

COMMENT

The Asian elephant estimated to be between 34,000 and 56,000 exists in a number of small, scattered and discontinuous populations from India in the west to Indo-China in the east. The population size ranges from a few animals (often pocketed with little prospects of long-term survival) to over 4,000 animals. In addition there may be up to 16,000 animals in captivity throughout Asia especially in India, Thailand, Myanmar (Burma) and Sri Lanka. With few exceptions, the numbers of both elephants in the wild and in captivity are on the decline throughout Asia. The question is whether this trend could be reversed?

If we follow the enlightened policies adopted in some countries as far as wildlife conservation is concerned, then there is indeed some room for optimism. But what we see in many Asian countries leaves no cause for such euphoria. The good news is from South India where under sensible management using nothing more sophisticated than simple common sense, there had been a spectacular increase in the number of calves born to elephants in captivity. In the State of Tamil Nadu, between 1950 and 1983 about 74 calves were born to 37 adult female elephants in captivity. The Tamil Nadu foresters and wildlife managers who were responsible for the success maintained the elephants in captivity in semi-natural conditions, in the vicinity of a reserve where wild elephants occurred. Furthermore, instead of keeping the elephants tied up day and night, they let the hobbled animals to roam in the forest and graze in the nights. This enabled the wild bulls to seek out oestrus females and mate with them thus siring the calves and improving the genetic stock of the elephants in captivity. This is the way to go about if we hope to increase the number of elephants in captivity. Artificial Insemination (AI) and other high-tech methods may work but these are prohibitively expensive to carry out in many Asian countries given the meagre financial resources available for wildlife conservation.

The wild populations of Asian elephants, as Shanthini Dawson and Tim Blackburn point out in this issue (under Short communications) are being threatened more by habitat loss and fragmentation as a result of escalating human population, than poaching for ivory. Only one third of the Asian elephant habitat is in protected areas. Poaching cannot be the terminal threat in the case of the Asian elephant as it is in the African elephant where both sexes have tusks. In Asia only a proportion of the male elephants have tusks.

Many Asian countries with elephant populations face a dilemma: on the one hand, as custodians of biodiversity and charismatic megafauna they are forced to assume responsibility for their protection. Yet at the same time, most of these countries faced with expanding human populations, collapsing economies and crippling foreign debts are in desperate need of new resources to bolster their ailing economies and thereby keep the body and soul of their human populations in communication. Therefore conservation of elephant *per se* may rank rather low in their scheme of things.

The Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) has achieved enormous success and recognition through its production of the so called Action Plans. There is also an Action Plan for the Conservation of the Asian Elephant but it remains just an achievement on paper. Sadly, it has not achieved its desired objectives. This may be due to the fact that it is already out-of-date and is therefore of little use now. This may be the case as far as the conservation of elephants in India is concerned. But in many other instances, the countries concerned have neither the financial resources or the trained manpower needed to implement the recommendations the Action Plan identified. Without money and manpower, very little indeed can be achieved in Asia.

One of the surest ways of creating public awareness of the importance of conserving the Asian elephant and its habitat is to encourage and promote the study of elephants across their range in Asia. The emphasis of such studies should be on resolving human-elephant conflicts in order to create a climate of public opinion conducive to the long-term survival of the elephant as an integral part of its ecosystem. Conservation of elephants and their habitats, perceived by the local populace to be of direct economic importance, is far more likely to be successful in the long-term than by conservation for its own sake.

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