

A Case Study of Wild Asian Elephant Attacks on Foreign Tourists in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Over the past few decades, tourism has become one of the fastest growing economic sectors in the world and a key driver of socio-economic progress. The economic activity generated by travel and tourism represents around 5% of GDP and an estimated 6 – 7% of the world's jobs (World Tourism Organization 2015). In 2010, the number of international tourists reached 940 million and this is forecast to grow to around 1.6 billion by 2020 (Ramsar Convention on Wetlands 2012).

Tourism is one of the key sectors propelling the economic growth of Sri Lanka. The government of Sri Lanka has introduced a program to attract 2.5 million tourists annually, by year 2016 (Ministry of Economic Development 2011). Wildlife and nature are one of eight product categories Sri Lanka tourism focuses on, and elephants are one of the main wildlife products identified (Ministry of Economic Development 2011). The Department of Wildlife Conservation Sri Lanka (DWC) has also identified elephants as a key component for promoting wildlife tourism (DWC 2016).

The majority of tourists visiting Sri Lanka are interested in observing elephants in the wild (Senevirathna & Perera 2013). Therefore the elephant is a key component of Sri Lankan tourism industry. However, elephants can also pose a danger to tourists.

This study analyzed incidents of wild Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) attacks involving foreign tourists in the past three years.

Materials and methods

Google Sri Lanka <<http://www.google.lk>> was used to search for articles related to wild elephant attacks on foreign tourists. The keywords 'Wild Elephant', 'Attack', 'Tourist' and 'Sri Lanka' were used for searching. A total of 28 articles were found and after removing repetitions of incidents and irrelevant material, three incidents were identified. Further information on the incidents was collected by interviewing DWC and police officers and eyewitnesses. Altogether 13 persons were interviewed.

Results

Case 1 – A tourist was attacked in March 2014 when she attempted to follow 'Rambo', a free – ranging elephant, which frequented the electric fence at the Udawalawe National Park boundary, along the Thanamalwila road. Rambo has been frequenting this area for many years, but was very docile with passers-by, who even hand-fed him through the electric fence. The tourist had first fed Rambo and had been highly fascinated to be at such close quarters to a wild elephant. Rambo had then walked along the fence and the tourist had crept through the fence and followed him, in spite of villagers warning her not to do that. When she approached Rambo he had turned around and hit her with his trunk, sending her sprawling to the ground. He then kicked her, injuring her head badly, and walked away. She was rushed to a hospital where she was treated and subsequently recovered.

Case 2 – A tourist was attacked in February 2016 by an elephant, which frequented the

Habarana – Polonnaruwa road, which runs along the Minneriya National Park. This particular elephant was used to getting food from people visiting a nearby temple. Local people commonly went close to the elephant but he did not show any aggression towards them. The tourist was attacked when he attempted to photograph the elephant after going close to him, and sustained a leg injury.

Case 3 – An elephant attacked a tourist killing him, in May 2016 on the Habarana – Sigiriya road. The incident happened where the road runs across the Moragaswewa Forest Reserve. According to the DWC, the victim had attempted to take a photograph with the elephant, as pieces of a broken camera were found at the site of the incident. However, his companion stated that they were attacked while they were travelling on the motorbike.

Discussion

All three attacks occurred on or close to main roads in proximity to protected areas, where free – ranging elephants are commonly seen. In all the cases the victims tried to approach the elephants, presumably without knowing the risk. A study by Durrheim and Leggat (1999) found that seven tourists were killed by wild animals in South Africa, in a period of ten years. Three of the deaths resulted from tourists approaching lions on foot, while the management of KwaZulu-Natal Reserve was held responsible for another death caused by a lion. Ignorance of animal behaviour and disregard of rules contributed to two fatalities involving hippos. Unusual behaviour due to illness was responsible for the death caused by an elephant. The same study found 14 nonfatal attacks on tourists, including five by hippopotami, three by buffaloes, two by rhinos, and one each by a lion, leopard, zebra and an elephant. Only the last occurred while a visitor was in a motor vehicle. Durrheim and Leggat (1999) suggest that attacks by wild animals are an uncommon cause of injury to tourists in South Africa. Our results suggest that the situation is similar in Sri Lanka, with deaths and injury to tourists being related to ignorance of the danger posed by wild animals.

Most tourists may not have experienced large wild animals in their countries of residence. Therefore they may not be aware of the potential danger posed by them. During Safari trips in protected areas, tourists are accompanied by DWC officers, travel guides or jeep drivers, who would advise them of such danger, reducing the possibility of incidents. However, the dangers are greater when tourists are on their own. Creating awareness among tourists about the risks posed by wildlife could prevent such incidents. Activities such as information display at airports and roadside notices on roads where wild animals could be encountered would be useful in this regard.

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