

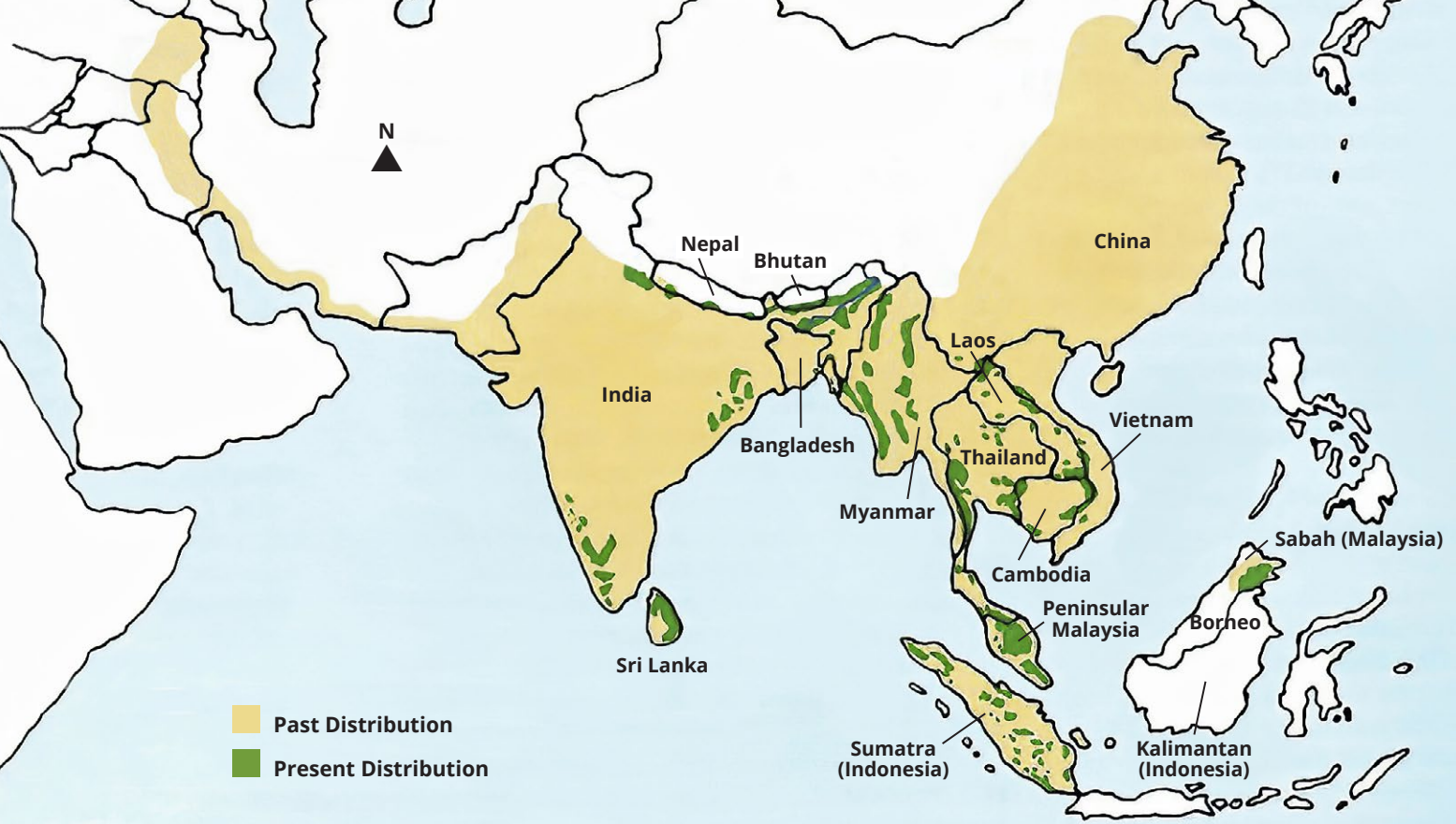


The IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group



The Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) is a global network of specialists studying, managing, monitoring, and conserving Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) across their 13 Range States in Asia. The overall aim of the AsESG is to promote the long-term conservation of Asia's elephants and, where possible, recover populations to viable levels; provide sound scientific and technical advice to aid decision-making and conservation actions; and build the capacity of Asian Elephant Range States to manage the species and the challenges it faces.

