

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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