

Report on the 11th Meeting of the IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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Introduction

The IUCN SSC AsESG meeting is a consultative meeting of the members of the IUCN Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG), government officials of the elephant range countries and other conservation organisations to identify priorities and challenges at a country and range level and ways to address them and also to devise best practices for the conservation of elephants in wild and in captivity. The AsESG meeting is an opportunity to foster a closer relationship among range countries and members of the AsESG to deliberate and plan a way ahead as a Specialist Group to promote the long-term conservation of Asian elephants in 13 range countries.

The IUCN SSC AsESG hosts the meeting of its members and range country officials every 18 months to deliberate on various issues related to conservation of elephants in Asia. The previous two AsESG meetings i.e. the 9th AsESG meeting was held at Bangkok, Thailand in April 2018 and the 10th AsESG meeting at Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia in December 2019.

Aiming to bring together the elephant conservationists in India that holds 60% of the global Asian elephant population, the 11th meeting of the IUCN SSC AsESG was held in India. The meeting was organised from 14th to 15th March 2023 at Hotel Royal Plaza, New Delhi and from 16th to 17th March 2023 at Infinity Resorts, Corbett National Park. The meeting was organised in partnership with the Ministry of Environment Forest & Climate Change and Uttarakhand Forest Department to take stock of the decisions of the last AsESG meeting as well as identify the priorities and challenges at a country and range level and ways to address

them for the conservation of elephants in wild and in captivity. Overall, there was participation from 130 members who participated and helped in organising the meeting. The participation included 67 AsESG members, representatives from 11 Asian elephant range countries, 11 conservation partners, special invitees and organisers from MoEF&CC, Uttarakhand Forest Department and Wildlife Trust of India. In this meeting, there were 57 plenary presentations in total with wide participation from 51 AsESG members actively involved in presenting, chairing and co-chairing the sessions. Dr. Jon Paul Rodriguez, Chair IUCN SSC, and Ms. Kira Mileham, Director, IUCN SSC Strategic Partnerships, also participated in the meeting and helped in linking the conservation partners into the strategic priorities and activities of the AsESG.

The event was inaugurated by Mr. Praveen Pardeshi, Member Admin, Capacity Building Commission, Prime Minister Office, Dr. Jon Paul Rodriguez, Chair IUCN SSC, Mr. Ramesh Kumar Pandey IGF & Director PE, MoEF&CC and Mr. Vivek Menon, Chair, IUCN SSC AsESG. The first volume of the “Action Elephant” including the National Elephant Action Plans of six elephant range countries was released during the inaugural session.

Chair's summary on AsESG's achievements

Mr. Menon thanked the Government of India and all the Conservation Partners for facilitating the organisation of the meeting and presented the report of AsESG activities since the last meeting held at Sabah in 2019. The updates on the 14 Working Groups working to assess, plan and act in this Quadrennium (2021–2025) were discussed (Fig. 1).

Assess

In terms of assessment, the team has successfully submitted the red list assessment of the Asian elephant and categorised it as Endangered. The mapping of elephant distribution in Asia is in progress and preliminary information has been received from Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia.

Plan

The first edition of “Action Elephant” including six National Elephant Conservation Action Plans was released during the inaugural session of the 11th AsESG meeting. The “Elephant Conservation National Action Plan for Sabah Malaysia” has been finalised and printed in 2020. Similarly, the National Elephant Conservation Action Plan of Lao PDR has been completed in 2022. The drafts of the Sumatra Elephant Conservation Action Plan are ready and waiting approval of the government. The drafting of National Elephant Conservation Action Plans of Peninsular Malaysia and Vietnam are also in process.

The three Working Groups that have completed and submitted their outcome documents 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. The draft for guidelines for the reintroduction of captive elephants in the wild as possible restocking option and the guidelines on emerging diseases affecting Asian elephants is ready and being reviewed. The Working Groups that are still working to complete their outcome documents include guidelines for best practices in addressing and mitigation of human-elephant conflict, mapping of elephant distribution in Asia, taxonomy of elephants in Sabah and its Red Listing, research paper on the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*): A flagship species in imminent need of climate change action.

Act

The membership advisory committee and the communications advisory group are also working on their respective mandate and will con-

tinue till the end of the quadrennial. A total of five Membership Advisory Committee meetings are organised in the new quadrennium and five members were added to the group. AsESG activities are now being uploaded in the social media such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram.

The editorial board of the journal Gajah has published five volumes since 2019. 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.

Activities of the AsESG representatives

Mr. Menon informed that of the 115 AsESG members, 56 members are part of the Working Groups constituted for drafting of the reports/guidelines and 47 members actively participating in the 11th AsESG meeting as chairs, co-chairs, moderators or as presenters.

The SSC Chair confirmed Mr. Vivek Menon as Chair of AsESG for the new quadrennium (2021–2025). The Chair attended the IUCN World Conservation Congress from 2nd to 11th September 2021 in Marseille, France and was also elected to the IUCN Governing Council as IUCN Councillor from South and East Asia Region. He also presented on conservation of Borneo elephants at the session “Assess-Plan-Act to reverse the Red within SSC” on 5th September 2021 organised by the IUCN SSC.

Third Asian Elephant Range States Meeting: The Chair, Vice Chair, Program Manager AsESG and Mr. Naresh Subedi took the lead in organising the third meeting of the Asian Ele-



Figure 1. Vivek Menon, Chair of the AsESG, presenting the report to the members.

phant Range States at Kathmandu, Nepal. The meeting was held from 27th to 29th April 2022 at Kathmandu with 48 persons participating in person and 27 virtually. The AsESG members that participated in the meeting were Mr. Salman Saaban, Dr. Prithviraj Fernando, Dr. NVK Ashraf, Mr. Wahdi Azmi, Dr. Ashok Kumar Ram and Mr. Ganesh Pant. The meeting resulted in the signing of the Kathmandu Declaration signed by all 13 Asian elephant range countries. A final report of the third range states meeting in Kathmandu will be prepared and circulated.

