

Report on the 10th Meeting of the IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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Introduction

The 10th Meeting of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) was held at the Shangri La's Tanjung Aru Resort & Spa, Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia from 4th to 6th December 2019. The meeting was jointly hosted along with the Sabah Wildlife Department. A wide range of issues including standards and guidelines for the management and welfare of elephants in the wild and in captivity, wildlife emergencies, national action plans, red-listing of Asian elephants, challenges for the conservation of elephants in Sabah, etc were discussed. The meeting was attended by 148 people including 62 AsESG members, 17 government officials from all 13 Asian elephant range countries, 3 other ex-officio members, 36 invitees from across the globe as well as 20 organizers and 10 exhibitors. The meet also provided a forum for AsESG members and young professionals to present their work. A Partners Round Table between AsESG partners and range country officials was also organized to explore the possibilities of supporting priority conservation activities of range states

The inaugural session was addressed by Mr Vivek Menon, Chairperson AsESG, Dato Abdul Kadir bin Abu Hashim, DG, Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Peninsular Malaysia and Mr Augustine Tuuga, Director Sabah Wildlife Department.

Chair's summary on AsESG's achievements

Mr Menon thanked the Government of Sabah and the Sabah Wildlife Department for hosting the meeting and presented the report of AsESG activities in the last 18 months. The 19 Working Groups worked to assess, plan and act in this Quadrennium (2016–2020); three of these have

already completed their mandate by 2017. In terms of assessment the team has successfully submitted the assessment of Asian elephant (except subspecies *Elephas maximus sumatranus*) and work on mapping the distribution of Asian elephants.

Plan

The “Elephant Conservation National Action Plan for Bhutan” has been finalised and printed in 2019. The drafts of the Sabah and Sumatra elephant conservation national action plans are ready and waiting approval of the government. Lao PDR and India, which do not have a plan, have also agreed to prepare their plans after a follow up by the AsESG secretariat and have constituted technical committees to prepare the plans.

The four Working Groups that have completed and submitted their outcome document include guidelines for creating artificial water holes in elephant habitats, guideline for welfare and use of elephants in tourism, management and care of captive elephant in musth and guidelines for the reintroduction of captive elephants in the wild as possible restocking option.



The three Working Groups that are still working to complete their outcome documents include guidelines for best practices in addressing and mitigation human-elephant conflict, areas and mechanism of involving AsESG members to strengthen MIKE and plans to arrest the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam.

The work of the Working Group to prepare guidelines to treat, minimize and manage spread of emerging new disease, formed in July 2018, is in progress. The Working Group to prepare a plan to manage the elephant habitat affected by the Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar undertook a field visit in October/November 2018 and is working on the plan.

Act

Capacity building training of veterinarians from Vietnam and Cambodia on radio collaring of elephants and HEC mitigation was conducted in Kaziranga, India by AsESG-WTI from 26th November to 2nd December 2018. IFAW-WTI veterinarians went to Cambodia to assist the WWF Cambodia team in radio collaring of elephants from 26th July – 7th August 2019.

The membership advisory committee and the communications advisory group are also working on their respective mandate and will continue till the end of the quadrennial.

The editorial board of the journal *Gajah* has published three volumes since April 2018. One of the major hurdles has been the lack of papers for publication and the editorial board urged members to submit their work for publication.

On request of the Chair, Mr Jayantha Jayawardene has drafted the history of the AsESG.



Activities of AsESG representatives

Organized a session at the 29th International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB 2019) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 25th July 2019 jointly with IFAW and Elephant Family on “Challenges confronting conservation of Asian Elephants: Securing corridors as a mitigation strategy.”

Organised a side event at the CITES CoP18 in Geneva on 22nd August 2019 in partnership with IFAW, Elephant Family and WWF on “Impact of poaching and illegal trade on Asian Elephants.”

AsESG WCPA Transport proposed Working Group: A meeting of the proposed linear infrastructure working group with members from WCPA transport working group of connectivity conservation and the AsESG was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia on 8th April to discuss the formalities and TOR.

IUCN African Elephant Specialist Group Meeting: Dr. Sandeep Kr Tiwari, program manager AsESG, attended the African Elephant Specialist Group members meeting on behalf of the AsESG in Pretoria, South Africa from 14th to 18th July 2019.

