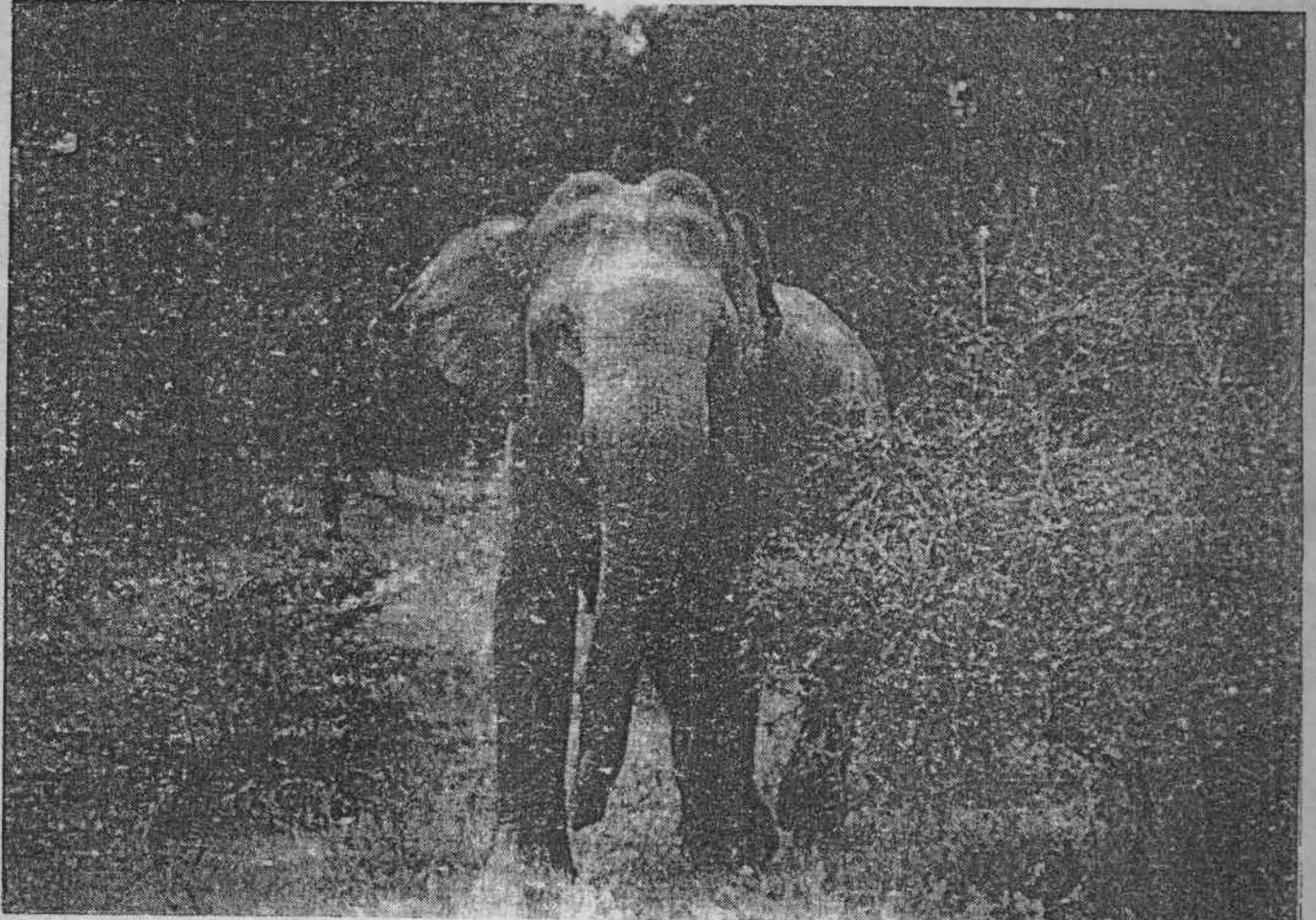


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For Nature

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Asian Elephant Specialist Group NEWSLETTER
Number 7 **Autumn 1991**



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The Asian Elephant Specialist Group Newsletter is published with the following aims: -

- to highlight the plight of the Asian Elephant
- to promote the conservation of the Asian Elephant
- to provide a forum for communication amongst all the members

Newsworthy articles are invited for consideration for publication and should be sent to Dr Charles Santiapillai at WWF - Asia Programme, PO Box 133, Bogor, Indonesia. All articles may be reprinted. Reprinted articles should give credit to the Newsletter. The editors would appreciate receiving a copy of any article so used. The opinions expressed by the authors do not necessarily reflect the policies of either WWF or IUCN.

