

## Mahoutship in Indonesia - Developing a Young Profession

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Indonesia's recent history of managing captive elephants began only in the 1980s. The first elephant forest camps were established by the government to address problems of Human-Elephant Conflict (HEC), much of which was caused by a program of transmigration of people living on densely populated islands, such as Java, to islands (i.e. Sumatra) which were less populated. Captive elephants in Indonesia are primarily housed in government supported forest camps in Sumatra, as well as in zoos and wildlife parks on other islands such as Java and Bali.

Unlike many of the other Asian elephant range countries with captive elephants, there was not a long-standing tradition of captive elephant management in Indonesia, so the Indonesian "mahouts" (elephant handlers) hired by the government beginning in the 1980s have been mainly self-taught. Early on this lack of knowledge led to management and husbandry problems among the various forest camps. But as relative newcomers to captive elephant management, the mahouts were also eager to learn and have since greatly enhanced their capacity for elephant work.

In an effort to strengthen their professionalism, the Indonesian mahouts recently established an organization to provide a better opportunity to influence captive elephant management, mahout education and needs, and elephant conservation in Indonesia more effectively, as well as share information with elephant managers from other regions. The concept of a professional mahout group helps the Indonesian mahouts improve the exchange of experiences and information amongst the various elephant management environments within the country.

In 2006, in the province of Bengkulu in western Sumatra, the first Sumatra Mahout Workshop was held at the Seblat Elephant Conservation Center (ECC). The Provincial Government Conservation Agency (BKSDA) sponsored this workshop with support from several NGOs, including the International Elephant Foundation (IEF), Fauna and Flora International (FFI), and the Veterinary Society for Sumatran Wildlife Conservation (VESSWIC).

The workshop was attended by mahouts representing six different provinces and all of the government supported forest camps in Sumatra. In addition to participating mahouts, the Director for Biodiversity Conservation from the Indonesian Government Conservation Agency, as well as the Head of Bengkulu BKSDA also attended. During this workshop, presentations were made about each camp - information such as numbers of elephants and staff, camp structures and duties, as well as activities of the camps. Additionally there were discussion sessions for the mahouts to outline how to improve their professionalism and effectively present their concerns to the government authorities in charge of administering the camps. Finally, the mahouts decided to establish their own formal networking group.

The group created by the mahouts is officially called the "Sumatran Mahout Communication Forum", and in the Indonesian language this acronym is FOKMAS. During this first workshop, participants elected officers as well as a representative from each camp to liaise with FOKMAS. Further discussions produced an outline of important issues for mahouts and for FOKMAS. Participants also voted to request dues from each mahout member for

the organization, and another vote was taken to decide on the frequency and venue of future mahout workshops.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Mahout Workshop was organized by FOKMAS and held in December 2007 at the Saree ECC in Aceh, again with support from the government conservation agencies (national and provincial) and several NGOs. This time FOKMAS also invited other mahouts and zoo elephant keepers from all over Indonesia. In addition, several veterinarians and managers from some of these non-governmental elephant facilities attended. During this workshop, in addition to presentations from the different elephant camps about conditions and problems, there was much discussion about the role of mahouts - not only in elephant care but also about the responsibilities of government mahouts in wildlife conservation and forest protection. FOKMAS also led a training session for the mahouts about the use of GPS during fieldwork. Continued discussions developed an outline of mahout concerns, which were later presented to the government.

In June 2008, FOKMAS, in collaboration with IEF, VESSWIC and the Way Kambas National Park management, organized a Paramedic (veterinary technician) Workshop at the Way Kambas ECC. During this workshop, presentations and training were given on various elephant health care topics, i.e. basic preventative, diagnostic, and treatment schemes and techniques. Mahouts and paramedics representing all Sumatra government camps, in addition to several camp managers, veterinarians, and elephant care staff from Indonesian zoos and wildlife parks attended the workshop.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> FOKMAS Mahout Workshop was held at the Way Kambas ECC in southern Sumatra in March 2009. The Way Kambas ECC is the first camp developed by the Indonesian government and currently houses over 60 elephants. During this Workshop, an IEF Director gave presentations about handling and initial training of captive born elephant calves. This information was requested by FOKMAS as several of the Sumatra government forest camps had recent elephant births, and the mahouts had little experience



**Figure 1.** Mahout workshop 2010.

handling very young calves. In addition to this practical component, the most recent Indonesian government regulations concerning elephant conservation issues were introduced and discussed during the workshop.