The chair attended the SSC steering committee meeting as well as the SSC leadership meeting, spoke and chaired a few parallel sessions. Other AsESG members also attended the meeting held at Abu Dhabi from 6th to 10th October 2019.

The AsESG has published a paper on “Population status of Asian elephants *Elephas maximus* and key threats” in the International Zoo Yearbook.

The AsESG is in the top 4 among the 160 IUCN SSC Specialist Groups and has been awarded the SSC Chair's Citation of Excellence for the outstanding contribution in delivering the species strategic plan for the 2017–2018 period.

Technical Working Groups

The technical Working Groups presented the outcome documents of their respective groups.

These include:

1. Red listing assessment of Asian elephants: process, challenges and way forward - Dr. A. Christy Williams
2. Mapping the distribution of Asian elephants in range states - Dr. Varun Goswami
3. Bhutan National Action Plan - Mr Namgay Wangchuk
4. Update on Sumatra National Action Plan - Dr. Wahdi Azmi and Mr Krismanko Padang
5. Update on guidelines for best practices in addressing and mitigating human elephant conflict - Dr. Alexandra Zimmermann
6. Guidelines for creating artificial water holes in elephant habitats - Prof. R. Sukumar
7. Updates on Guidelines to treat, minimize and manage spread of emerging new diseases - Dr. N.V.K. Ashraf
8. Guidelines for the effective management and care of captive elephants in musth - Dr. Janine Brown
9. Guideline for the welfare and use of captive elephants in tourism - John Edwards Robert
10. Areas and mechanism of involving AsESG members to strengthen MIKE - Dr. Shermin de Silva (in absence of Dr. N.M. Ishwar)
11. Guideline for the reintroduction of captive elephants in the wild as a possible restocking option - Dr. Shermin de Silva (in absence of Dr. Chatchote Thitaram)
12. Plan to arrest the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam - Ms Nilanga Jayasinghe (in absence of Mr Ajay Desai)
13. Managing the elephant habitat affected by Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and minimize the human elephant conflict - Prof. Anwarul Islam

Mr Vivek Menon concluded the technical session with following remarks:

1. Six Working Groups have finalized their outcome documents and will be dissolved; others to complete their document by June 2020
2. All Working Group documents finalized will be peer reviewed and could be published. This will also be uploaded on AsESG website and could also be published in Gajah. This could also be put for IUCN publication.
3. Two new Working Groups to be formed:
 - Working Group on Borneo Elephants
 - Working Group for drafting the National Action Plan for conservation of elephants in Peninsular Malaysia

Other meeting highlights

Datuk Christina Liew, Hon'ble Deputy Chief Minister of Sabah State Government /Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment formally inaugurated the AsESG meeting on the second day. She thanked the Chair AsESG for organizing the IUCN AsESG Meeting 2019 in Sabah, Malaysia. Expressing her concern that about 145 elephants have died in Sabah between 2010 and 2019, she felt that this is the perfect opportunity to openly discuss and to look for pragmatic solutions to address this escalating mortality in Sabah's elephant population. Although Malaysia's last known Sumatran rhino died few weeks back, we will not let this happen with elephants and will ensure we do our best to protect this species. It is not too late to save the Bornean elephants! We must not hesitate to take drastic actions and





initiate conservation programs that will create an ultimate goal of “having a sustainable landscape to support free-ranging breeding populations of elephants in Sabah”. She also emphasised on the need of planning for co-existence of elephants and humans and to work towards to change the meaning of letter “C” in HEC from conflict to co-existence.

Dato Abdul Kadir bin Abu Hashim briefed on the challenges for wildlife conservation in Peninsular Malaysia and the conservation initiatives undertaken by the government. The Department of Wildlife has established an intelligence and technical centre for wildlife crime in 2018 and has also established a cybercrime unit to deal with wildlife cases.

Mr Augustine Tuuga informed that Sabah has completed the draft for the Sabah 3rd NECAP for 2020–2030 and hopes it will be tabled in the state meeting early next month to get government support for implementation of the action plan. He expressed his concern on increasing human-elephant conflict in recent years with about 145 elephant deaths from 2010–2019, mostly due to suspected poisoning and shooting. The Sabah Wildlife Department needs to improve the intelligence network, enforcement and forensics as well as improve community driven initiatives to address the issue. He hoped the Sabah forum with diverse stakeholders will discuss on how to minimize human-elephant conflict and elephant mortality and assured of all support from the government.

