

Notes from the Chair IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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Dear Members

Hope you are safe, keeping well and that most of you have been vaccinated against Covid-19. While we have all been working remotely over most part of 2020 and early 2021, I believe with SARS-CoV-2 cases coming down globally, you have been able to resume your travel and normal work. However, the threat still persists and we should maintain Covid protocols while we resume our work.

Covid has stolen many good friends, colleagues, scientists and conservationists from us. As we were still trying to overcome the shock and grief from the death of Mr. Ajay Desai late last year, we lost Dr. K. Ramkumar, a talented and committed scientist and a member of the AsESG this year. It is tragic to lose a loved one before their time and his loss to the field of elephant conservation in India will be long felt. An obituary to his memory is also published in this issue.

One of the main responsibilities of the AsESG Secretariat in the last few months after I was re-confirmed as Chair of AsESG for the coming quadrennium, was to review the contribution of the members in last quadrennium along with the Membership Advisory Committee (MAC) and decide the membership for the new quadrennium (2021–2025). I am happy to inform that we have been able to confirm 106 members (98 from the last quadrennium and eight new members) from 22 countries (including members from all the 13 range states) for this quadrennium (Fig. 1). The new team brings in regional representation and gender parity and is a good balance of youth, experience and skills. The expertise of the current membership covers 13 broad skill sets with a large proportion of them working on elephant ecology and population, human-elephant conflict (HEC) mitigation,

habitats and corridors, wild elephant management, captive elephants and elephant health and reproduction. The current male to female ratio is 2.4:1, which is an improvement from the 3.3:1 when I took the responsibility of the group in 2015. The average age of the group today is 52.5 years with 13.2% of the members between 30–40 years and 32.1% in the 41–50 years age group (Fig. 2). Please see an analysis of our member's diversity index presented graphically. We have not renewed the normal membership of Dr. Jacob Cheeran and Mr. Richard Lair due to their old age but we have offered them an AsESG Emeritus Membership to gain from their experience.

I am happy to inform you that I have also reconstituted the AsESG Leadership Team for this quadrennium. Ms. Heidi Riddle has been deputed as the Vice-Chair of the group and will be helping me with leading the range state meetings, captive elephant conservation and welfare issues, and international fundraising for the group. Dr. Wong Ee Phin will serve as Deputy Chair of the group, responsible for ensuring members from South-East Asian states join the AsESG, mentoring young professionals (YP) and also forging scientific collaboration between members for joint publications. Dr. A. Christy Williams will continue to serve as the AsESG's Red List Coordinator. Dr. Jennifer Pastorini has also agreed to continue serving as

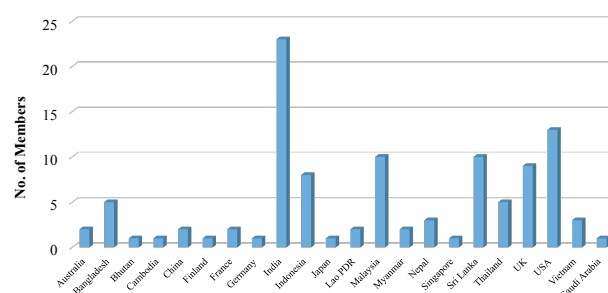


Figure 1. Countries of AsESG members (October 2021).

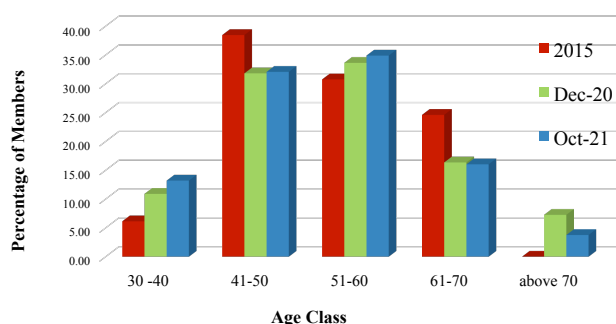


Figure 2. Age composition of the AsESG membership in 2015, 2020 and 2021.

the Editor of the journal Gajah. I hope you will join me in wishing the new Leadership Team the very best for the quadrennium 2021–2025.

Unfortunately for the AsESG, but happily for him, Dr. Sandeep Kr Tiwari has accepted new leadership roles in his parent organisation Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) and will be leaving his Program Manager role in March 2022. I would like to thank him for the excellent work done during his tenure for the last quadrennium and wish him well for his future. We will put out a vacancy advertisement for an amended role soon on the website and please do circulate for us to get a good candidate for this.

In the last quadrennium, 14 Working Groups were formed of which 7 Working Group documents have been finalised including the Red List reassessment of Asian Elephant that has been published. Three Working Groups have also submitted their draft documents and are being reviewed. The finalised documents will soon be uploaded on the website. Of the remaining 4 Working Groups, the Sumatra NECAP is pending approval from the Government. The other three Working Groups who have not been able to finalise their documents include mapping the distribution of elephants across range states, guidelines for best practices in addressing and mitigation human elephant conflict, and managing the elephant habitat affected by Rohingya in Cox Bazar, Bangladesh.

The two Working Groups formed in 2020 are also working on their mandate. The Sabah Working Group formed to decide on the taxonomy of Borneo elephants had a meeting on 2nd June 2021 and looked at both the cyto-

etic studies and morphological features to confirm on the taxonomy of the population. The group also discussed on the need of Red Listing of the subspecies and are collecting all relevant information including historic distribution and population data to undertake the assessment. The AsESG and its members are also assisting the drafting of the National Elephant Conservation Action Plans (NECAP) for range countries. Peninsular Malaysia has constituted a core team (with AsESG member) that through a series of meetings reviewed the achievement of the last plan and has prepared the first draft of the NECAP, which is being further reviewed. The AsESG, in collaboration with WCPA CCSG Transport Working Group, has developed the draft report on best practices for linear infrastructures passing through elephant habitats in Asia and is being reviewed.

The World Conservation Congress (WCC) was held from 3rd to 11th September 2021 in Marseille, France where Government and members from across the world came together with the goal of conserving the environment and harnessing the solutions that nature offers to global challenges and to also elects the new IUCN council. The congress also marks the beginning of the new quadrennium (2021–2025) and I was happy to be part of the congress. As informed to you earlier, I have been elected to the new IUCN governing Council for 2021–2025 as IUCN Councillor from South and East Asia Region and will be happy to take up regional conservation issues, including ones on elephants, at the IUCN council. A separate report is included in this issue.

I think as a team, the AsESG has been able to contribute significantly for the conservation of the species and I would like to thank you all for your active contribution and look forward to taking forward the momentum in the new quadrennium. I would also like to thank the Gajah editorial board, our institutional partners, range state officials and SSC Chair Office for all their support and assistance.

Vivek Menon
Chair IUCN SSC AsESG