

Notes from the Co-chairs IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

Ajay A. Desai and Simon Hedges

Co-Chairs' e-mails: ajayadesai.1@gmail.com & shedges@wcs.org

25 years ago, in May 1986 the very first issue of the AsESG newsletter/journal was published by the late Mr Lyn de Alwis who was then the Chairman of the AsESG. Starting off as a newsletter (*Asian Elephant Specialist Group Newsletter*) in 1986 the group's publication grew, evolved and also changed its name to "*Gajah*" in 1992, becoming a journal. We need to acknowledge the contribution of Dr. Charles Santiapillai to *AsESG Newsletter* and *Gajah*, soon after newsletters launch he took charge and almost single handed kept the journal going till 2006 – almost 20 long years – Thanks Charles.

In the very first issue Lyn starts his editorial with "we, like the elephants we are pledged to conserve, apply ourselves to any task with ponderous determination and esprit de corps, yet are somewhat modest and unobtrusive (isn't even crop damage seen only the next morning!) about our accomplishments. Again, like elephants we must have a "family bond". He made this comment because of an AsESG meeting in November 1985 where the outcome of the humongous task of mapping elephant distribution (under WWF project 1777) was presented. A large volume of work has been accomplished but elephant conservationists were not fully aware of what was going on in the next state/province let alone in a neighbouring country or further away. Hence the need for a regular newsletter was felt by all members. It is to the credit of the group, the editors - Lyn, Charles and Jayantha Jayewardene (the current editor), the editorial boards, all the contributors, donors and not forgetting the readers who have kept this journal alive and well for the last 25 years. Simon and I take this opportunity to thank and congratulate each and every one for this.

Having attended (AAD) the 1985 meeting and seen AsESG and the journal since the early 1980's, what are the major changes that are visible? The

old problem of communication remains even today but is less pronounced than earlier due to greater direct interaction between people and because of IT revolution (internet). However significant problems remain, almost all peer reviewed journals are out of reach for most researchers in Asia as their institutes do not subscribe to them. A large body of work also remains unpublished. Demand for information has also increased significantly as elephant conservation is facing significant hurdles and elephant populations are increasingly threatened.

Hank Hammatt and Jayantha were responsible making soft copies (PDFs) of the *Gajah* available online and we thank them for it. In this context the availability of all the older issues of the journal 'online' is a significant boon to field workers (thanks to Hank, Christy Williams, Jayantha and all others who helped). The latest effort by Dr. Jennifer Pastorini with help from Michael Cordingley to make individual papers (from all *AsESG Newsletters* and *Gajah* issues) available online and by providing support for search engines to pick these papers (using keywords) is set to take accessibility to a new level. This will significantly increase access to the journal for people with no prior knowledge of the journal and give *Gajah* a much larger audience. Hank has put out a trial issue (1st issue) online on the AsESG website for testing and comments from members (please check and respond). We thank Jennifer, Michael and Hank for this latest effort.

Hank has also been responsible for establishing and managing the AsESG website and we thank him for this. The site also contains additional information and links that will help all researcher and conservationists in their work.

The Task Forces have also been active, the AsESG Human-Elephant Conflict Task Force conducted a workshop in Beijing in 2009 and

has since put the HEC document online so that it can be edited and worked on by all. Creating an opportunity to contribute and also being inclusive. The final product (will keep changing as it will be a living document which will grow with our growing knowledge) will be a useful tool for all wildlife managers. Check it out at <http://www.fws.gov/international/DIC/species/ase/asian_elephant.html> and also at <http://hectf.wikia.com/>>. Conflict remains one of the biggest hurdles in elephant conservation and there is a lot of ground to be covered. The HEC Task Force aims to get all the information and guidelines into a single comprehensive document. It will require inputs from all to develop such a document that systematically and effectively addresses all diverse HEC situations we see across Asia.

The AsESG Veterinary Task Force has posted draft guidelines on ‘veterinary care’ and have also brought out the ‘Elephant pre-shipment guidelines for Range States’. While the former is already on the website the later will be posted soon. Peter Stroud brought to our notice the case of an elephant that had suffered severe injuries (possibly untreatable) during an accident and several members suggested euthanasia to end the needless suffering the animal was undergoing. Since then several similar cases have been

brought to the notice of the co-chair or members. As this is a tricky issue and requires clear guidelines and quality assessment of situations where it can or should be applied the Vet Task Force is contemplating developing a decision making protocol for euthanasia. Your inputs and suggestion would be welcomed by them even at this stage – as also the question – should we put out such guidelines? There are several other areas like capture, translocation, disease, etc. that this task force will have to take up and all that will require support and inputs from all members and non-members working with elephants. We thank Drs. Susan Mikota and Jacob Cheeran and the Task force members for their efforts.

The AsESG Wild Elephant and Elephant Habitat Management Task Force has circulated a preliminary note on the problem of weeds in elephant habitat “Extent and Distribution of some invasive plant species in Asian Elephant Habitats”. They are looking forward to comments and inputs from members and also working on building on this initial effort. Weeds remain a hidden, not well understood and a very significant threat to the remaining elephant habitat. While all of us are very closely focused on habitat loss, fragmentation and degradation (from anthropogenic pressures) and are making



Grazing after the rains - Yala National Park, Sri Lanka (see book review on page 84)
Photo by Vajira Wijegunawardane

significant efforts to contain these problems, weeds seem (we mention 'seem' as there are other views held by some members) to be eating away at habitat quality like a cancer. There are other major areas where this task force will require significant inputs from all researchers and conservationists.

