

First National Symposium on Elephant Healthcare and Managerial Practices

Kushal Konwar Sharma

College of Veterinary Science, Assam Agricultural University, Assam, India

Asian elephants are presently under threat due to various factors and a multi-pronged approach is necessary if this species, which is recognized as a flagship species, is to be saved from extinction. Consequently, the first ever 'National Symposium on Elephant Healthcare and Managerial Practices in India' was organized. This was an initiative of the Directorate of Project Elephant, Government of India, which also provided financial assistance. The symposium was held in the College of Veterinary Science, Assam Agricultural University, Guwahati, Assam, which is located in the most strategic region of the country in terms of elephants.

The theme for the symposium was "*Elephant ecology, healthcare and management with special emphasis on empowerment of its handlers for the welfare and conservation of the species.*"

The symposium was held over three days from 19th to 21st of January 2009 with two days of lectures and one day of field work. The lectures were divided into the following technical sessions:

- I: Elephant ecology, in situ conservation and mitigation of human-elephant conflict
- II: Captive elephant husbandry
- III: Elephant behaviour and social status
- IV: Elephant physiology, anatomy and forensic science
- V: Elephant healthcare and management
- VI: Preventive healthcare
- VII: Elephant anaesthesia, radiology and surgery
- VIII: Elephant reproduction and nutritional aspects
- IX: Plenary session

For practical demonstrations on various aspects of elephant healthcare, the participants were taken to Pobitora Wildlife Sanctuary and the following practical classes were conducted using the nine camp elephants there.

- Approaches for clinical examinations
- Body weight estimation
- Microchip implantation
- Drug administrations by various routes
- Foot care, corrective foot trimming
- Administration of anaesthesia
- Tusk care and trimming etc.
- Field laboratory procedures etc.

A total of fifty elephant workers, conservation experts and elephant veterinarians from across India participated in the symposium. A few international experts from Indonesia, Singapore and Germany also participated and interacted with the country experts. Dr. (Ms.) Munmun Sarma, Assistant Professor of College of Veterinary Science, Assam Agricultural University was the Organizing Secretary of the symposium.

The plenary session held at the end of the symposium resolved the following to be sent to the Directorate of Project Elephant for its consideration and necessary action:

1. Render strict legal protection to the elephants in the declared Elephant Reserves.
2. Habitat restoration and improvement in the protected areas.



Participants exchanging practical tit bits on elephant healthcare procedures

3. Clear elephant corridors from human settlements and farming activities.
4. Empower and educate people for peaceful co-existence with elephants; like alternative cropping, avoiding brewing country liquors etc.
5. Engage trained *koonkies* with experienced mahouts to manage marauding herds.
6. Regular mahout education and training and same to be carried out by carefully designed programmes with due emphasis to the role of expert veterinary components in conducting these training programmes.
7. Work in tandem with Indian Railway authorities and State Electricity Boards to avoid accidental deaths of elephants.
8. Healthcare and other forms of support for the mahouts.
9. Encourage captive elephants to be provided with a balanced diet with due consideration to its physiological needs.
10. Establish mobile elephant healthcare units in the Veterinary Colleges of important elephant states.
11. Establish super-specialty disease diagnostic centres dedicated to the elephants in the key Veterinary Colleges of the country.
12. Encourage and provide funds for the problem solving kind of research programmes.
13. Encourage research on the area of forensic science in solving wildlife crimes.
14. Organize national symposia on elephant healthcare and managerial practices, at least once every two years.
15. Continue with the present practice of organizing refreshers' courses for the field vets in the key veterinary to render strict legal protections to the elephants in the declared Elephant Reserves.
16. Regular mahout education and training should be carried out with carefully designed programmes with due emphasis to the role of expert veterinary components in conducting these training programmes.
17. Organize Training of Trainers (TOT) to train the veterinary college teachers so that they can then act as resource persons for the next generations of veterinary students in terms of elephant healthcare.
18. Encourage international exchange programmes for upgrading the existing skill of the veterinary experts of the country.
19. Induct at least one veterinarian into the Project Elephant Steering Committee to allow the profession to present its view in the important policy making body governing the fate of elephants in India.
20. Institute national awards for significant contributions in elephant conservation, healthcare, welfare etc.

Author's e-mail: kushalkonwar@gmail.com



Trimming of the tusks is one of the managerial practices to prevent poaching by ivory hunters and to reduce the chances of injuries to other elephants