The 4<sup>th</sup> FOKMAS Mahout Workshop was held in North Sumatra province in June 2010. Mahouts from different camps gave presentations about utilizing captive elephants for conservation activities (i.e. for HEC management, forest patrols, ecotourism as alternative income source, education, etc.) to exchange experiences about these activities, and discuss the effectiveness of the different techniques and strategies employed (Fig. 1). Theoretical and practical training was given on the topic of field navigation using GPS devices (Fig. 2). Forums were held to discuss new legislation and regulations concerning elephant conservation in Indonesia as well as problems and urgent needs to be addressed by the government conservation agencies. Additionally, a survey was created to assess the effectiveness of the workshops, and participants were asked



**Figure 2.** Field navigation training.

to complete the survey both before and again after the workshop. The results of the survey will help inform the direction of future Mahout Workshops, identify which needs are not being met, and whether changes to the format of the workshops are necessary.

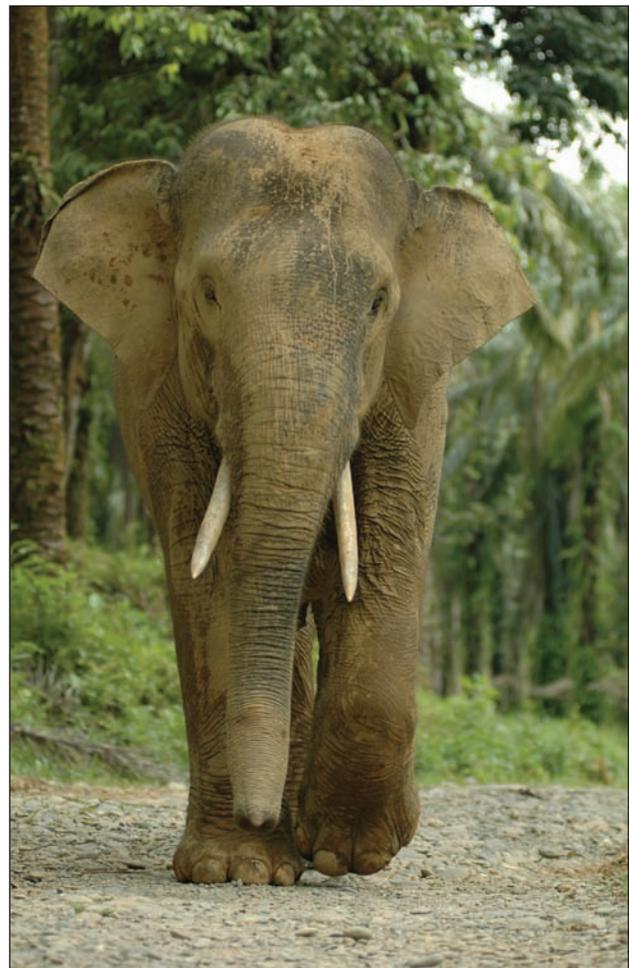
These workshops have been very effective in allowing the Indonesian mahouts to meet their peers and be informed about a wide variety of elephant issues within their region. For most of the participant mahouts, attending these workshops is the first time they have participated in such meetings. FOKMAS is continuously looking for the best ways to make a difference for the mahouts and, ultimately, for elephants all across Indonesia. FOKMAS continues to progress in developing itself as a resource - not only for all of the mahouts and camp managers who work with elephants on a daily basis, but also for the various government agencies concerned with elephant conservation in Indonesia.

FOKMAS has also started collaborating with a similar organization, the Elephant Managers Association (EMA) based in the U.S., to support elephant management and conservation, and continue the exchange of professional experiences and information. The EMA is an organization created by elephant keepers in 1988, and has become a well-respected international professional group with a membership numbering about 500, an annual conference, and ongoing support of advocacy work to benefit elephant care, husbandry, and training. The EMA has provided support to FOKMAS via donations of elephant foot care tools for the mahouts, support of mahout training programs, and through presentations and discussions with the mahouts about western facility elephant management.

The Indonesian government now recognizes FOKMAS as a professional group that can address elephant conservation and management issues effectively, and has been requesting input and expertise from FOKMAS regarding elephant management and conservation issues in Indonesia. Private facilities in Indonesia that manage Sumatra elephants (i.e. zoos and wildlife parks) increasingly request input and support

from FOKMAS to improve their captive elephant handling and management strategies. Currently FOKMAS has been asked by the government to actively participate in educating mahouts in the use of captive elephants for HEC management in Sumatra. FOKMAS also contributes to the collection of data on populations of wild and captive Sumatran elephants, thus providing valuable input for conservation and welfare strategies to Indonesian government agencies and NGOs.

FOKMAS is a young organization that continues to develop. However, FOKMAS is the only professional group of mahouts in Asia, and has already demonstrated the value of sharing experiences and building capacity of this level of staff. This communication not only improves knowledge and skill about captive elephant care and husbandry, but also involves mahouts very effectively in broader issues of elephant conservation and forest protection.



Camp elephant “Tio” (Tangkahan, Sumatra)  
Photo by Mahdi Ismail