

Epilogue

With the publication of issue # 25, the future of GAJAH as the Journal of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) remains uncertain. A number of options for the future of GAJAH are being considered and they include its continued publication as the journal of the AsESG, or a possible merger with PACHYDERM, the journal of the African Elephant, African Rhino and Asian Rhino Specialist Groups; or possible extinction of the journal itself, if there are no funds to continue its publication.

Asian elephant, given its special cultural and religious significance to the Asian people, deserves a separate journal to promote its identity, conservation and management. But in the end, it is the AsESG membership that must decide what would be the best option. The success of any journal will depend on the quality of the papers and their impact on society.

The publication of GAJAH traces its origin to the time when the second Chairman of the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group, Mr. Lyn de Alwis felt the need for a medium of communication in the form of an annual Newsletter. The first issue of the AsESG NEWSLETTER was published on May 1, 1986. The 2nd NEWSLETTER was named HASTHI and was published on July 2, 1987. Both issues were edited by Mr. de Alwis. From 1993, I took the initiative in improving the quality and distribution of the NEWSLETTER and changed its name to GAJAH (after the Sanskrit word for Elephant).

I take this opportunity to thank Mr. Lyn de Alwis, who as the Chairman of the AsESG, not only started the newsletter, but more importantly, gathered together some of the most deserving people to become members of the Group. During his time, there were civilized debates and discourses at meetings. It was through his personal charm and patient diplomacy that the AsESG was able to work with the Governments in countries such as Burma, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. He took the AsESG into Burma and Cambodia when these countries were virtually closed to outsiders. He also ensured the active participation of the international zoo community. In all his efforts he was greatly supported by the then Head of the Species Survival Commission (SSC), Dr. Simon N. Stuart. GAJAH in the initial stages, owed its survival to the funds provided by WWF-International. Subsequently, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USF&WS) continued providing the funds for the publication of GAJAH. I owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr. Karl Stromayer (USF&WS) for his constant support and encouragement. I consider myself privileged to have worked with the former Chairman of the AsESG, Prof. Raman Sukumar – an internationally well known and respected wildlife biologist and elephant conservationist, and Mr. Widodo Sukohadi Ramono the Deputy Chairman from Indonesia – in developing GAJAH. The moment of revelation is a little different for every person who experiences it and for me, the

road to Damascus came in the form of Prof. Lahiri-Choudhury, who with his inimitable wit, erudition and boundless enthusiasm for elephants, contributed much to the success of GAJAH and enlivened the AsESG, especially at meetings.

The long-term survival of the Asian elephant both in the wild and in captivity must remain the main focus of interest of the AsESG. Our concern must be more on enhancing the survival of viable populations of the elephant than counting carcasses. Resolving elephant conservation problems in Asia needs ideally Asian solutions that give due recognition to the people's perception of the elephant in terms of culture, mythology, and religion. It is therefore encouraging to note the initiative of the Sri Lankan Government in formulating a National Policy for Elephant Conservation and Management. The Task Force convened by the Government to prepare the national policy included six AsESG members. This is one way in which the AsESG can re-establish its position as an authority on elephant conservation, providing advice and assistance to Government agencies.

Unfortunately, there had been a few instances when outsiders working in Asian countries have highlighted the shortcomings and inadequacies of the national conservation agencies vis-à-vis elephant management, at international symposia and meetings, much to the dismay of the host nations. Asians do not like to lose face, especially at international forums. Such individuals and institutions are mercifully rare, and they seem to work on the principle that a squeaky wheel gets the oil. The oil in this instance is money. Some have criticized even the practice of maintaining elephants in captivity in Sri Lanka – a tradition that dates back to more than 2000 years. They have questioned the use of elephants in the annual religious pageant – the Perahera – in Sri Lanka, citing cruelty to elephants. They forget or choose to ignore fox hunting in England or bull fighting in Spain, practices that are far more distressing to watch than caring for elephants in captivity. Such critical individuals and institutions remain inflexible in the application of common sense, and their opposition to the manner in which elephants are managed in Asia is often motivated by the ease with which such a stand could be used to raise funds from the emotional western communities.

There are however, many individuals and international institutions that continue to assist elephant conservation and management in Asia. They are able to match their counsel with the necessary funds to implement their advice. We need to collaborate with them in our efforts to conserve and manage the elephant both in the wild and in captivity.

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