The AsESG acts as the Red List Authority for the Asian elephant, carrying out assessments of populations for inclusion in the IUCN Red List. Group members have also helped in the development of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) system for Monitoring the Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) and the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS).



Elephants are the largest living land animals in Asia. They are generalists that are found in habitats ranging from dry thorn forests to wet evergreen forests, and they are adapted to surviving on resources that vary based on specific conditions in different regions. Across Asia, elephants' long-standing connection with humans have made them cultural icons. Today, there are fewer than 50,000 Asian elephants in the wild, and around 15,000 in captivity.

Asian elephants once ranged from West Asia almost to the Mediterranean coast; into the Indian subcontinent; eastward into Southeast Asia, including the islands of Sumatra, Java, and Borneo; and as far north as the Yangtze River in China. This former range covered over 9 million km². Today, the species has disappeared from around 95% of its historical range and is extinct in Western Asia, Java, and most of China.

Currently, wild Asian elephants are found in 13 countries and distributed over an area of 486,800 km². The species occurs in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka in South Asia, and in Cambodia, China, Indonesia (Kalimantan and Sumatra), Lao PDR, Malaysia (Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah), Myanmar, Thailand, and

Vietnam in Southeast Asia. A small feral population occurs in the Andaman Islands (India).

All populations of Asian elephants are included in CITES Appendix I,

and the global status of the species in the IUCN Red List is Endangered. The Sumatran elephant (*E. m. sumatranus*) is listed as Critically Endangered.

Estimated minimum and maximum number of Asian elephants in the wild and in captivity in Asia

COUNTRY	WILD POPULATION (min-max)	CAPTIVE POPULATION (min-max)
Bangladesh	289-437	96
Bhutan	605-761	9
Cambodia	400-600	70
China	300	243
India	29,964	3,467-3,667
Indonesia		
Sumatra	1,724	467
Kalimantan (Borneo)	60-80	
Laos	500-600	454
Malaysia		
Peninsular	1,223-1,677	92
Sabah (Borneo)	2,040	23
Myanmar	2,000-4,000	5,693
Nepal	109-145	215
Sri Lanka	5,879	230
Thailand	3,126-3,341	3,783
Vietnam	104-132	88
TOTAL	48,323-51,680	14,930-15,130

Sources: Sukumar 2003, updates by IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group in 2016 and 2018; AERSM, 2017; MoEFCC 2017, Bangladesh elephant conservation action plan 2018-27; National Elephant Survey report, Bhutan, NCD 2018. Menon and Tiwari, 2019.



MAJOR THREATS AND CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

1. Habitat loss and fragmentation

The most significant threat to Asian elephants is habitat loss and fragmentation due to economic growth and increasing human populations. Elephants in Asia are competing for space in the most populous continent on the planet—one that is experiencing a human population growth rate of 0.5% to 1.5% per annum. The spread of human settlements, plantations, industry, farming, mining, and linear infrastructures (roads, railway lines, irrigation canals, power lines, pipelines) has squeezed elephant populations into ever-decreasing pockets of forest surrounded by human settlements that often block traditional migratory routes.

2. Extirpation of small populations

Elephant populations compressed into ever-decreasing spaces as a result of habitat loss and fragmentation face the reduced likelihood of surviving environmental catastrophes (drought, flood, etc.), disease, or stochastic threats (e.g., highly skewed sex ratios).

3. Human-elephant conflict

Increasing habitat loss and fragmentation are also leading to human-elephant conflict, another key threat to Asian elephants across their range. With a large proportion of elephant habitat found outside conservation/protected areas and interspersed with agricultural land and human settlements, elephants and humans often encounter each other, with these interactions turning negative on a regular basis. Every year, elephants damage millions of dollars' worth of agricultural crops and property, and hundreds of people and elephants are killed or injured in the resulting conflicts. In many cases, villagers have retaliated by poisoning or electrocuting elephants. More than 600 human and 450 elephant deaths are reported every year in Asia; 80%-85% of these are reported from India and Sri Lanka.



