

Book Review

Endangered Elephants: Past, Present and Future

All over their range elephants come in close contact and conflict with people. The elephant, with its massive bulk and power, social organization, behaviour, and intelligence, has been a figure of reverence in religion, a cultural symbol, a useful work animal that has fascinated man from the earliest of civilization. While this is true of all elephant-containing geographical areas of the world, in Asia especially, people have nurtured close ties with the elephant for centuries. In Asia also, are the worst incidences of human-elephant conflict when both man and beast turn against each other resulting in fatal clashes that claim lives on both sides.

Many of the elephant habitats of Asia are densely populated. The agricultural practices in many of these countries encourage elephants to move into human habitation. The elephant's great adaptability to changed environments and its preferences to open, forest edges places the animal in more danger of direct contact with humans.

But of the world's elephant population, the majority of the animals live in Africa. Although there are very large natural reserves and less population density, human-elephant conflict is not rare in Africa. The root causes of the conflict and the socio-economic situation of the people involved are startlingly similar in both Asia and Africa.

In 2003, Colombo (Sri Lanka) hosted a landmark symposium that brought researchers and conservationists from 23 different countries of Asia and Africa to share lessons between the two vastly differing continents and come up with a way forward that would ensure the survival of the elephant species. The three-day symposium was titled 'Human Elephant Relationships and Conflicts' and served to expose new conservation techniques, unveil new and exciting elephant research and present many past experiences of dealing with conflict between man and elephant.

The legendary Iain Douglas-Hamilton from Africa in his opening address to the forum spoke emotionally about the plight of elephants all over the world. "My heart bleeds when I read the endless and almost hopeless catalogue....", he said. "Elephants are weekly being shot, snared, electrocuted, run into trains, poisoned and everywhere deprived of habitat."

Douglas-Hamilton posed the question – do we leave elephants all alone to the wilds and hope they survive the best they can, or as certain conservationists insist, actively manage wildlife so that that species have better chance of survival especially if they have an economic value?

The symposium resulted in over 50 papers on a wide range of elephant-related topics presented by scientists, field researchers, funding agencies, zoological gardens, veterinary surgeons and conservationists. The topics ranged from historical perspectives of human elephant relationships to genetic research, to documentation of conflict in different countries and ranges, management of domesticated elephants and traditional knowledge in elephant capture. These papers are now published in a book titled "Endangered Elephants: Past, Present and Future." By publishing these papers with their accompanying maps, photos was primarily, to fulfill the aim of making this information available to a wider audience than the 220 delegates who participated at the symposium. The research, the field experience and the methodologies discussed in the book under different subject headings would lead to better understanding of the species and their conservation needs in areas that are becoming highly populated and where agriculture is taking over previous elephant habitat.

Jayantha Jayawardene, editor of the volume, who was instrumental in organizing the symposium said, "This book will be a substantial addition to the scientific information out there on the elephant and contribute greatly to future conservation practices. It is a great resource for practitioners and researchers alike, since rarely have we managed to get experiences of such a wide range of countries in to a single volume."

The final discussions at the 2003 symposium led to an agreement that the forum would request the United Nations to establish an inter-governmental body with scientific support from the IUCN Specialist Groups on Elephant Conservation. The aim of such a body would be to coordinate initiatives within a global strategy for future survival of the species and also to encourage inter-agency communication and facilitate synergies. The Body would also be able to assist range states in the development and implementation of policies that would protect elephant ranges. This letter, signed by Debbie Olsen of International Elephant Foundation (USA) and Jayantha Jayawardene of Biodiversity and Elephant Conservation Trust (Sri Lanka) is also included in the book.