Inputs will be particularly important in areas where we provide guidelines on elephant conservation areas and their management. With increasing fragmentation and reduction of elephant habitat, size and shape of the remaining habitat patches becomes critical for conservation of elephant which are a wide ranging species prone to indulge in severe crop raiding when their home ranges are lost or reduced significantly. What are the spatial requirements of elephants? We are generally at a loss when any government agency asks us what they need to set aside and where? Do we draw line on a map as in the past and then hope for the best? What if the area is not adequate? What if a significant part of the population has its home range outside the demarcated conservation area? What would be the size of a genetically sound population for long-term conservation taking into account the social organization and reproductive strategy of elephants? These and many more questions remain to be answered and it will take significant effort from everyone to get there. We thank Drs. Christy Williams and Arnold Sitompul and their team members for their efforts.

The Captive Elephant Task Force has come out with a draft position statement on captive elephants, this too will be on the website and will require your inputs. It is important that you make suggestions, additions and deletion that you think are necessary. The statement also immediately brings to mind the need for standards and protocols – these can be either pre-existing ones developed by some country or organization or something that the Captive Elephant Task Force itself or in collaboration with the Veterinary Task Force can develop. An interesting and important issue that the Captive Elephant Task Force is thinking of is looking at issue of reintroduction of captive raised elephants (especially calves) into the wild and to develop protocols for such operation. So please take time to interact with

this group and give your inputs. We thank Heidi Riddle and Wijeyamohan and the team members for their efforts.

Ponderous we maybe, like Lyn mentioned in his very first editorial but he also mentioned determination – we need to have that and we need to ensure that what we make and what we leave behind are things that are useful in the long-term conservation of elephants. We must remember that the output of these Task Forces will represent the AsESG view and guidelines – consequently the view of the majority. And since it technically represents the members' collective view (indirectly meaning your view) you need to make sure that your voice is heard. We are sure that most of you would be more interested in and also understand that your inputs are not just about your view but are about getting suitable conservation action for elephants which you all care for. As the major (primary) task of the AsESG and its members is advisory it is here that your inputs to the group will have their greatest impact – so please interact with the chairs/co-chairs of the various task forces and contribute what you can.

The AsESG also facilitated the first Asian Elephant Range States' meeting. The situation facing the Asian Elephant and ways to address the main issues threatening its survival were discussed at a meeting of all the Asian Elephant Range States' representatives in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 24-26 January 2006. The Government of Malaysia invited the 12 other countries, which still hold wild populations of elephants to participate in the first meeting of this kind for Asian Elephants, which was funded by the USFWS with additional support from CITES/MIKE and the Government of Malaysia. The World Conservation Union (IUCN), in particular its Species Survival Commission (SSC), was asked to facilitate the discussion and to this end provided the services of (among others) the two AsESG Co-chairs and the then SSC Chair (Holly Dublin). The report on this meeting was originally circulated in 2006 and posted on the IUCN and CITES websites. Since then no other country has come forward to host the next meeting and we are hoping that India will play host to the next such meeting as this has

been a major recommendation (to host a meeting of Asian Range States) by the Task Force set up to upgrade Project Elephant in India.

In November 2008 a workshop, funded by the AsESG, WWF/AREAS, and WCS attempted to use the recently completed IUCN guidelines for species conservation planning to begin drafting a conservation strategy for Asian Elephants. This will be used as the basis for planning the Action Plan, hopefully in the near future.

In addition to these advisory (as in Task Forces) and facilitating roles AsESG has been helping members and non-members interact in various ways, from conservation filmmakers seeking information or links to students seeking contacts and information. We thank all those who responded to requests for help. There have also been discussions within the group on several issues – more recently the issue of India banning all elephants from Indian Zoos was debated and it resulted in members making various suggestions, which were compiled and sent to the Govt. of India. The Government's response was to take a more moderate or flexible stand on the ban and also to ask us for shipment guidelines which were given (draft veterinary care and shipment guidelines developed by the Veterinary Task

Force). In addition other concerns expressed by members were also passed on to the concerned authorities and have been taken into account. Members have also been given the opportunity to give their inputs to IUCN on various issues or in the most recent case inputs for US Fish and Wildlife Service's International Conservation Strategic Planning Initiative.

We have also ensured that whatever funding opportunities were brought to our notice was passed on to members in hope that it would help them in their conservation efforts. Here we would like to thank those members who took efforts to bring such opportunities to our notice. We would also like to take this opportunity to thank the USFWS/AsECF, WWF/AREAS, WCS, IEF and Singapore Zoo who have helped with supporting various workshops or in the publication of *Gajah*.

As always members remain focused on doing on ground conservation and are doing a good job of it. But we do need them to take some time off to help with the various task forces as these and their outputs will be the most critical contribution from the Group. We thank all of you (members and non-members) for your inputs, time and contribution and wish you the very best in 2011.



© Vajira Wijegunawardane

A herd moving en masse towards fellow family members - Kala Wewa (see book review on page 84)
Photo by Vajira Wijegunawardane