

## International Workshop on Asian Elephant Conservation and the Development of a New Asian Elephant National Park in China

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### Introduction

China is home to a small but growing population of wild Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*), representing less than 1% of the global total. These elephants inhabit Southwest Yunnan, where they are divided into two geographically and genetically distinct populations. The larger population, found in Xishuangbanna and Pu'er, constitutes approximately 95% of China's elephants and belongs to the  $\alpha$  genetic clade. Over the past three decades, this population has doubled in size and expanded its range significantly, marking a notable conservation success. In contrast, the smaller population in Lincang, belonging to the  $\beta$  clade and numbering fewer than 20 individuals, has remained stable or slightly declined. The growth of the elephant population in Xishuangbanna and Pu'er has increased spatial overlap between elephants and humans, intensifying human-elephant conflict. Additionally, some elephants in Xishuangbanna exhibit transboundary home ranges, moving regularly between China and Laos, highlighting the need for international collaboration in their conservation.

Recognising the ecological and cultural importance of Asian elephants, the Chinese government, in partnership with various stakeholders,

has implemented significant conservation efforts. These include strict wildlife protection laws, an elephant monitoring and early warning system, and an economic compensation scheme for affected communities. The government is also advancing the establishment of a new protected area under China's National Park system. The proposed Asian Elephant National Park aims to protect Southwest Yunnan's tropical seasonal evergreen forests – the largest stretch of tropical forest in China – and conserve the region's wild elephant population.

To support these initiatives, the Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden (XTBG), part of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, collaborated with the Asian Elephant Research Center (AERC) of the National Forestry and Grassland Administration (FGA) and the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) to organise the 2025 International Workshop on Asian Elephant Conservation and the Development of the Asian Elephant National Park. Held on April 20–24, 2025, the workshop facilitated knowledge exchange and gathered expert recommendations on conserving China's wild elephants and developing the National Park. It included a 2.5-day field visit to Pu'er and Xishuangbanna, followed by a 1.5-day indoor session at XTBG. This report summarises the

workshop's activities and outcomes, emphasising the value of international collaboration in advancing elephant conservation, habitat protection, and human-elephant coexistence.

## Workshop participants

The workshop involved 60 participants, including 13 members of the IUCN's SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) from six range countries: Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Laos, and China. Local participants included staff from various levels of China's FGA – national, provincial, and prefectural offices – as well as representatives from universities, research centres, NGOs, local communities, and the private sector.

## Field Visit to Pu'er and Xishuangbanna

The field visit began in Pu'er City, where Pu'er's FGA introduced the history and current status of the local elephant population and ongoing conservation and human-elephant conflict mitigation efforts. Elephants disappeared from Pu'er in the second half of the 20th century but returned around 1992. Today, an estimated 60 elephants reside permanently in Pu'er, while other 140 may move between Pu'er and Xishuangbanna.

On April 21, a group of 30 delegates visited Pu'er's Jiangcheng County to learn about the drone-based elephant monitoring system developed by the Chinese government (Figs. 1 & 2). This system integrates data from field rangers, drones, camera traps, and AI to monitor elephant presence and activities. It uses social



**Figure 1.** Learning about the drone-based monitoring in Jiangcheng county, Pu'er.



**Figure 2.** Drone-view of wild elephants in Jiangcheng county, Pu'er.

media, loudspeakers, and road signs to warn people of elephant movements, reducing the likelihood of encounters and providing valuable data on elephant behaviour.

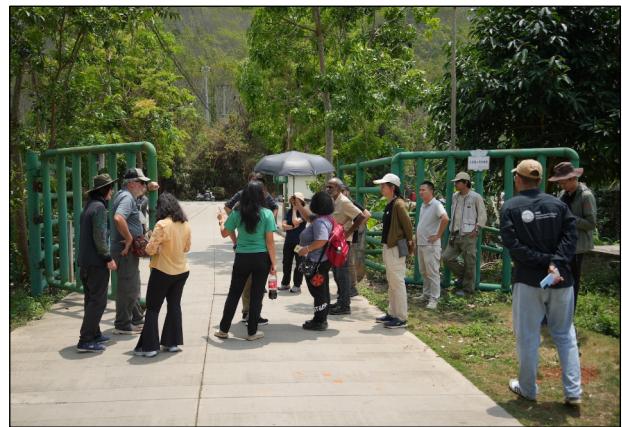
On April 22, the delegates visited the Mengyang sub-reserve of the Xishuangbanna National Nature Reserve (Fig. 3), which served as a refuge for elephants during the population bottleneck of the 1980s and 1990s. The day began with a visit to an “elephant canteen” near Guanping, designed to provide supplementary food in an area frequently used by elephants in their movements across valleys. The delegation then visited a Hani village, where they learned about community-based efforts led by IFAW, including honey production as an alternative livelihood (Fig. 4) and cost-effective electric fencing. Next, they visited Xiang Yan Qing, a village fully enclosed by a permanent metal fence to prevent elephant access (Fig. 5). The day concluded at Wild Elephant Valley, where delegates met researchers and staff from the Xishuangbanna Asian Elephant Conservation and Management Center and observed Mengyang's forest via a walkway and a cable car.



**Figure 3.** Introduction to elephant conservation in Xishuangbanna.



**Figure 4.** ‘Hani Honey’ as an alternative source of income in human-elephant conflict areas.



**Figure 5.** Permanent metal fence around the village Xiang Yan Qing.

## Indoor sessions

On April 23, the workshop featured a full-day public session (Fig. 6). Opening remarks by XTBG’s Deputy Director, Professor Quan Rui-Chang, were followed by ten bilingual presentations (English and Chinese) from AsESG members and other experts. The presentations provided insights into elephant conservation and human-elephant conflict mitigation across much of the species’ range, sparking active questions and discussions among participants.

The workshop concluded on April 24 with a discussion among government officials, foreign visitors, and organisers. Key topics included balancing efforts to protect elephants and tropical forests, addressing questions about the implications of mixing  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  clade populations,

managing population growth and associated human-elephant conflict, handling “problem elephants,” and extending China-Laos collaboration for transboundary elephant management.

## Conclusions

This workshop was a valuable experience for both local and visiting participants. Foreign experts gained firsthand insights into China’s elephant conservation efforts, including the innovative use of technology to promote human-elephant coexistence. The issues discussed will be compiled into policy recommendations for elephant management and the development of the new National Park, aiming to ensure the long-term conservation of China’s elephants and tropical evergreen forests in harmony with local communities.



**Figure 6.** Participants of the 2025 International Workshop on Asian Elephant Conservation and the Development of China’s Asian Elephant National Park.