Side event at CoP 19 of CITES: The AsESG organised a side event at CoP 19 of CITES at Panama on 16th November 2022, in partnership with IFAW, on the “Kathmandu Declaration and its implication towards conservation of Asian elephants” involving the Chair, IUCN SSC AsESG; Dr. Jon Paul Rodriguez, IUCN SSC Chair; Mr. Azeddine Downes, President IFAW; Country delegation from India, Malaysia and Nepal; Ms. Tanya McGregor, CITES and Mr. Benson Okita-Ouma and Ms. Rose Mayienda, African Elephant Specialist Group.

The Chair presented on the overall status of Asian elephants at the “VIII International Conference on Mammoths and their Relatives” held from 25th to 28th October 2021 at the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, India. Dr. Adrian Lister, Dr. Raman Sukumar and Dr. Nurzhfarina Othman also were actively involved in the conference.

The AsESG has submitted a report on “Asian elephant: status, threats and conservation action” for the 74th Standing Committee report in November 2021. It also has published document on “Protecting Asian elephants from linear transport infrastructure” with IUCN WCPA Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group.

Technical Working Groups

Day 1

The technical sessions focused on discussions on threats and challenges impacting the conservation of Asian elephants and the various guidelines and plans being drafted by the group and range countries for the conservation and

welfare of elephants in wild and in captivity. The first day discussions focused on country presentation from all 13 range countries, both by ex-officio and AsESG members. The ex-officio member of the country presented a general outline on status of wild/captive elephant population of the country, main conservation issues and threats, if the country has an action plan and the interventions being made by the range country. This was followed by the country presentations by AsESG members of the respective countries specifically outlining the emerging challenges towards elephant conservation in the country and providing specific suggested solutions to counter the problem.

Day 2

The discussions on the second day were on the various guidelines and plans being produced by the AsESG Working Group members. The AsESG Chair reported that by the end of March 2023 six Working Group reports were completed which are enlisted as below:

- Bhutan Elephant Conservation Action Plan
- Sabah Elephant Conservation Action Plan
- Red List assessment of Asian Elephant
- Guidelines for creating artificial water holes in elephant habitats
- Guideline for welfare and use of captive elephants in tourism
- Management and care of captive elephant in musth

The status on the remaining eight Working Group reports were presented by the respected Working Group convenors. The ninth Working Group i.e. on the Sumatra Elephant Conservation Action Plan has been finalised by the Working Group members and submitted to the Indonesian Government for approval.

- Guidelines for best practices in addressing and mitigation human elephant conflict
- Guidelines for the reintroduction of captive elephants in the wild as possible restocking option
- Plan to arrest the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam. The Working Group has been revamped to now work on the preparation of the National Elephant Conservation Action Plan of Vietnam.
- Mapping the distribution of Asian elephants

- Emerging diseases affecting Asian elephants
- Taxonomy of elephants in Sabah and its Red Listing
- Drafting the Peninsular Malaysia NECAP
- The Asian elephant: A flagship species in imminent need of climate change action

The two ongoing Working Groups are as below:

- AsESG Communication Working Group
- Membership Advisory Committee

Six speed talk presentations were moderated by Dr. Ee Phin Wong (Deputy Chair, IUCN SSC AsESG) where presentations by members from Cambodia, Nepal, India and Malaysia.

Ms. Heidi Riddle chaired a parallel session on the stocktaking of the Kathmandu Declaration. This focused on the follow up to be done on the Kathmandu Declaration 2022.

A Partners roundtable meeting was held with all the conservation partners to discuss on the way forward to support the AsESG activities.

A workshop on addressing transboundary illegal wildlife trade was organised involving representatives of Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and US Embassy-INL representatives.

The meeting also provided a forum for the emerging scientists to present their work in form of speed talks on various issues of elephant conservation and take feedback of AsESG experts to refine their studies.

Day 3

The meeting in Delhi was followed by a field visit to the site of elephant interventions done in Corbett Tiger Reserve. Under the guidance of Mr. Dheeraj Pandey (Field Director, Corbett Tiger Reserve) the AsESG members interacted with Eco Development Committee (EDC) members on the challenges they face living close to the forests and sharing the landscape with elephants (Fig. 2). The members were also shown the honeybee power fencing done by the Uttarakhand Forest Department to counter human-elephant conflict issues in the area.

Day 4

On the last day of the AsESG meeting a session was organised at Infinity Resorts, Corbett National Park in which AsESG members shared their work, experience and studies on various topics from across different Asian countries on elephant conservation.

The closing session of the AsESG meeting was presided by Mr. Subodh Uniyal, Hon'ble Minister Forest & Environment, Uttarakhand. The other guests of the closing ceremony were Dr. Samir Sinha, Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (WL) & Chief Wildlife Warden, Mr. Jon Paul Rodriguez, Chair, IUCN SSC, Mr. Vivek Menon, Chair IUCN SSC AsESG and Mr. Dheeraj Pandey, Field Director, Corbett National Park. A short film, showcasing the flora and fauna of the Jim Corbett National Park was also screened during the closing session. Dr. Prajna P. Panda proposed the vote of thanks.



Figure 2. Group photo taken during the field visit at the Corbett Tiger Reserve.