

## **An International Workshop on the Conservation of the Bornean Elephant in Sabah: What Were the Outcomes?**

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An International Workshop on the Conservation of the Bornean Elephant was held in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, 21. - 23. May 2008, at the Shangri La's Rasa Ria Resort. The workshop was hosted by the Sabah State Government and co-organised by the Sabah Wildlife Department, Cardiff University, the NGO HUTAN, Universiti Malaysia Sabah and WWF-Malaysia. Funding was provided by the Darwin Initiative for the Survival of Species (UK), the US Fish and Wildlife Service Asian Elephant Conservation Fund (USA), Borneo Conservation Trust (Sabah) and the Rasa Ria Resort itself. Around 150 participants from around the globe attended the workshop, including elephant experts from India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Gabon in central Africa, UK and USA.

The Bornean elephant, the eastern-most population of the Asian elephant, is evolutionarily distinct and is a high priority for conservation (Fig. 1). The aims of the workshop were to present the results of the works carried out in the State during the last eight years and to discuss the results with all stakeholders involved in the conservation and the management of elephants in Sabah. The objectives were (1) to provide a forum for presenting and discussing the results of on-going studies about the Bornean elephant ecology, its distribution, movement and habitat use, the population genetics, and human-elephant conflicts; (2) to provide sound management recommendations for securing elephants long-term survival in Sabah; and (3) to produce a resolution endorsed by all workshop participants and to be tabled before the Sabah State Government in a near future.

The Workshop was opened by the Assistant Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Bolkiah Haji Ismail and closed by the Minister of Tourism, Culture and Environment, Datuk Masidi Manjun, to whom the resolution was presented.

The participants of the workshop recommended a series of conservation measures to enable the future viability of Bornean elephants in Sabah. Issues such as human-elephant conflict, elephant management, habitat management, research and education, fundraising and tourism were discussed and priority actions were set.

First, the conference identified four major elephant areas and urged their declaration as "managed elephant ranges" (MERs): Lower Kinabatangan, Tabin, Deramakot-Sebuku, and Ulu Kalumpang. These four elephant ranges should ideally be maintained under natural forest management and all necessary measures to re-establish connectivity within and between these ranges need to be investigated.

Second, other major recommendations included: (1) the establishment of a Borneo Elephant Conservation Alliance (BECA) to encourage collaboration and communication between all stakeholders involved in elephant management in Sabah. This alliance will help coordinate fundraising, conservation, research, education and information sharing; (2) the urgent need to produce basic biological information on the Bornean elephant to better understand the dynamics and the ecology of this species in Sabah; (3) a better understanding of elephant habitat requirements and land-use interactions;

(4) decide for and implement a moratorium on new oil palm development within 500 m on both sides of the Kinabatangan river and include all state lands covered with forest and adjacent to the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (LKWS) into the LKWS; (5) more attention to be given to the problem of elephant crop raiding and conflict mitigation; and (6) create a management committee for Responsible Elephant Tourism (RET), chaired by the State Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment.

Third, some additional recommendations were identified by the different working groups and were the following:

- (a) Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC) Working Group recommendations: (1) to improve mitigation measures for HEC by exploring the efficacy of direct elephant management, electric fencing, clarifying land demarcation, increasing support from government and NGOs and defining policy; (2) to increase awareness of HEC by improved interaction with the wildlife authorities, facilitated if necessary by NGOs; (3) to unblock former elephant migration routes which have been constricted by land-use changes, by land purchasing or leasing from industry and communities; and (4) to establish a credible compensation scheme for crop raiding and injury following best practice from outside models if appropriate.
- (b) Habitat Management Working Group recommendation: (1) Secure connectivity within and between the key MERs with specific protection for critical corridor habitats.
- (c) Elephant Management Working Group recommendations: (1) to set goals for minimum viable population sizes for the elephant populations in Sabah; (2) to establish a decision making framework for establishing the non-viability of a population or its overabundance. Specific population and habitat viability analysis for the elephants of Sabah should be carried out when sufficient data become available; (3) a viable ex-situ management strategy for Bornean elephants should be established with international cooperation; and (4) elephants need



**Figure 1.** A Bornean elephant in the forest of the Lower Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary.

specific protection measures to enable their conservation in situ. Such measures should use patrol units, intelligence networks, guard systems, penalties for illegal activity and potentially, after consultation, the upgrading of the elephant's status to Schedule 1.

- (d) Research Working Group recommendations: (1) to understand the ecology; habitat use and ecophysiological limitations of elephants in the major central forest population in Sabah to enable a predictive approach and landscape planning for reserve design and to understand what limits their present distribution on the island of Borneo; (2) to establish a research community network (within the auspices of BECA) to enable co-ordinated research activities, joint funding proposals and to enhance the local research infrastructure (physical and human) in Sabah; (3) to carry out research to understand the socio-economics of human-elephant interactions, including financial consequences of crop raiding,

an assessment of potential compensation measures and the economic and ecological effects of elephant based ecotourism.

- (e) Education Working Group recommendations: (1) to use direct advocacy to educate and influence those involved in land-use decisions, via specialised education tools, direct interaction and early stage curriculum development; (2) to build educational capacity and improve general coordination using Sabah Environmental Education Network (SEEN) and by focusing on training teachers and honorary wildlife wardens; (3) to spread environmental education activity best practice from the Kinabatangan to other elephant range areas; and (4) to seek funding for educational materials (books, audio-visual), especially from industry.
- (f) Fundraising Working Group recommendations: (1) enable sustainable and interactive funding by exploration and engagement in Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) mechanisms, creation of a Sabah Elephant Conservation Trust Fund targeting tourists visiting elephant sites, by building funding partnerships with corporations/industry and through public fundraising campaigns; (2) identify organizations that support operational costs and salaries which are currently difficult to attain; and (3) improve fundraising capacity by providing necessary training and identifying and building on existing skills.
- (g) Tourism Working Group recommendations: (1) of highest priority, and within the auspices of BECA, create a management

committee (involving relevant government agencies, local communities, researchers, tour operators and NGOs) for Responsible Elephant Tourism (RET), chaired by the state Ministry of Tourism Culture and Environment; (2) produce guidelines, rules and regulations for RET using a standardized information package to be developed and disseminated to Tourism Players by the management committee; (3) to introduce a RET compulsory training program with certification, developed and implemented by the management committee under the approval of the state Ministry of Tourism Culture and Environment, including stringent health and safety and local infrastructure guidelines; (4) raise awareness, build capacity and encourage participation of local communities in RET including financial support and creation of economic opportunities; and (5) incorporate elephant and environmental issues in the guidelines and especially focus on measures to minimise behaviour changes in elephant populations as a result of tourism.

As stated by Datuk Masidi Manjun at the closing ceremony on May 23 “Time is running out fast and there are not many animals left in the wild. If we do not do something urgently I think we are going to lose these animals. This wildlife, as part of the State natural heritage, is the very reason why people come to Sabah. We need to protect wildlife and its natural habitat!”

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**Figure 2.** Workshop participants below the official banner.