The Elephant Conservation Action Plan of Bhutan recently published was released by the Chair, Director General Malaysia, Director Sabah Wildlife Department and Mr Namgay Wangchuk.

A panel discussion was held on subspecies of Asian elephants, their red listing and finalization organised with Dr. Benoit Goossens, Dr. Pruthu Fernando, Dr .T.N.C. Vidya as panellists. The discussion was facilitated by Vivek Menon. Currently three subspecies are recognised: Asian mainland (*Elephas maximus indicus*), Sri Lankan (*Elephas maximus maximus*) and Sumatran (*Elephas maximus sumatranus*) elephants. The Borneo elephants are included under Mainland. However, mtDNA haplotypes analysis indicates that Borneo elephants are genetically distinct from any other South and Southeast Asian population and have been isolated for over 300,000 years. Therefore, they should be considered as a separate subspecies. It was discussed if genetic data can be the sole criteria or if such a decision should be based on both genetic and morphometric assessments. The overall view was that the Borneo elephant is separate and could be included as subspecies or Evolutionary Significant Unit and should be red-listed. Dr. A. Christy Williams felt that we could go to national red listing to argument because they have separate CITES authorities. The chair suggested forming a Working Group for deciding if Borneo elephants should be considered as a subspecies and its red-listing.

Dr. Ben Okita, co-chair African Elephant Specialist Group, attending the AsESG meeting on special invitation, made a brief presentation on the sharing and learning from the African experience and their range of activities.

Mr Jayantha Jayawardene has drafted a brief note on the history of the AsESG, talking about its genesis, founding members, the reason for formation of the group, the various chairs and co-chairs, the major work done by the group and



contributions to elephant conservation, meetings and workshops, guidelines and manuals, Asian elephant conservation centre, role of IUCN, journals, AsESG website, logo and funding.

A dedicated session on Sabah elephant conservation was also organised to discuss the challenges confronting the conservation of elephants in Sabah and discuss mitigation plans. Four breakup groups were formed to discuss diverse issues: Connectivity (wildlife corridors); human-elephant conflict or co-existence (land sharing vs. land-sparing); zero killing of elephants and enforcement; and awareness for elephant conservation. The stakeholders who participated in the discussions included officials of the Sabah Wildlife Department and palm oil plantations, local scientists and conservationists, AsESG members, range country government officials, donors and officials of the Sabah government.

Parallel sessions on the third day

On the third day, there were three parallel sessions going on. The first was on emerging challenges for Asian elephant conservation, organized to enable the AsESG members and few invited guests to share and present their work (research and conservation) as a knowledge sharing mechanism to learn from each other's experience.

The second session was a partner's round table, which was attended by over 14 partners and donors and 13 range state officials. The partners informed of their core areas of support in terms of geography and themes. Range officials

presented the priority activities from their plan for technical and financial support. This provided an opportunity for the partners to get ideas on conservation issues in Asia and the priorities in actions for the conservation of elephants in range states. This also gave them an option to choose from the basket of priority actions what they would like to support.

The third session was a workshop and capacity building training for young professionals. The session was organised to provide a forum for young researchers and conservationists working on Asian elephants, but not a member of the AsESG, to present their work to the AsESG members and range officials. Six youths from three countries presented their work. This was followed by a training program on new SMART conservation tools for monitoring Asian elephants (by Dr. Antony J. Lynam), principles of effective HEC management (by Dr. Alexandra Zimmerman) and key aspects in proposal writing (by Ms Cory Brown). This session was organised to provide them an opportunity to showcase their work and interact with experts and other members of the AsESG and also to train them on a few key aspects.

The meeting ended with concluding remarks by Mr Vivek Menon and Mr William Baya, Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment. The chair felicitated all the Working Group conveners who have completed their mandate. Dr. Ben Okita, Co-Chair, AfESG was presented a memento by the Sabah Wildlife Department. Dr. Sandeep Kr Tiwari gave the vote of thanks.

