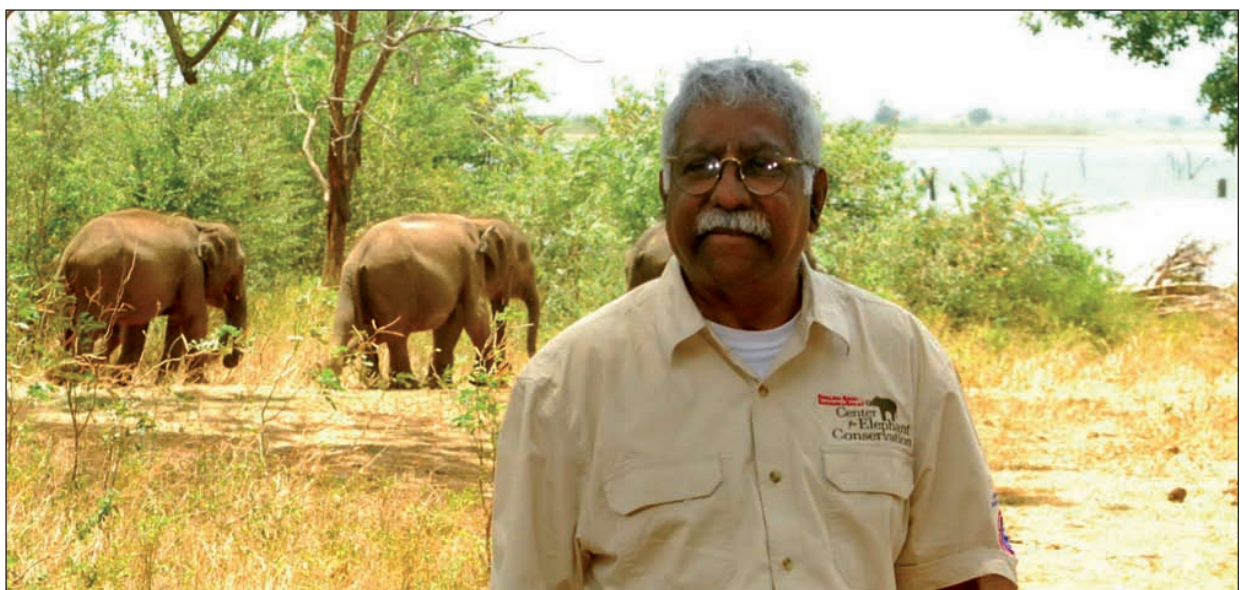
When I heard in October last year that Charles Santiapillai was critically ill, I was totally surprised as I knew that he been actively travelling in Sri Lanka in pursuit of his passion to understand and save the elephants of the country. The past several years he had been logging thousands of kilometres every year visiting Sri Lanka's elephant habitats in the company of the young S. Wijeyamohan, who was with him until the very end. My wife and I were fortunate to see him alive about a week before he died on October 29, 2014.

Charles was Sri Lanka's preeminent naturalist who wrote extensively in scientific journals, magazines and newspapers on a variety of species and themes. Although Charles is best known for his work on Asian elephant ecology and conservation, he also wrote on the dugong, Javan rhino, wild buffalo, wild pig, sambar, tiger, leopard, leopard cat, clouded leopard, mongooses, otters, and crocodiles. Whenever he wrote a scientific article he often followed it up with a more popular article that would reach a broader audience. He was a regular contributor to *Tigerpaper*, a conservation journal from the

Food and Agriculture Organization that reached conservation organizations, policy groups, and managers, as well as to several Sri Lankan newspapers.

He wrote on topics as diverse as the need for academic freedom in universities, how to convert elephant dung into dollars, the life of the genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, and the voice of the jazz artiste Willis Conover (though I must add that Charles' favourite music was Carnatic classical). He published a commentary in 2003 in the respectable journal *Current Science* on the looming threat of smallpox in which he argued that humans had now completely lost any exposure and, hence, immunity to the dreaded virus that could be used by bio-terrorists to spread mayhem. He even published an illustrated guide to the endemic birds of Sri Lanka.

For about 17 years (1988-2004), Charles was the mainstay of the activities of the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group. First as Executive Secretary and then as Deputy Chair, he worked tirelessly to build a network of elephant conservationists and edit on behalf



of the group a newsletter that later went on to become the journal *Gajah*. The action plan for Asian elephant conservation that Charles edited in 1990 provided perhaps the finest and most comprehensive practical vision of where and how to conserve elephants for posterity.

Among the honours that Charles received, I must mention the *Order of the Golden Ark* in 1990 from the Netherlands and the *Vidya Nidhi* from the Sri Lankan President in 2005 for his lifetime contribution to the cause of conservation science in the country.

Although Charles spent many years abroad, especially in Indonesia, his heart was always in his home country and he returned in 1995 to join the University of Peradeniya where he taught zoology for 15 years until his formal retirement in 2009 at the age of 65 years. Charles was not yet ready to give up academic or conservation pursuits. He would often tell me that there is no specialist centre anywhere in Asia for the study of elephants and that he wished to establish one in Sri Lanka.

This is precisely what he did soon after his stint at Peradeniya as he went on to establish a centre for the study of Asian elephants at Rajarata University in the historic town of Mihintale. This centre was Charles' passion during the last five years of his life as he tried to promote a younger

generation of Sri Lankans to take to elephant studies. These five years was also the period when I had the opportunity to make several memorable visits to Sri Lanka to lecture at the university, travel with Charles and Wijeyamohan across the island's elephant country, and enjoy the warm hospitality that Charles' wife Anoma provided me at their Kandy home that was full of books, music, laughter and pet dogs.

I first met Charles in 1987 when he came to Bangalore to attend the Asian School of Conservation Biology at the Indian Institute of Science. I would have met him seven years earlier at Colombo but for a burglary at his house that prevented him from attending a meeting of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group. That seven year delay was entirely my loss – of enjoying his gentle humour (which even when occasionally risqué was never offensive), of listening to his level-headed analysis or plain speaking of a complex subject, and of being encouraged by a professional colleague and a personal friend.

Charles was a sane voice in the somewhat confusing world of conservation. He was as eclectic and secular a personality as you could come across. A Tamil Christian, he was devotedly married to a Sinhalese Buddhist, while his final passage from this world included Hindu rituals as per his own wishes. Need I say anything more about this gentleman naturalist-conservationist.

