

## Notes from the Chair IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

Vivek Menon

*Chair's e-mail: vivek@wti.org.in*

Dear members

I would like to wish all of you a very happy 2019. Let me begin with good news. The IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) had in the past members from all the Asian range states except Vietnam. I am pleased to inform you that three experts from Vietnam have recently joined the group and now we have members from ALL 13 range states.

Also, after the initial discussion with our members and officials from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, China and Malaysia (Sabah) for hosting the next AsESG meeting, I am very happy to inform you that we have settled on Sabah in Borneo, Malaysia. The meeting will be held sometime in the first two weeks of December 2019 and the dates are being worked on which we will soon communicate to you. I would request all of you to keep your calendars free for this important meeting and we will narrow it down as soon as possible.

We have received the final documents from two Working Groups. The first is on the “Management and Welfare of Captive Asian Elephants Used in Tourism” and the second on the “Management and Care of Captive Elephant Bulls in Musth”. I have also received updates from the Working Groups working for preparing the “Sabah Elephant Conservation Action Plan” and the other working on “Developing Guidelines for Rehabilitation of Captive Elephants in the Wild as a Possible Restocking Option”. Based on the comment received during the last AsESG meeting in Bangkok, the Working Group for “Mapping the Distribution of Asian Elephants in Range States” had its meeting in Yangon, Myanmar early 2019 facilitated by the convenor Dr. A. Christy Williams. I hope the others will soon follow.

The three new Working Groups formed in mid 2018 have also started their work. The Working Group for “Preparing the Elephant Conservation Action Plan for Bhutan” had online discussions and will be meeting in February 2019 at Paro, Bhutan to discuss the initial draft plan recently prepared by the Department of Forests and Park Services, Bhutan based on national consultation held in early 2019. The second Working Group working towards “Developing the Plan to Manage the Elephant Habitats Affected by Settlement of Rohingya Refugees in Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh and Minimize the Human-Elephant Conflict” had its field visit in end October 2018 (Fig. 1). Currently about 921,000 Rohingya refugees reside in 27 camps in Cox’s Bazar occupying about 6000 acres of forest area cleared for settlement. About 35-40 elephants are trapped on the western side of the camp in degraded secondary forests and 13 cases of human death due to elephants have been reported between September 2017 and October 2018 by elephants in and around the camp area. The team is working on the draft report. The third Working Group on “Emerging Diseases Affecting Elephant in Wild and in Captivity in Asia” has also started its discussion recently.



**Figure 1.** Stakeholders consultation on mitigating impact of Rohingya refugees on elephants.

Taking forward the responsibility of helping the range states develop their national action plans for the conservation of elephants, the AsESG Program Manager on my behalf visited Lao PDR and had meeting with the Director General, Deputy Director General and other senior officials of the Department of Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Wildlife and Aquatic Management Division, Lao PDR along with officials of WWF Lao offering the assistance of AsESG experts for the preparation of the Lao elephant conservation action plan (Fig. 2). Appreciating the initiatives of the AsESG, he has agreed to get the plan prepared for Lao PDR within this year. Our members from Lao – Mr Khamkhoun Khounbolin and Dr. K. Yoganand facilitated the meeting. A Working Group will be soon constituted to facilitate the work.

As part of AsESG mandate to help in capacity building of range country members for the conservation of the species, we facilitated a training program on radio collaring of elephants and for mitigating human-elephant conflict to six delegates from Cambodia (including two vets) and three delegates from Vietnam (including two vets). This was held in collaboration with the Wildlife Trust of India at its Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC), Kaziranga National Park, Assam from 26 November to 2nd December 2018 (Fig. 3). WWF Cambodia and WWF Vietnam supported the exposure visit-cum-training program. We will continue to offer our assistance to range state officials in the future too.

I also had the opportunity to attend the American Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) 2018 annual conference at Seattle, USA from 22nd to 27th September 2018 as part of IUCN delegation, the SSC Steering Committee in Bangkok in August as well as the 14th MIKE and ETIS Technical Advisory Group meeting at Nairobi, Kenya from 6th to 8th November 2018.

For the two upcoming meetings – Conference of the Parties (CoP18) to be held in Colombo, Sri



**Figure 2.** Meeting with officials for the Lao PDR national action plan for elephant conservation.

Lanka, from 23rd May to 3rd June 2019 as well as the SCB's 29th International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB 2019) to be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 21st to 25th July 2019 – we are planning to organise side events/discussions for the group and would be happy to have your suggestions to showcase our work.

I would like to thank each one of you for actively contributing towards the conservation of the species in Asia and I am sure the group will continue in this new year all the good work that we initiated in the last few years. I also take this opportunity to thank Elephant Family and International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) for their continued support to the Asian Elephant Specialist Group.

Vivek Menon  
Chair AsESG, IUCN SSC



**Figure 3.** Training of vets and other forest officials from Cambodia and Vietnam.