

Obituary

Jayantha Jayewardene (27.3.1944 – 30.7.2025)

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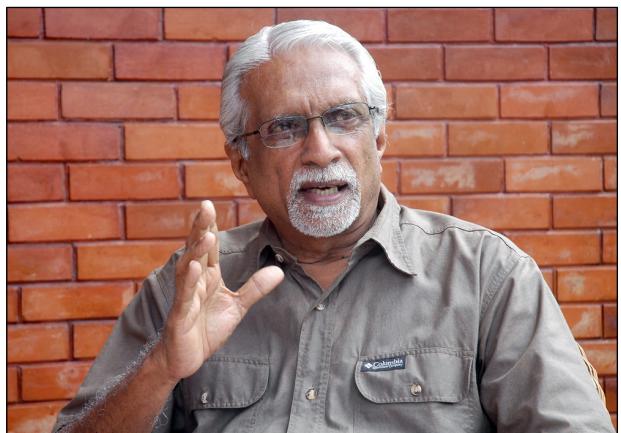
Jayantha Jayewardene, one of our most senior and best loved members of the AsESG, passed away on the 30th of July 2025, bringing the curtain down on the end of an era.

Born in 1944, he was educated at Trinity College, in Kandy, the hill capital of Sri Lanka. A sportsman of repute, with his admirable physique he excelled in the rough and tumble game of rugby, leading the college team and earning the coveted 'Trinity Lion'. He was also a force to reckon with in the club rugby scene, playing for the Kandy Sports Club and performed a pivotal role in rugby administration in the country. After leaving school, like many a young gentleman of note of that era, he took up planting. His career as a planter spanned two decades, during which time he was stationed at a number of hill stations in charge of the tea plantations there.

Jayantha then joined the Mahaweli Development Project, which was headed by his close friend, Minister Gamini Dissanayake. The project was the largest and most ambitious development project undertaken in Sri Lanka. Damming the longest river in Sri Lanka the 'Mahaweli', to create a series of reservoirs that became the lynchpin of hydro-power generation, its flow was then diverted to the dry zone for irrigated agriculture. Originally planned to be executed over 30 years, it was compressed into six short years by the then government. The project covered almost one sixth of the island. Over 100,000 ha of the dry zone were cleared of forests for irrigated agriculture and extensive infrastructure facilities were put in, including roads and canals. A massive re-settlement program moved hundreds of thousands of families into the newly developed areas.

The project completely changed forever the dry zone landscape of the country and in its wake created a massive conflict with elephants. Jayantha was one of the earliest to take note of the brewing conflict between man and elephant. His series of publications titled 'Elephant conservation amidst development - parts 1-9' published in the FAO Journal 'Tigerpaper' from 1984–1999, documented and drew attention to the issue, discussing in great detail the complexities of attempting to conserve elephants while changing the landscape at an unprecedented scale and tempo. A keen observer, possessed with an enquiring mind and unafraid to speak out, he was also the first to go against the prevailing conventional wisdom and point out the failure of elephant drives as a human-elephant conflict mitigation measure in his landmark note titled 'Elephant drives in Sri Lanka' and published in the AsESG's journal Gajah in 1994. Jayantha was also a member of the committee that drew up the National Policy for the Management and Conservation of Sri Lankan elephants in 2006.

By and by Jayantha transformed into a complete naturalist and conservationist by the 1990s. He took up the cause of Sri Lankan elephants and



filled a major gap in publication and discussion in that era. His magnum opus titled, what else but, ‘The Sri Lankan Elephant’, brought together all aspects pertaining to the Sri Lankan elephant and stands out as a highly readable and popular tome on Sri Lanka’s elephants, that created a point of reference that was sorely lacking until then. It was also translated into Sinhalese and Tamil languages later, making it widely accessible to all Sri Lankans. While championing the conservation of elephants in Sri Lanka, Jayantha also conducted many studies and published a number of papers on elephants in captivity. Another area of interest of his was the plight of those who suffered losses due to elephants.

Jayantha set up the Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust (BECT) in 1998, which mainly focused on two aspects, the welfare of those who suffered from elephants, particularly children that lost a parent, and awareness about elephants and elephant conservation. The assistance program included provision of financial support, schoolbooks, and in some cases housing for those negatively impacted by elephants. Through his able lieutenant Sudath Abeysinghe, BECT conducted over 3,000 awareness programs in schools and held a number of awareness programs on human-elephant conflict for communities in elephant areas. BECT also conducted training programs for veterinarians and facilitated study tours for wildlife veterinarians.

In 2003 Jayantha organised the ‘International Symposium on Human-Elephant Relations and Conflicts’ the first and last elephant focussed symposium to be held in Sri Lanka. The symposium brought together researchers, managers and elephant enthusiasts from all over the world, the proceedings of which were also published by him subsequently.

Always the man for a crisis, when the AsESG was in turmoil and the journal Gajah was left rudderless due to the resignation of Prof. Charles Santiapillai as editor, Jayantha rose to

the occasion and steered the ship. He served as the editor of Gajah from 2007 to 2014, during which time we worked very closely together. When he finally gave up the reins, he inducted Dr. Jennifer Pastorini as the new editor, ensuring the progression of the journal.

There never was a dull moment when Jayantha was around. Many are the fond memories that I have of sitting at the back of a conference or even at AsESG meetings with Jayantha and listening to his running commentary on the goings-on, tempered with his irrepressible if cutting sense of humour. When someone was waxing eloquent about their achievements he would say “Pruthu, there are two types of elephants in this world – those who haul logs and those who go on parade”. Another time discussing some colleague or other who had a difference of opinion, he would say “Machang (a Sinhala term meaning ‘buddy’), it is better to have the guy in your tent and pissing outside than standing out and pissing in”! Jayantha was always larger than life and brought a spark that illuminated the dreary and made it interesting. You are very much missed, my friend.

