

Editorial

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People living with wildlife are important players in any strategy to conserve wildlife. This becomes more important where there are conflicts between man and wildlife. The importance of the involvement of the local people in wildlife conservation is because these people share resources with wildlife and the interaction of people and wildlife affect each other both positively and negatively. Therefore one cannot isolate local people from the conservation of wildlife. It is also equally important to look at conservation issues from both the point of view of conserving wildlife per se and its socio-economic aspects.

Human-elephant conflict (HEC) is one such issue that requires a greater consideration of its socio-economic aspects, if any mitigation measures are to be successful. These conflicts impact on the livelihoods of people. The declaration of protected areas takes away land that could be used by increasing human populations for cultivation. Agriculture in elephant habitats disrupts elephant home ranges, and reduces the resources available to the elephants. The loss of human lives and damage to houses and cultivations affects the livelihood of families. It creates animosity with the elephants. Therefore if one does not tackle these issues directly, it would be difficult to find long term solutions to the ever increasing HEC.

Initially, when planning elephant conservation and HEC mitigation strategies, it is necessary to meet and get the input of the communities that are affected. The necessity for those affected by these conflicts to take an active part in the solution of HEC in their areas cannot be over emphasized. Without the initial input of the people the actual situation on the ground cannot be ascertained accurately. It is also necessary to look at these problems from their point of view instead of making conservation decisions based on the perceptions and theories of managers and conservationists alone.

When an elephant is killed the carcass is buried or burnt. No further thought is given to the effect that the death of this elephant has on the herd. However, if a human is killed by an elephant there is an immediate effect on the family of the deceased. Apart from the pall of grief that descends on the family and friends of the victim, there is an immediate negative effect on the economic status of the family, especially if the victim was the bread winner. A source of income, in many instances the only source, is cut off. With this loss many changes to the life style of the family, with regard to food, schooling, plans for the construction of a house etc., have to be made.

The payment of compensation for the loss of human lives and loss of property is the only action that the authorities take. In most of these instances this compensation schemes do not meet their objectives. Charitable schemes, which have no compensatory effect on the families of the victims, will only ease the conscience of the authorities and show the world that a compensation scheme is in place. What is needed is a compensation scheme that would gradually alter the pathway of the lives of the victimized families towards a better life.



Elephant on a road in Riau, Sumatra
Photo by Ajay A. Desai

In Sri Lanka, for instance the compensation scheme for a family where one member has been killed by a wild elephant is the payment of Rs. 50,000 (\approx \$ 500) to the spouse. Another Rs. 50,000 is divided amongst all children under the age of 18 years. The irony of this is that each child has to wait till he/she is over 18 years to get the due share of money.

Another important aspect of HEC mitigation is to have accurate data and information to go on. This becomes more important since the cause of conflicts in one area may not be the cause for conflicts in another. Data and the information flowing from this data, is important for decision making, in order to evaluate the status of a problem and also for post implementation evaluations. HEC attracts quite a number of individuals and various organizations who contribute to the socio economic development of poor families including those victimized by elephants.

There are also researchers who work on different aspects of these conflicts. However, there are large gaps in the data or information that is available all over Asia. Not only is there a paucity of data and information to plan conservation strategies but this also effects post implementation evaluations when measuring the actual impact of conservation and mitigation strategies.

It is absolutely necessary for research personnel and the decision makers to join forces and coordinate

their activities. This not only strengthens the conservation plans but also makes it possible to focus on the gaps in the data available. It is imperative that we make use of the good work that has been done so far. With research priorities in place the limited funds available for research could be put to the best possible use.

Since the governments of most Asian countries are involved in elephant conservation, each of them should not only develop a policy for elephant conservation but also ensure that this policy is implemented. Sri Lanka has a policy for elephant management and conservation, which has been approved by the highest legislature in the island, which is a good first step. However even in Sri Lanka much needs to be done to translate policy into action on the ground.

Policy implementation needs to involve not only stakeholders in elephant conservation but also all those that contribute to genesis of HEC such as government and non-government agencies that undertake development in and around elephant habitat, the general public and politicians, who should also be stakeholders in its mitigation. If the wild elephants in Asia are to be conserved effectively, there has to be a concerted effort, by all concerned, to plan realistically, implement these plans efficiently and evaluate them at the end to ensure that there has been a positive impact.



Elephant on a road in the Bandipur Tiger Reserve, India
Photo by Ajay A. Desai