

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

285/1 Talatuoya Road
Ampitiya
Kandy, Sri Lanka
3 August 1991

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for your letter and the two Newsletters of the Elephant Group. Now that I have gone through Nos. 5-6, is there any possibility of obtaining the issues 1-4. Even photocopies will suffice. May I suggest that these be printed in the same size, so that fanatics like me can bind them. I hope it will not be too much of a bother to you. I will be grateful if you could kindly send me any other publications you can spare on the Asiatic Elephant.

About the electric fences used in Sri Lanka, both at Gal Oya and at the Sugar Cane Plantation at Pelwatte, I have an interesting observation. At Gal Oya, the elephants soon learnt that the wires were the problem. The herd leader however would walk up to the fence and kick the fence post. Once the post collapsed and the current earthed, the herd crossed over with impunity.

I was at the Pelwatte Plantation only for one month in August 1985. The fence had been just put up and was very effective in keeping the elephants out of the cultivation. I cannot say what the situation is just now. Perhaps the elephants have learnt another method of getting across. I have read that in some areas, the African elephants carried logs and put them on the wires so breaking the wires!

..... I am told that the Department of Wildlife is now considering having elephants in our national parks to take visitors around, as it is done with success in India. Some officers have gone across to Botswana to see how it is organised. I cannot understand why Botswana, when Periyar or Corbet National Parks would have been closer, and in my opinion better for our people to learn from. Perhaps you will know better.

In your letter you said that you helped out in Yala (Ruhuna National Park) to get a census of elephants. I am very interested, could you please let me know your opinion on the number of elephants in Yala. Are the staff members doing a proper census. I ask you this as experience has taught me, that these studies done by the Department will never be published, and if by some chance the Director changes, that will be the end of the study! Such periodical studies are very important and should be done at least once in 10 years! Some of these are never published. My estimate (of the number of elephants) is around 300 in Yala (Ruhuna National Park) with about 80-100 mostly in Block I. I may be wrong.

The most interesting feature in Yala is the increase of the tusker population. Way back in 1950, there were said to be only 2-3 tuskers in Yala, but today there are quite a few. I can personally identify about 15 (animals), but there are said to be 20-25 tuskers in Yala. Is this estimate correct? I feel, given adequate protection the number of tuskers is bound to increase.

South India: 80% of the males are said to be tuskers (according to Dr. R. Sukumar), but back here only 6% (tuskers). Why? Is this because the tuskers were poached off for their ivory during "the British Raj" and the tuskless (males) now predominate! I am also interested very much on the effects of musth in breeding. Any literature on these, some photocopies will be most welcome.

You have requested me to write to your Newsletter. Please let me know what type of article you would like and I will gladly oblige. Thank you for inviting me to write. Wishing you all the very best.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. H.I.E. Katugaha. M.B.B.S (Cey).

Reply

Thank you for your letter. Your observations on the electric fence are most welcome. Elephants being very intelligent animals, no electric fence is likely to be 100% elephant-proof. The animals are known to destroy the fence once they experience (even for a split second) the memorable shock of 5,000 volts the electric fence may carry. The usual reaction is to return and smash the fence. Bulls have one advantage in that the tusks do not conduct electricity and so can prise an insulator off the fence post. But even if an electric fence can be 80% effective, the benefit in some instances (especially in oil palm or rubber estates in Malaysia) far exceeds the cost. In Malaysia, one mile of electric fence is known to protect about 800 acres of cropland. It is therefore necessary to monitor the electric fence every day and repair any damage inflicted by the irate elephants. The grass and weeds underneath the wires must be cut regularly to prevent them coming into contact with the live wires.

You will be happy to note that the results of the survey of the elephant population in Ruhuna National Park, Sri Lanka carried out by the staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation are published in this issue of the AESG Newsletter and not confined to the departmental archives! However, the disturbing observation during the survey was the lack of tuskers in the population. Although a total of 94 animals were encountered in Block I of RNP, there wasn't a single tusk among the males! One reason for the lack of tuskers could be the increase in poaching activities as a result of the breakdown of law and order in the country and the increase in guerrilla activity in the recent past. It is also possible that we had missed the few tuskers that are still around. Only further surveys would throw some light on this matter.

Your estimate of 80-100 elephants in Block I of RNP confirms our estimate of about 84 animals in 140 km². The entire RNP may support 300+ elephants on a year-round basis.

The low percentage of tuskers in Sri Lanka could well be due to the systematic removal of tuskers during the "British Raj" by trophy hunters and also poachers. One Major Rogers is credited with the slaughter of 1,400 animals! Tusks were exported from both Ceylon and Sumatra during the Dutch Colonial rule. Between 1879 and 1883, the average export of ivory from Ceylon and Sumatra per year was 2,000 kg, half of which went from Ceylon.

As far as musth in elephants is concerned, I would recommend the paper entitled, "Observations on musth in the domesticated Asiatic elephant (*Elephas maximus*)" by M.R. Jainudeen, G.M. McKay and J.F. Eisenberg. *Extrait de Mammalia Tome 36 (2): 1972. 247- 261*. This should be available in the library at the Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka.

I would be most grateful if you could send me any articles on Asian elephant (e.g: on its management in captivity, historical accounts of elephant management in Ceylon, traditional elephant lore, traditional methods and medicines used in treating elephant diseases, conversations with the mahouts on their experiences with elephants, the influence of elephant on the religion, society and politics of Ceylon etc). I look forward to receiving your articles. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Charles Santiapillai