

## Brief Introduction to the Human-Elephant Conflicts in Upper Mekong Region

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(trample on) the fish there. It may sound a bit funny, but it really happened here in Xishuangbanna MAB reserve, the Upper Mekong Basin, Yunnan, China (Fig. 1).

Four thousand years ago, the elephant distribution in China extended to the north, reaching Beijing (Elvin 2004) and most of the area of Huang River basin (Sun *et al.* 1998; Li 1998). However, several thousands years later, their range has shrunk. Elephants exist only in the Upper Mekong Basin, the southwestern part of Yunnan, China, bordering Myanmar and Laos. With less than 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>, it remains the largest and the last elephant population of China. There are about 200-250 elephants living in Xishuang-banna (Aster 2003).

Two decades ago, the elephants just stayed in the forest while the farmers harvested their crops in the field. No one knows what the exact time was when elephants began to “help” villagers

at harvest time. At the beginning, there were just a few elephants that appeared in the fields during the crop harvest season. At that time since Dai minority religion, Buddhism had an influence, the local people regarded elephants as the symbol of luck and wisdom. So the villagers were excited about seeing elephants coming out from of the forest to their fields.

As time went by, more elephant herds seemed attracted by the taste of crops in the fields, and that led to a large number of elephants appearing around the village. They seemed to “know” when the crops will be harvested and where the crops were cultivated. Main crops like rice, maize, sugar cane and banana were encroached by elephants. Based on the reserve statistic, the total amount of crop loss from 1991 to 2004 was 50,895 tons, worth about 150

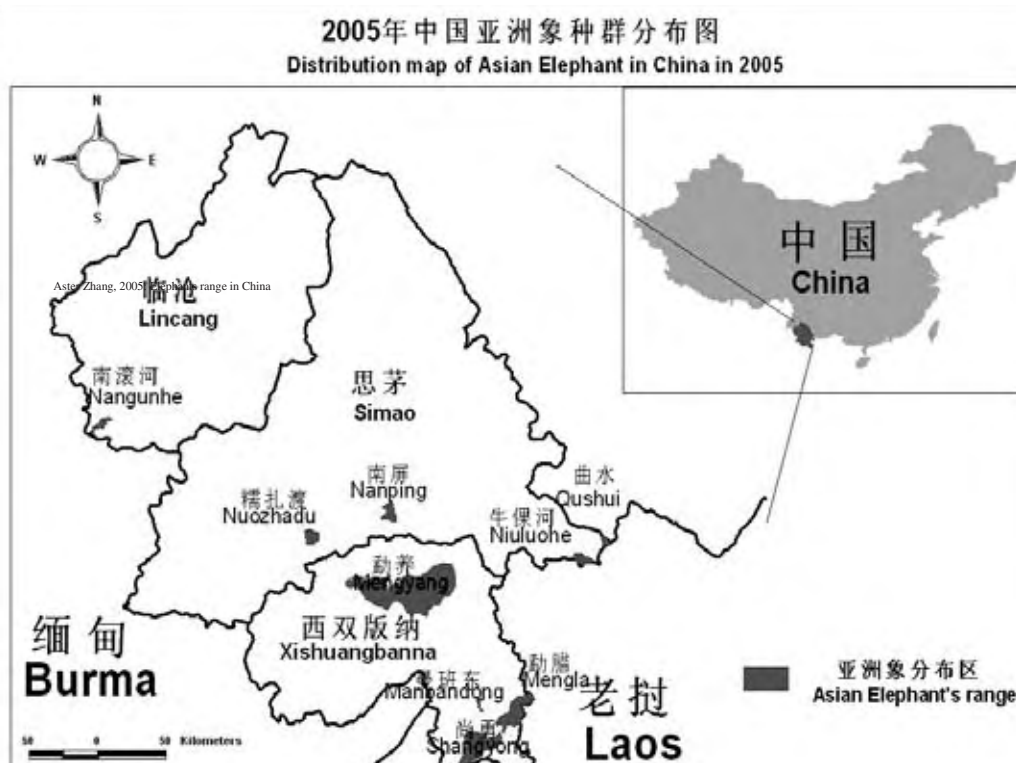


Figure 1. Elephant range in China. (Aster Zhang 2005).

million Yuan RMB (about 20 million US Dollars) direct economic value.

Chart 1 gives the increasing trend of annual loss since 1991. Additionally, the number of household crop loss increased from 612 in 1991 to 16,380 in 2004. This grew nearly 30 times more within decades. Besides the damage to crops, people injured and killed by elephants was another serious problem. Since 1991 to 2004, there was a total of 132 people injured by elephants and among those people, 24 were killed. Based on historical records (Chart 2), the number of people injured and killed annually has increased, indicating that the situation has got worse.

According to reports, accidents happened when people suddenly encountered wild elephants in the forest or at the edge of forest within elephants range. Only a few cases showed elephants had actively attacked people. Although the exact reason why elephants attacked humans has not been revealed, one thing is certain: the conflicts occurred when elephants and human beings ‘meet’. No matter whether human being are cutting into elephant range or elephants encroached human settlements, the conflict would get worse.

