Gajah 42 (2015) 3-6

Correspondence

Comments on: Jayantha Jayewardene (2014) Editorial. Gajah 41: 1-2.

Dear Jayantha

I am writing in response to your Editorial in the most recent *Gajah*. Before I turn to the Editorial, however, I would like to once again express my thanks to you, to the *Gajah* Editorial Board, and to Hank Hammatt, our webmaster for the excellent job you have all done over the last years editing and producing *Gajah* and making the journal and individual papers therein available online. I have acknowledged your sterling efforts for *Gajah* on many occasions including in my reports to the SSC, written with Ajay Desai, on the AsESG's work (AsESG 2012, 2013) but it is of course fitting to do so again now that you are standing-down as editor.

In your editorial, you make a number of points but clearly a key point is that about communication. I accept that communication could be improved significantly and apologize for any deficiencies in this regard. I also note that communication should be a 'two-way' process. For example, Ajay's and my calls for information or comments to AsESG members have often produced very few, or in some cases, no, responses. It is also worth noting that some years ago Ajay and I proposed creating an AsESG listserv and/or a Newsletter to provide a means of fostering discussion and keeping AsESG members up to date and informed of the AsESG's activities, notable developments, etc. but the majority of the group's members were not in favour of these ideas. One way of addressing the group's communication issues might be to actively use the website's news page, another might be to consider the idea of, say, a two-monthly-update bulletin that could be emailed to all members and posted on the website. I would welcome the membership's thoughts on these ideas. Finally, I am happy to commit to a 24-hour maximum response time for those emails clearly identified in the subject line as 'important' or 'urgent'.

An important point related to communication resulting from your Editorial, and discussed in the correspondence it has generated, is the desirability for the AsESG to have a Program Officer who could handle day to day communications and otherwise assist with AsESG's work. I could not agree more, and as you and others should know because we have included reference to it in Ajay's and my reports on the AsESG's activities (please see the hyperlinks in the references listed below), we announced a couple of years ago that we were seeking funding for such a position. We have also discussed possible opportunities for support for a Program Officer and the role that officer would play with a number of AsESG members over the last two years. In any case, we sought funding for a Program Officer position and a donor agreed to fund such an officer but unfortunately there was an unexpected hiatus partly because of the fall-out from the global financial crisis. However, I am pleased to be able to say that we are now finalizing an agreement with another donor for support of a Program Officer and will begin seeking a suitable candidate in the near future.

The most important point arising from your Editorial and related correspondence, of course, concerns the nature and extent of the AsESG's work: i.e. "tangible action" for Asian elephants. Doubtless the group's work could be better communicated but one should not simply assume that because one does not know everything that is happening that little or nothing is actually happening. Much of the AsESG's work is summarized in the annual and quadrennial reports in the SSC's journal *Species*, examples of which are hyperlinked in the references listed below. I will, however, take this opportunity to highlight a few of the more important of the AsESG's recent achievements, actions, and engagements:

Two of the most important roles of specialist groups are acting as the Red List Authority for the taxa concerned and conservation planning.

The AsESG has therefore been responsible for the assessing the Red List status of Asian elephants (and many group members participated in that process) and for listing the Sumatran elephant subspecies as critically endangered in 2011 (and again quite a number of group members participated in that process). Of course listing a subspecies as critically endangered is not "a cause for celebration", which is why we wrote in our report on the 2008–2012 quadrennium: "On a more sober note, the AsESG listed Sumatran elephants (*E. m. sumatranus*) as critically endangered on *The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* in November 2011. The primary reason for the critically endangered listing was the scale and rate of habitat loss … The AsESG has offered its help in addressing the threats to Sumatra's elephants to the Indonesian authorities."

With regard to conservation planning, the AsESG organized a workshop to draft a *Conservation Strategy for Asian Elephants* that was attended by government representatives from all range States as well as many AsESG members. Then, in an attempt to seek wider government 'buy-in' for a range-wide strategy, we adopted the process used by IUCN and others for African elephants that resulted in the widely-acclaimed African Elephant Action Plan (AEAP). Specifically, the AsESG worked with the CITES Secretariat and a number of range States to seek a mandate from the range States as well as CITES for an Asian Elephant Conservation Strategy. Thus at the last CITES Conference, Cambodia proposed such a CITES Decision (following a request from the AsESG and others) and India was ready to support it (again after requests from the AsESG) but unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding, Indonesia opposed the idea, which was ultimately dropped at that conference. Nevertheless, we have continued to have discussions with Asian elephant range State governments and with CITES and I am hopeful that the idea of replicating the success of the AEAP for Asian elephants will be given a high-level mandate at the CITES meeting in January 2016, with the intention of launching the strategy at the CITES Conference in October 2016. If we can obtain such a mandate, then AsESG members and others as appropriate will of course be involved in the preparation of the strategy. If a mandate for adopting an AEAP-like process is not forthcoming, we will have to decide on another suitable way forward in discussion with AsESG members and the range States.

Another key issue, on which the AsESG has been active, with some success, is that of the illegal live trade in Asian elephants. As you know, such trade is a significant and growing problem in Asia. The AsESG has, therefore, worked with a number of partners, including Elephant Family in particular, both at the CITES Conference in March 2013 and at the last CITES Standing Committee meeting (July 2014), to draw attention to this problem and successfully get live trade into the purview of CITES and thus provide some 'weight' to calls to address the problem. Subsequent to the 2014 CITES meeting I worked to seek funds for an investigation of the scale of the problem in Asia and the measures needed to address it. The CITES Secretariat has now contacted the AsESG to say that it will fund a consultant and is seeking our inputs into the 'TOR' for that consultant (we will be in touch with relevant Task Force leaders once we receive the TOR from CITES). Encouragingly, we also have a donor lined-up to help fund follow-up work, i.e. implementation of the consultant's recommendations (e.g. registration of captive elephants).