Cover: An adult bull elephant in the Ruhuna National Park, Sri Lanka.
(Photo credit: Charles Santiapillai).

COMMENT

There is lately much concern over the plight of the elephants from the international conservation agencies. This is most welcome. Even the National Geographic magazine has devoted much of its space in its May 1991 issue to highlight the precarious situation facing the long-term survival of both Asian and African elephants. The international ban on ivory may have reduced substantially the threat of poaching in the case of the African elephants, but as far as the Asian elephant is concerned however, a more insidious threat is the rapid loss of its range. Throughout Asia, the elephants that roam outside a few conservation areas especially set aside for their protection are coming under increasing conflicts with man.

National Parks, as viable, self-sustaining areas in many Asian countries could prove to be poor bets for the long-term survival of the elephants *if* they are managed in isolation and with no reference to the people living along the periphery of such areas. For elephant conservation to succeed, it must have the support of the local people, especially those who live in the vicinity of the reserves and often bear the brunt of elephant depredations. This is not going to be easy. This can only come about if protected areas such as National Parks and Nature Reserves are integrated as one form of land use with the surrounding agricultural areas so as to form a multiple land use unit.

National Park as "an area set aside where man can enjoy, as a privileged visitor, the plants and animals that are indigenous to that environment under conditions as little affected by his presence as possible" may appeal to someone in the West following Western ethics, but for many Asians especially those from underdeveloped nations, this may be a bit difficult to comprehend. As Norman Myers once stated, "Policy for the United States parks concentrates on the aesthetic, as opposed to the economic, factors of park values. It suggests that if you once let commercial considerations into a park, the place stops being a park: to which one might retort that in Africa, *unless* you let commercial considerations into a park, it will stop being a park". This may find an echo in many people in Asia too.

The lesson from these arguments is that wildlife conservation must be integrated in such a way as to confer direct benefit to the surrounding communities. Elephant conservation is no exception. In the final analysis, both economic as well as ecological considerations will determine the survival of much of the wildlife including the elephant. Although in theory, large

conservation areas are better than smaller areas to enhance the long-term survival of elephants and thus reduce the risks of early or untimely local extinctions, yet in practice, most countries in the Third World where elephants occur, have neither the money nor the trained manpower needed to adequately protect such areas.

It has been shown by Nigel Leader-Williams and S.D. Albon that rates of decline of rhinos and elephants are related directly to conservation effort and spending. Their conclusion is that either conservation schemes must be adequately funded, or resources must be concentrated in small parts of large reserves, if local extinctions are to be avoided. Therefore it is imperative that international conservation organizations and aid agencies focus their efforts and energies into providing much more investment in park infrastructure and its effective protection. The amount of money available for *in-situ* conservation globally is still small compared to that available in some western countries for *ex-situ* conservation. The total budget set aside for the *in-situ* conservation of wildlife in whole of Africa for example, is estimated to be about US\$ 75 000 000/- per year. The total annual budget for the San Diego Zoo in USA alone is US\$ 70 000 000/-!. In any case, *ex-situ* conservation is not an option for the elephants with their intemperate appetites and vast space requirements.

If elephant conservation is to succeed in the coming decades, then the ball is in the International Conservation Organizations' court. They have to adopt a long-term perspective and assist the Government Organizations in the economically poor developing countries in Asia in tackling such broader issues as land-use planning and the reduction in human population growth rate. The factors adverse to elephant survival stem not only from the aspirations of a burgeoning human population in Asia but also from more demand by the industrialised countries in the west for goods of the kinds which lead to pressures on the elephants' life-support systems.

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THE STATUS OF ELEPHANTS IN VIETNAM

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INTRODUCTION

Vietnam is a thin, long and largely mountainous country situated between latitudes 8 N and 24 N, at the southeastern margin of the Indo-Chinese peninsula (Fig. 1) It has a total land area of 330,541 km² with a coast line of about 3,200 km. Vietnam is principally an agricultural country with a rapidly growing human population of 65 million. The average population density is 200 per km² which is one of the highest for any agricultural country in the world, thereby placing an "impossible strain on the environmental capacity of the country" (IUCN, 1985). Given the present rate of growth of 2.7% per annum, the population is expected to double in 25 years (Westing & Westing, 1981).

Forest cover

In the distant past, the entire country was covered with dense tropical forest vegetation with the predominance of monsoon evergreen tropical dense forest (Hoe & Quy, 1990). As recently as 1960, about 65% of the area south of the 17th parallel was forested, of which undisturbed primary forest accounted for about 18%. Since the Indo-China war, the country has experienced a rapid loss in its forest cover. The total forest cover declined from 43.7% in 1943 to 23.6% in 1983 (Quy, 1983). Thus within 30 years, the country lost 50% of its forest cover. By 1987, the forest cover had declined to 21% (Quy, 1987). The true extent of undisturbed primary forest may be only about 10% (MacKinnon, 1990).

