

Census of Temple and Privately Owned Captive Elephants in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) were tamed in Asia during the Indus Valley Civilisation (3300–1300 BC) (Sukumar 2003). Elephants were an integral part of society in ancient Sri Lanka (Deraniyagala 1955; Jayewardene 2013). A 1st century BC inscription at Navalar Kulam in Eastern Sri Lanka refers to a religious donation by 'Ath Acharia' or Master of the elephant establishment, indicating the presence of captive elephants. The Sanskrit Hindu epic Ramayana also mentions King Ravana from the kingdom of Lanka possessing elephants (Sukumar 2003).

In Sri Lanka, during ancient times elephants were used as royal mounts, in festivals, war, arena sports, execution of criminals, as diplomatic gifts and for hauling heavy items. Currently the main use of captive elephants is for religious-cultural processions called "perheras" (Fig. 1). A few elephants are used for elephant rides for tourists (Fig. 2).

The last census of captive elephants in Sri Lanka was in 2002, which recorded 189 elephants. Here I report on a survey of elephants owned by private owners and temples. The survey did not include elephants from orphanages or zoos.

Methods

Information on the location of captive elephants was obtained through nearly two decades of records that were gathered at visits during festivals in which captive elephants participated. Also, by contacting elephant owners, veterinary surgeons and people enthusiastic about elephants, more information on the whereabouts of captive elephants was collected. Locations of

captive elephants were visited and data on the individual elephants collected from 2018–2021.

Results and discussion

In 2018 a total of 117 elephants were recorded, consisting of 77 males and 40 females (Table 1). There were 19 tuskers among the males. There were 77 owners of elephants. Two male elephants and one female died in 2018 and three males and three females died in 2019–2021. As no additions occurred during this period, the number of elephants in 2021 was 108. During 2018–2021 one tusker died. Out of the remaining 18 tuskers 11 were of foreign origin, 3 being from India, 5 from Myanmar and 3 from Thailand. All foreign elephants were tuskers. Only one foreign elephant was privately owned and others by temples. The highest number of elephants owned by a single entity was 12 at the Sri Dalada Maligawa Temple in Kandy.

The privately owned foreign elephant was Nadumgamuwa Raja, also known as Vijaya Raja, owned by ayurvedic physician Dr. Harsha



Figure 1. Elephant taking part in a perahera.

Table 1. Previous surveys of captive elephants reproduced from Jayewardene (2013).

Year	Survey	Males	Females	Tuskers	Total	Owners
1946	Department of Wildlife Conservation				736	
1950	P.E.P. Deraniyagala	225	211	16	452	
1955	P.E.P. Deraniyagala				670	
1970	Jayasinghe & Jainudeen				532	378
1982	Department of Wildlife Conservation	183	161	29	344	
1988	W.H. Ranbanda				400–450	
1994	Dr. Cheong	148	166		316	154
1997	Jayewardene & Rambukpotha	107	107	23	214	150
2002	Jayewardene	101	88	19	189	131
2018	This study	77	40	19	117	77
2021	This study	72	36	18	108	72

Dharmavijaya (Fig. 3). This elephant was one of the most celebrated captive elephants since he was the main casket bearer at the Kandy Esala Perahera festival. In Sri Lanka he was the second elephant to be declared as a national treasure by the President. Raja passed away on 7. March 2022.

The elephants were distributed among 12 districts as; Badulla - 6, Colombo - 18, Gampha - 16, Hambantota - 1, Kalutara - 7, Kandy - 18, Kegalle - 14, Kurunegala - 7, Matara - 5, Monaragala - 5, Polonnaruwa - 1 and Ratnapura - 10.

Most of the captive elephants were located in the wet zone of the country, whereas the wild population is almost entirely in the dry zone. Even 50 years ago the wet zone districts of Colombo, Gampaha, Kegalle and Kandy had the highest number of elephants probably because more wealthy and aristocratic families

resided in those districts (Jayasinghe & Jainudeen 1970). The staple food given to captive elephants in Sri Lanka, which consists of coconut leaves (*Cocos nucifera*), jak leaves (*Artocarpus hetrophyllus*) and kitul leaves/trunk (*Caryouta urens*), is relatively easily found in these districts.

During the Kandyan Kingdom (1469–1815) wealthy families in Kandy and surrounding districts possessed tame elephants (Jayewardene 2013). Prior to that, captive elephants were



Figure 2. Elephant used for a tourist ride.

