

Raman Sukumar – Winner of the Whitley Gold Award 2003 and the Friends Award (March 14, 2003)

The endangered Asian elephant took a step near survival on the night of 14 March 2003, when ecologist Prof. Raman Sukumar from the Centre for Ecological Sciences of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore (India) was awarded 50,000 pounds sterling at the annual Whitley Awards ceremony held at the Royal Geographic Society, in London.

Presenting Prof. Sukumar with both the Whitley Gold Award and the Whitley Laing Foundation's Friends Award, HRH The Princess Royal – patron of the Whitley Laing Foundation – said the most important challenge facing conservationists was the need to strike a balance between the world's wild and human populations. Princess Anne said, "We share this planet, and we need to share the environment we live in. This is not a single issue, it's a co-operative issue between different species. We need to understand what enables each of us to survive, within that context."

Prof. Sukumar from Southern India has dedicated much of his life to saving the Asian elephant. His award will help provide support to local farmers to mitigate the impacts of elephants on their lands as well as supporting his field research team who act as a "watchdog" – identifying threats such as poaching for ivory and monitoring the health of the elephant population.

"Each year the judges face really tough decisions as all of the Finalists are of extremely high calibre and completely committed to the conservation work they are undertaking" said Edward Whitley, founder of the Whitley Awards. "Raman Sukumar is a truly exceptional person – who most probably knows more about elephants than anyone else in the world and has devoted his professional life to their survival. We are honoured to be able to support his work by presenting him with the Whitley Gold Award."

The Nilgiri landscape covers some 14,000 km² in Southern India. This vast area, varied in climate and vegetation, is rich in biodiversity and has the largest single population of the endangered Asian elephant anywhere in the world. The Asian elephant is an integral part of the continent's natural environment as well as the culture of her people. First tamed over 4,000 years ago, it has played a pivotal role in the political, economic, social and religious life of Asian people.

Prof. Raman Sukumar is the Director of the Asian Elephant Research and Conservation Centre (AsERCC) and Chairman of the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

(AsESG). The AsERCC – an independent organization – works closely with the Indian Government's Project Elephant, providing technical support and advice to the government on elephant conservation matters. Sukumar's work provided the first comprehensive overview of the interaction between a large mammal and humans. He is now concentrating on the conservation of Asian elephants in the Nilgiri region, working at all levels – from complex science to trying to find simple and practical ways to ease the at times troublesome relationship between elephants and villagers.

There are currently three major threats to the integrity of the Nilgiri landscape, the elephant population, and the interests of the local people. Destruction of habitat and as a result fragmentation of remaining areas is rife: development projects such as hydroelectric dams and railway projects combine with growing agricultural pressure. Conflict between elephants and humans is widespread. Elephants raid crops and have been known to kill humans in the process – and farmers reciprocate. Thirdly, widespread poaching occurs. The vast majority of male elephants in this area are tuskers and therefore valuable targets. The killing of mainly male animals is rapidly changing the sex ratio of wild herds. Sukumar's work seeks to save the varied habitats and wildlife of Nilgiri by using the Asian elephant as "the ultimate flagship species". He combines scientific research firmly rooted in good theory with pragmatic conservation solutions involving local communities, and is determined to succeed. If we can protect elephants in heavily human dominated landscapes, surely humans can save smaller creatures in less crowded habitats.



The Whitley Foundation

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