Three decades of conflict during which the Vietnamese fought first with the French and later the US caused not only the death of four million people, of which 60% were children under the age of 16 years, but also destroyed thousands of ha of forests: saturation bombing dumped more than 72 million litres of herbicides and 13 million tons of ammunition, an amount 450 times the size of Hiroshima atom bomb (Kemf, 1986). Huge bulldozers called "Rome Ploughs" were used to clear forests from strategic areas (MacKinnon, 1990). These operations were directly attributed to the loss of 2 million ha of forest. But unfortunately, even more forest land has been lost since the end of the war through slash and burn agriculture, forest fires and fuel wood collection. According to Kemf (1986, 1990) these are responsible for the annual loss of 200,000 ha of forest cover. Reforestation is going on at the rate of 100,000 ha annually but only about 3% of the plants survive.

Protected Areas in Vietnam

The first national park, Cuc Phuong was established in 1962. Today, the country has seven national parks (Cuc Phuong, Ba Be, Ba Vi, Cat Ba, Bach Ma, Yok Don and Nam Bai Cat Tien) and a total of 87 reserves including 49 nature reserves (MacKinnon, 1990). Although these protected areas encompass samples of almost all the different forest formations in Vietnam, as far as the elephant is concerned, with the exception of Muong Nhe (in Lai Chau province) and Yok Don (in Dac Lac province) the protected areas where the elephant occurs