Apart from retaliatory killing, elephants are also being killed due to infrastructure impacts, such as train collisions (mostly in India and Sri Lanka) and vehicle collisions (largely in Malaysia and Thailand). In India alone, approximately 312 elephants died as a result of train hits between 1987 and 2019; in Sri Lanka, 21 elephants were lost between 2017 and 2018.

4. Poaching and illegal trade in elephant products

Poaching, especially for the emerging skin trade, remains a significant threat in Asia. In Southeast Asia, in particular, there is a ready market for products made from elephant tusks/tushes, meat, skin, tail, and hair. Given the already small size of the elephant populations in many of these countries, and the fact that they are further fragmented into small subpopulations, poaching is a very serious threat to their survival. The capture of calves and juveniles for live trade is also a serious threat facing Asian elephants in several parts of their range.

Mandate of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group

The Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) is an integral part of the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The mandate of the AsESG is derived from the four objectives outlined by the SSC, which are to

- **Assess and monitor the status of wild and captive populations**

The AsESG provides the best available, scientifically grounded evidence on the abundance, distributions, and demographic status of Asian elephant populations in all 13 range states. It sets advisory guidelines for range states to perform their own assessments to maintain common standards of rigor, which facilitates range-wide assessments while building range-state capacity to perform necessary assessments.

- **Analyse the threats to wild populations and the interrelationship with captive populations**

The AsESG analyses threats to wild populations and raises awareness of these by communicating findings within and outside the scientific community, and sets standards or guidelines for the management and welfare of wild and captive elephants.

- **Provide conservation recommendations and initiate conservation actions involving relevant stakeholders**

The AsESG uses its advisory mandate to guide Asian elephant conservation and welfare actions undertaken by governments, civil society, or any other relevant stakeholders. AsESG members with various areas of expertise will collaborate

with those outside the specialist group to outline conservation strategies for Asian elephants.

- **Convene expertise needed for conserving Asian elephants**

The AsESG's community of researchers and practitioners meets regularly in order to consult one another and conduct its own activities, while subsets of the AsESG may also meet separately as required. The AsESG also convenes gatherings in the form of conferences or workshops open to external participants, with specific aims or themes that it deems necessary and timely for furthering the protection of Asian elephants.

Among AsESG's current work streams are these: assisting range states with their national elephant conservation action plans and building field staff capacity; developing guidelines/manuals on arresting the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam, creating artificial water holes in elephant habitats, managing human-elephant conflict, managing captive elephants in musth, the use of captive elephants for tourism, emerging diseases and threats, and the impact of the refugee crisis on elephant habitats in Bangladesh; and mapping the distribution of Asian elephants and other aspects of elephant conservation.



All AsESG members are actively involved in various aspects of elephant conservation and/or management. There are currently about 110 volunteer members from 19 countries led by the AsESG Chair, Mr Vivek Menon. Apart from the members, the group also has Ex-officio officials from all Range States, nominated by the relevant Ministries to manage elephant conservation in the countries. Membership is reviewed and reappointed approximately every four years.



IUCN is a membership Union uniquely composed of both government and civil society organisations. It provides public, private and non-governmental organisations with the knowledge and tools that enable human progress, economic development and nature conservation to take place together. By facilitating these solutions, IUCN provides governments and institutions at all levels with the impetus to achieve universal goals, including on biodiversity, climate change and sustainable development, which IUCN was instrumental in defining.



ELEPHANT FAMILY
Protecting Asian elephants and their habitat



Chairperson AsESG **Mr Vivek Menon**
Program Manager AsESG **Dr Sandeep Kr Tiwari**
Red List Coordinator AsESG **Dr A Christy Williams**

Office of the Chair, AsESG
Wildlife Trust of India | F-13, Sector-8, Noida 201301, India
Phone: +91 120-4143900 | Fax: +91 120-4143933

www.asesg.org