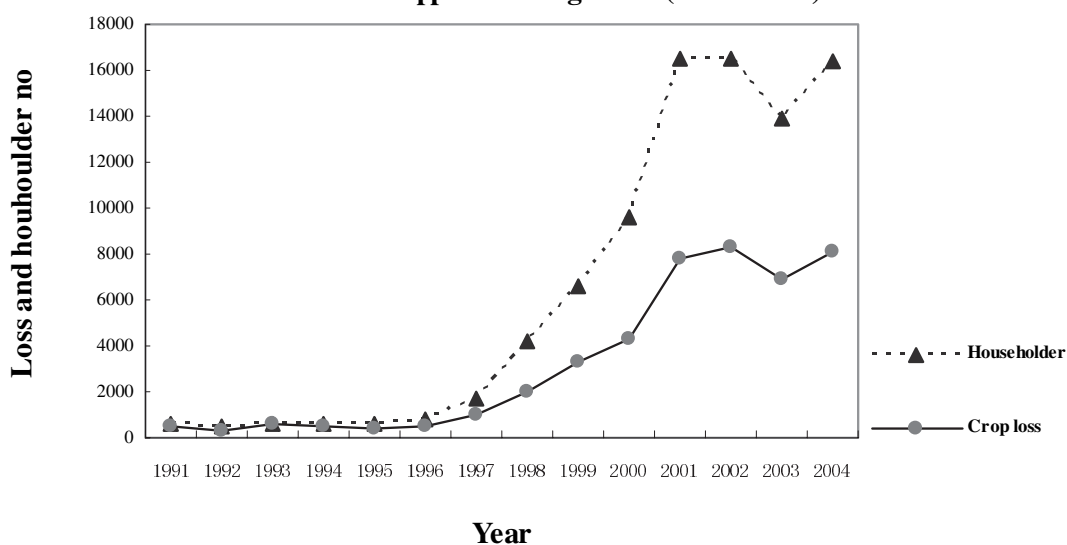
Therefore, we need to find a solution to solve it. Due to human being injured and killed by elephants and crop loss, local people doubt the benefits from wildlife conservation. They complained about the damage caused by elephants and inadequate government compensation fund for their losses. In order to handle the problem, the local government and Xishuangbanna MAB Reserve had tried some measures such as villager settlement relocation, building electric fences, establishing anti-elephant ditch and anti-elephant wall. Unfortunately, not all measures worked efficiently.

Currently, the reserve is exploring the elephant habitat improvement project, enhancing the habitat quality for elephants. Several food bases were established in the serious elephant damage areas. The favourite plants of elephants like bamboo, palm, banana, sugar cane and maize were cultivated to meet elephants foraging demand. However, the results need to be seen in the future.

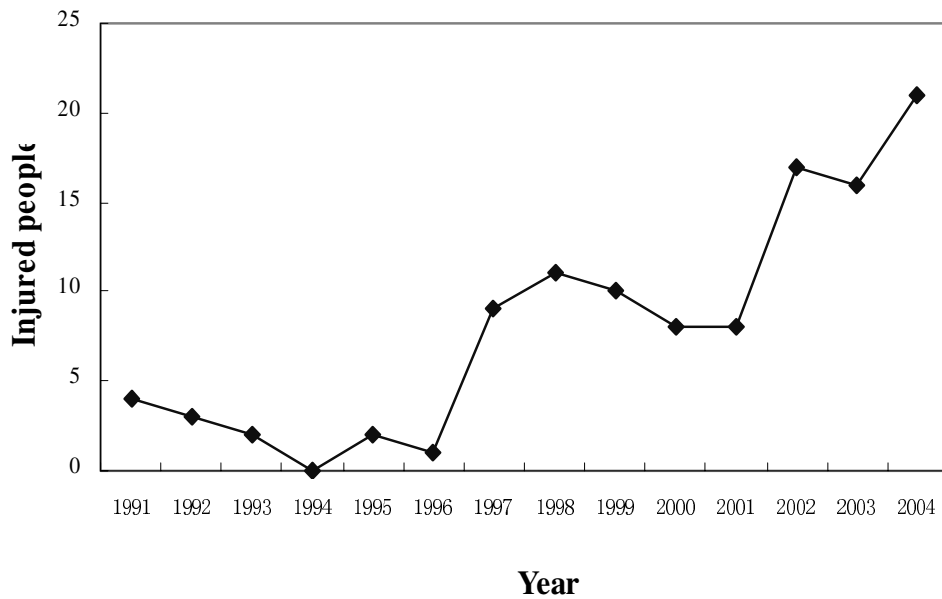
### References

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**Chart 1. Elephants damage crops loss (in tons) and the householder involved in the Upper Mekong basin (1991-2004)**



**Chart 2. The no. of injured people by elephants in the Upper Mekong basin (1991-2004)**



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Elephant mud bathing in Xishuangbanna MAB Reserve, China  
Photo by Dong Yonghua