

Building Relationships between Asian Mahouts

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The 7th Indonesian Mahout Workshop hosted by FOKMAS (Indonesian Mahout Communication Forum) was held from February 24-27, 2015, at the Minas government elephant training centre (PLG) located in the province of Riau in Sumatra, Indonesia. Seventy participants attended the workshop and represented most of the Sumatran government elephant camps, Conservation Response Units (CRUs), and other elephant patrol units in Sumatra, as well as several zoos and safari parks from Sumatra, Java, and Bali. The majority of participants were mahouts, but some camp managers and veterinarians from private facilities also attended.

The Indonesian Mahout Workshops were initiated in 2006 at the Seblat government elephant conservation centre in Bengkulu province (Sumatra) to provide an opportunity for mahouts to share information, strengthen their professionalism, and influence elephant conservation in Indonesia more effectively.

Several NGOs, including the International Elephant Foundation, Asian Elephant Support, and the Elephant Managers Association, provided workshop support to assist this professional training opportunity for mahouts. General issues discussed during the workshop included problems mahouts encounter in their elephant work and habitat conservation efforts, finding solutions to improve the care and management of Indonesia's wild and captive elephants, and means to create an information network with colleagues throughout Asia. FOKMAS and the Mahout Workshops are supported by Indonesian government conservation agencies

The 7th Indonesian Mahout Workshop was officially opened by the Director of Indonesian Biodiversity Conservation (KKH), Ir. Bambang Dahono Aji, M.M., M.Si, along with the Head of Riau Provincial Conservation Agency (BKSDA), Ir. Kemal Amas, M.Sc, and the Head of Siak District, Drs. H. Syamsuar, M.Si.





Myanmar mahout demonstrating to Indonesian mahouts how to tie harness rope.

During the first two days of the workshop several presentations and an informal hands-on session were conducted by visiting colleagues from the Myanma Timber Enterprise (MTE). The group from Myanmar included two MTE elephant veterinarians, an MTE manager, and a senior mahout (Singaung) from an MTE timber camp. The Indonesian mahouts were very attentive to the presentations from their Myanmar counterparts, and good discussions resulted from the interactions. The participants from Myanmar were impressed with the level of interest from the Indonesian mahouts and expressed the intention to develop similar meeting and training opportunities for mahouts in Myanmar. Following the Mahout Workshop, the Myanmar group had the opportunity to visit other Sumatran elephant camps and learn more about the use of elephants in Sumatra for eco-tourism and in conflict mitigation.

In addition to presentations, training in field navigation using maps and GPS units was conducted during the Workshop by Conservation Officer Diding Ichsan. This training was divided into two parts: theoretical background and hands-on practice in locations within the Minas camp area. All mahouts were instructed about various skills to deal with wildlife monitoring and illegal activities such as data collection and recording, GPS instruction, human-wildlife conflict mitigation techniques, and community relations. Building capacity of the mahouts with skills for improved forest protection and

wildlife conservation also promotes improved job performance of these individuals.

The final part of the Mahout Workshop included discussion among the participants about improving elephant facilities and management in Indonesia, and a wrap up of the field navigation and GPS sessions.

These Mahout Workshops and interactions with fellow mahouts from around Asia are very important for the mahout staff across Indonesia. Prior to this Workshop, in December 2014, two Sumatran staff who have been regular instructors at the Indonesian Mahout Workshops, travelled to Myanmar to train MTE mahouts in the use of GPS and field navigation. As MTE reduces the amount of logging now done by elephants, they are turning to conservation activities, such as patrolling protected areas, for these ex-logging elephants.

There is a need to continue these regional professional exchanges and training as this has resulted in positive outcomes. In Indonesia, the government has requested input from FOKMAS about mitigating elephant conflict. FOKMAS is currently in the planning stages for the next Mahout Workshop and will continue hosting mahout training modules so this level of staff can be more effective participants in elephant conservation initiatives in Indonesia - and across Asia.



Minas elephants bathing.