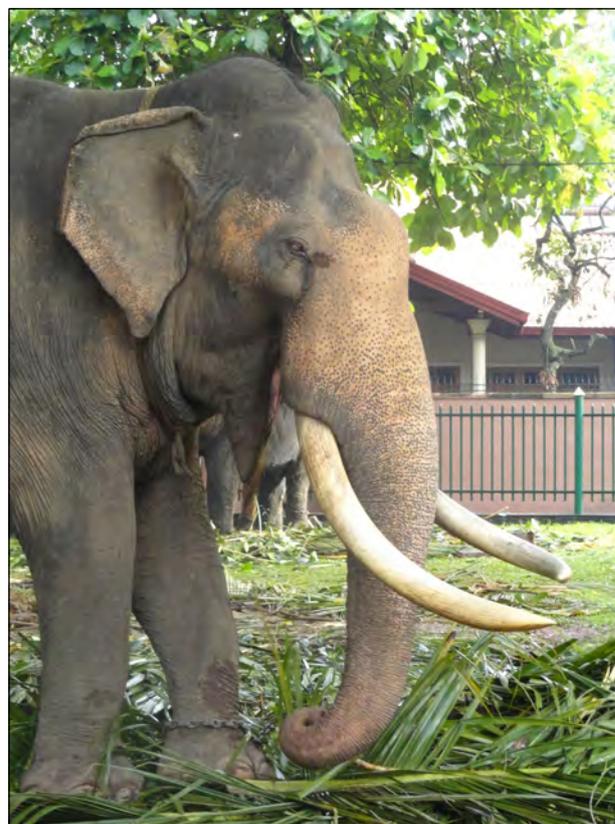


Figure 3. Vijaya Raja alias Nadungamuwa Raja.

royal property and could only be owned by the king. During the Dutch period, local chieftains, who captured wild elephants for their colonial masters as tribute, were allowed to keep some for themselves (Jayewardene 2013). From then on, ownership of elephants has been considered a status symbol. The last permits for capturing of elephants were issued under the request of Minister P.B. Kalugalla in 1975 and since the Minister was from Kegalle, many permits were given to people of Kegalle.

The captive elephant population has been decreasing continuously (Table 1). The reason for this is that elephant capture was banned in 1975 and the only way to obtain elephants for private ownership was from the Pinnawala orphanage, which happened only occasionally. Many owners agree that breeding elephants in captivity should be done, yet are reluctant to do it.

Only two privately owned captive born elephants were recorded, one of them was a female elephant named Pooja born on 5th August 1986 to a female named Lakshmi, owned by Mrs. Samarasinghe from Kegalle and fathered by the male Kandula, owned by Mr. Kivulpane Ranbanda. The other was a male elephant named Bandara born on 13th October 1992 to a female named Kumari owned by Mr. Kamal Kithsiri from Kottawa and fathered by Vijaya from the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage. Previously, Kumari was mated by a male elephant named Raja and gave birth to Jayathu in 1975, but he died in 1980. In Sri Lanka, the law protects elephants and captures from the wild are illegal. However, there is insufficient vigilance about illegal capture and illicit trade in captured elephants occurs (Prakash *et al.* 2020).

Of five previous surveys that recorded the number of males and females, that in 1994 showed a higher female number, while an equal number of males and females were observed in 1997 and a higher number of males was observed in 2002 and this study (Table 1). Reasons for the current male bias maybe because addition to the temple and private captive population since 1975 has mostly been from elephants given away by the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage,

which are mainly males. Also, all foreign elephants owned by temples and private individual are tuskless, therefore males.

Considering the names given to elephants, the suffix “Raja”, which means ‘king’ in the vernacular, was the most common among male elephants with 14.91% (n = 17) thus named. Some prefixes of ‘Raja’ had conventional names like Vijitha, Jana, Surathala and Muthu as the prefix. Others had prefixes referring to the origin as in Indi for India, Miyan and Buruma for Myanmar, or the location of the elephant as in Kotte. The second most common male name was “Kandula” with 6.14% (n = 7). Kandula was the name given to the war elephant of King Dutugamunu (101–77 BC), a famous king in Sri Lanka. Among females, the most common name was “Menike” which means ‘gem’ in Sinhala, with 8.77% (n = 10) and the second commonest was “Kumari”, which means princess with 5.26% (n = 6). The third commonest was “Rani” which is a Sanskrit name for princesses, with 4.38% (n = 5).

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