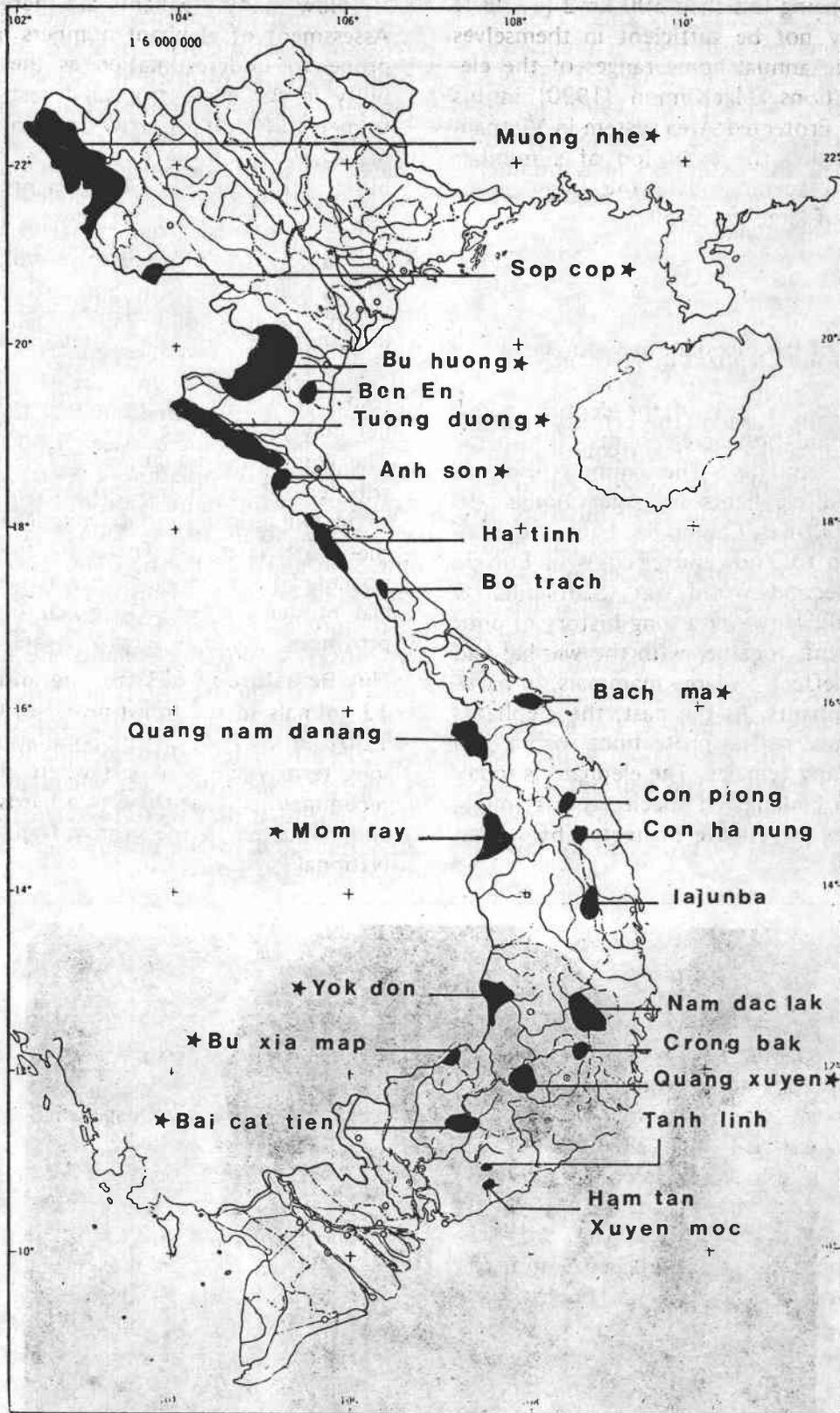


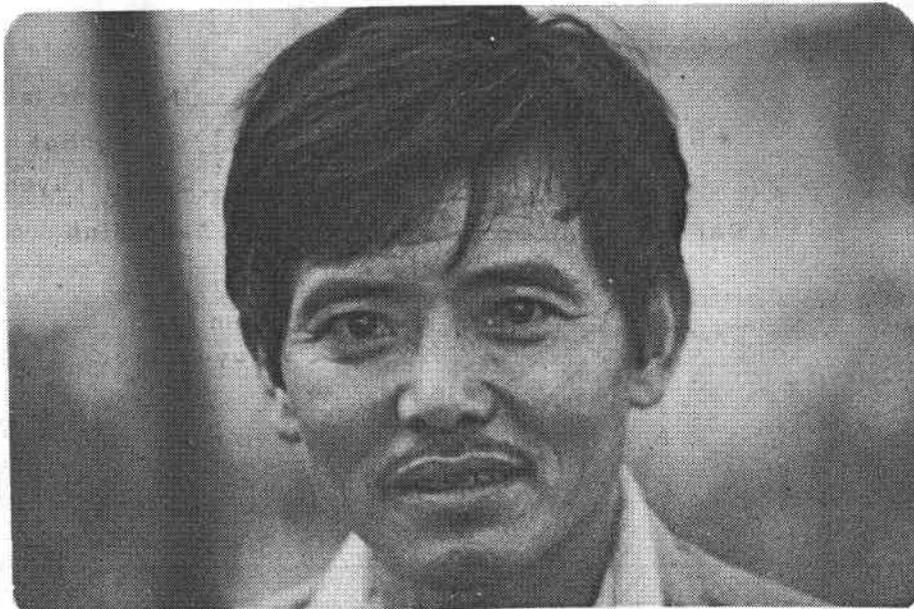
Fig. 1 Distribution of wild elephants in Vietnam.
 (★ denotes protected areas)

are all small, being less than 500 km² (Table 1) and thus may not be sufficient in themselves to protect the annual home ranges of the elephant populations. MacKinnon (1990) in his review of the Protected Area system in Vietnam has recommended the extension of a number of reserves to accommodate the home range requirements of large mammals.

Status of the Elephant in Vietnam

Vietnam at the turn of the century had a substantial population of elephants both in the wild and in captivity. The country used to supply trained elephants in large numbers to Myanmar (= Burma), Cambodia, Laos and Thailand and also to Zoos and circuses in Europe before the Second World War (Santiapillai & Jackson, 1990). However a long history of poor law enforcement, together with the war has had a devastating effect on large mammals, in particular the elephants. In the past, the elephants were given only partial protection, with a ban only on shooting females. The elephant is today considered an endangered species and is among the 38 species of wildlife protected by law in Vietnam.

How many elephants are there in the wild? Assessment of elephant numbers in the wild is prone to underestimation as the lack of visibility in the dense tropical forest makes it extremely difficult to arrive at even working estimates. Much of the information on the distribution and number of elephants in Vietnam has been obtained from the field surveys and from talking to knowledgeable villagers, especially hunters living in and around elephant habitats. Both Khoi (1988) and Tuoc (1989) independently arrived at estimates of the number of elephants in Vietnam to be 1,115 and 1,463 respectively but pointed out that the true number may lie anything between 1,500 and 2,000. The elephant populations in Vietnam are distributed discontinuously from Lai Chau province in the north to the Dong Nai province in the south (Fig. 1). There are two very small, pocketed herds of elephants across the provincial border between Dong Nai and Lam Dong provinces: about 9 elephants are known from Nui Be (altitude 871 m) and another herd of 12 animals in the forest near Nui Ong (altitude 1,307 m). These two populations have no long term viability if left where they are. It is recommended that these two herds be captured and relocated to the nearby Nam Bai Cat Tien National Park.



Mr Do Tuoc – Vietnamese mammalogist.