

## Editorial

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My connection with the Asian Elephant Specialist Group of IUCN/SSC goes back to 1997. The Group was first formed earlier in that year. In one sense I may be called one of its founder members, though I was not a part of the Group initially formed, but was invited to join it a few months later. The same year I participated in the first meeting of the Group held in Colombo that year or thereabouts. Thus I take it I am in a position to chronicle the Group's progress during its initial years.

The first task before the Group was to determine the number and home range of elephants in Asia. Very little of this was known those days, except vague hearsay evidence. This was true even a decade after the formation of the Group. To illustrate the point, in a meeting of Life Scientists held in the lecture hall of the Indian Museum in Calcutta, someone from the audience asked Mr. J. C. Daniel of Bombay Natural History Society, then the Chairman of the Group how many elephants were there in North East India? He answered that a study funded by WWF (International) was going on and he would be in a position to answer only when the study was complete.

India for the purpose of the study had been divided into four regions: North, Central, South and North East India. It was a time when the racio-political turbulence in North East India was at its height. Even now the situation in the hilly region of North East India is rather vague. Only the other day I read in a newspaper that the birth rates of elephants could vary depending on the habitat, and the soil. Taking a flat rate for all the regions would be extremely unreliable.

There was some confusion in the earlier stages: the first was the labelling of elephants as an "indicator" species. The top position had already been taken over by the Tiger as the "climax" species. Now it appeared that the "indicator"

species (of the health of the habitat) was the only suitable label left for the elephant to indicate its importance in the scheme of land biota.

While working with elephants it became clear to us that the problem with elephants is not unidimensional; but had many layers not the least of it was the problem of man-elephant conflict. It was soon clear that with the rise of human population the demand for arable land became imperative leading to an inexorable encroachment on elephant territory. Even now in India the much debated question of "corridors" remains legally undefined, though elephants moving from one part of the habitat to another is often at the heart of the problem. The "corridor" problem came to the fore during our study of the "conflict" problem in 1975 in North Bengal. Even now the distinction between "passage" and "corridor" is not always clear. A passage may be developed into a habitat but a "corridor" must not become a passage. It must not encourage elephants to linger. A "corridor" allows movement but does not encourage elephants to linger when moving from one habitat pocket to another. The "corridor" problem is clearly stated in Government of India publication, *Project Elephant*.

Thus the next stage of our enquiry led to the problem of man-elephant conflict. An editorial is not the proper place for footnotes (nevertheless, I refer here to *Gajah 25, 2006*) as a valuable resource book on the topic. I remember sometime ago an editorial appeared in *Gajah* outlining the history of man-elephant conflict, each species claiming its share of the available natural resources; hence the elephant as an iconic species for conservation still remains an important topic since it continues to have many lacunae.

Finally, it is necessary to mention, therefore, that "number" can be a problem here. The more elephants the merrier is no solution to the

problem, but “proper use”, that re introduction of the system of keeping “UDR” (undetected removal) register for every elephant forest and replacing the current practice in India, for example, of using elephants for patrolling forests on Jeeps, in short, “using” elephants for “work” and not merely to increase gate-takings of zoos of affluent countries.

It may be necessary at the present stage of our enquiry to review the progress of the project of elephant conservation, some stages of which

have been outlined above and to ask for the status of different levels of field work in different regions. They have to be put in a format to make necessary investigations, remembering that it is not the “holy cow”, which is a different kind of conservation, however pious the intention may be. Let us therefore, forget for the time being the present Theodicy of Conservation efforts and keep our eyes riveted on the new Holy Book – The Red Data Book and always keep in mind that we are interested in the survival of the species, rather than in the number of the species.



Elephants at Kala Wewa (Sri Lanka)

Photo by Jennifer Pastorini

## Note from the Editor

Jayantha Jayewardene

This is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue of *Gajah*, the Journal of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group. From its beginnings as a Newsletter, *Gajah* has now developed into a fully fledged, internationally accepted journal. We have to thank the late Lyn de Alwis and Charles Santiapillai for initiating the Newsletter. Special thanks are due to Charles Santiapillai who was the editor for a long period and made the metamorphosis from a Newsletter to *Gajah* happen. He worked indefatigably to bring this about.

Since this is the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary issue, the editorial board thought it would be appropriate to have papers on the current status of elephants in the range states. The collection of papers, presented in this issue, provides an overview of the status of Asian elephants in 12 of the 13 Asian elephant range states, with separate papers for Peninsular

Malaysia and Borneo (Sabah and Kalimantan). Unfortunately, a report on the status of elephants in Thailand is missing due to the paper not being submitted on time.

The assessments made and opinions expressed in each paper are those of the authors based on their experience and knowledge. Readers are encouraged to comment on any major omissions or additions necessary. This can lead to a fruitful discussion and greater clarity of the status of elephants in each of the individual range states.

Although it was intended to publish the list of AsESG members, as has been done in the past, unfortunately the many requests to the co-chairs to provide the current list failed to produce a result.