

Editorial

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The conservation of a species necessitates the provision of all resources (habitat, security, food, water etc.) necessary to maintain a stable population into the long-term future. Conservation has two aspects; one is the protection of the species and the other, scientific management of the species and the resources necessary for its conservation. The continued existence of the Asian elephant in the wild is threatened not only by the actions of those whose interests are counter to elephant conservation, but also due to the non action or incorrect actions of those who are responsible for their conservation.

If Asian elephants are to be conserved each country needs to have a policy for elephant management and conservation. One of the first steps that have to be taken when revamping or stepping up a conservation programme is to take stock of the present situation. Therefore, obtaining baseline data on the populations in question is of critical importance. Based on such data, first one has to identify the problems facing the conservation of elephants. Then assess what the causes for those problems are, and the options that are available to address the causative factors. All too often conservation of elephants has been limited to treatment of the symptoms rather than addressing the root causes.

The behaviour and ecology of elephants may differ from country to country. Accurate data, for each country is essential if conservation efforts in those countries are to be successful. Hitherto management and conservation actions have been based on outdated beliefs handed down from earlier times. The non-availability of actual data on which to base management plans, has been a major drawback in most of the range states.

Research results are very important, because they may modify or disprove the assumptions, perceptions and beliefs that our conservation activities have been based on for a long time. They can identify and focus attention on the causes of problems rather than the obvious symptoms, which has been the main focal point of elephant conservation in most of the range states.

For instance in Sri Lanka elephant conservation has largely been driven by the need to mitigate the human-elephant conflict. Based on the belief that elephants live in forests, elephant conservation over the past few decades has focused on setting up protected areas and pushing elephants into them, where they would be safe and not come into conflict with people. Recent research in Sri Lanka has found that, the best habitat for elephants is not mature forest but disturbed or regenerating forest, which occurs almost entirely outside protected areas as a result of slash-and-burn agriculture, and that pushing elephants into protected areas by elephant drives and capture translocation does not work. Herds so driven and restricted decline and die off, while males so translocated simply do not stay. Based on these and other research results, a National Policy has been developed, which attempts to address the root causes of elephant decline and directs elephant conservation and management in a new direction. Heretofore, elephants will be managed *in situ* both in and outside protected areas, through integration of conservation and human activities that promote habitat suitability for elephants.

One of the major setbacks to the conservation of the Asian elephant, in almost all its range states, is the fact that it is the governments of those countries that have to play the major role. Given the scale of the actions that have to be undertaken to manage elephants, and the conservation politics in Asia we have necessarily

to deal with governments, if elephant conservation programs are to be effective. In the case of some governments the conservation of elephants is not a priority. Others lack the motivation, technical capacity and funds to undertake research, develop management plans, and implement them.

The need of the hour is for the Asian Elephant Specialist Group to step into fill the gap. To persuade governments to make elephant conservation a priority, to provide motivation where it is lacking, technical capacity where it is wanting, access to funding sources or canvassing for funds from international agencies where it is needed. We have to look at the scientific management and research needs of each country, prioritise them, seek sufficient funding and ensure the proper implementation of each project. A great effort by many from many places is necessary to ensure the continuance of the Asian elephant in the wilds.

The need of the hour is for all concerned to get together and make a concerted and cooperative

effort to save our elephants for their longterm future. Otherwise, as is happening now, whilst we are criticizing, bickering and fighting, elephants in the wild are dying by the day. We have to get away from our lethargy and take positive action toward successful conservation. However, from a pragmatic point of view, we must realize and accept the fact that every wild elephant in most of these countries cannot be saved. If we are to conserve the species we need to focus on the issues that threaten the survival of the species and we need to prioritize populations for conservation based on their conservation potential. While the welfare of individual elephants is important, we should not lose sight of the wood for the trees.

What we must strive to achieve, in our efforts at elephant conservation, is to ensure that viable populations of wild elephants will continue to flourish in adequate numbers, in different locations, that they will reproduce successfully, and that the survival of offspring would be sufficient to maintain their numbers into the future.



Two bull elephants next to the electric fence in the Udawalawe National Park, Sri Lanka (2006)

Photo by Jennifer Pastorini