Questions around the issue of captive elephants more generally are also a growing concern. These issues include (1) the trend for range States to remove elephants from the wild in response to human–elephant conflict and release them in very small fenced areas which are then called 'sanctuaries' with obvious negative effects on wild populations; (2) interactions between captive elephant populations and wild elephant populations including the threat posed by capture from the wild, and the future of large under-employed captive elephant populations such as those in Myanmar – e.g. should they be reintroduced into the wild?; (3) the need for captive elephant registration standards and much-wider roll-out of elephant registration to prevent abuses including illegal trade in live elephants; and (4) other ways of monitoring and combating the illegal trade in live elephants, as discussed above. As a number of AsESG members know as

a result of on-going discussions, we are planning to hold a workshop this year or early next year to address these and other related issues, including possible IUCN position statements, the development of registration standards, and ways to promote greater 'roll-out' of registration. Several donors have already said they will fund (or are likely to fund) that workshop and/or its outputs including registration standards, and we have had discussions with the Cambodian government about their hosting the workshop. I expect to be able to provide both more details of this workshop and call for the group's inputs in the near future.

The AsESG has organized (or co-organized) a number of workshops, notably the range-wide mapping/status assessment and the strategic planning workshops in Cambodia in 2008 and the human–elephant conflict mitigation methods workshop in China in 2009, which the AsESG's HEC Task Force led on. As mentioned above, we are also planning a workshop on captive elephant issues to be held later this year or early next year in Cambodia.

The AsESG worked with the AfESG to develop the IUCN's *Elephant Database* <http://www.elephantdatabase.org/maps/asian_range> and the range data for Asian elephants are now included in and publically available from that database. Reviewing and entering all Asian elephant population status data has taken longer than I would have liked but I am hoping that the appointment of a Program Officer will facilitate that process (a likely requirement for the Program Officer will be good GIS skills).

Other notable recent achievements include the AsESG's involvement in the preparation of the annual reports to CITES on the *Status of Elephant Populations, Levels of Illegal Killing and the Trade in Ivory* from MIKE, ETIS, IUCN/SSC (AfESG & AsESG), CITES, and WCMC (CITES, IUCN/SSC AfESG & AsESG, TRAFFIC, WCMC 2011, 2012, 2014). These reports were a key influence on the CITES processes that resulted in a number of countries being instructed by CITES to produce National Ivory Action Plans (NIAPs) in 2013 and 2014 and AsESG members subsequently helped a number of countries produce their NIAPs working 'behind the scenes'.

Finally, I have been in discussions with donors and others about a high-profile campaign to put Asian elephants 'on the map': that is to say to draw attention to the threats to Asian elephants, to remind the global community that Asian elephants need help as much as, indeed more than, African elephants, and to help drive funding and political support for Asian elephant conservation. The details of that campaign (tentative title, "The Forgotten Elephant") need to be a little further developed before they are ready for sharing with the group for its inputs, however the campaign is likely to include high-profile elephant-themed public art exhibitions, films and popular articles, fund-raising events, and promotion of Asian elephant conservation in relevant political and development fora.

Turning now to the question of funding for *Gajah,* contrary to your assertion, Ajay and I have helped you secure funding for *Gajah* from donors such as Singapore Zoo and USFWS and defended you with IUCN HQ when there were disagreements over the contracts required in order for the funds to be disbursed. I am of course happy to seek funds again now and whenever needed in the future to help secure the future of *Gajah* but it is perhaps necessary to again clarify, in response to your comments about transparency and your statement that "not one cent (or rupee) has been provided by the AsESG for *Gajah*", that the AsESG does not have an annual (or any other) budget from IUCN or any other organization. We cannot just provide money for *Gajah* or any other AsESG activity, instead we have to seek funds on a project-by-project basis.

In response to accusations that the AsESG has become dysfunctional under Ajay and myself as the group's Co-chairs it is perhaps worth thinking back to the "state of play" when we took over: *Gajah* was becoming moribund (it only came out erratically, was only available in hard copy, back issues or papers in previous editions were essentially unavailable, and the group was in bad odour with the main donor for *Gajah*), there

was no AsESG website, no AsESG Task Forces, no engagement with MIKE or CITES more widely, etc., etc. Since we took on co-chairing of the AsESG: *Gajah* has become a regularly-produced high-quality journal and all the back issues (and individual papers therein) are now available as PDFs online (and as we have repeatedly acknowledged that is a great tribute to your work and to that of the editorial board and Hank Hammatt); the AsESG now has a website (and let us again acknowledge Hank's continuing efforts there) and Task Forces, which have produced, for example, reports on invasive plants in elephant habitat, elephant health protocols, and a bibliography on elephant tuberculosis. We also convened the first-ever Asian Elephant Range States' Meeting. Other activities were summarized above, including the AsESG's engagement with the AfESG, with MIKE and ETIS, and with CITES more generally. These and other activities have been all been discussed with group members, many of whom were of course involved in the activities; in addition, these activities have also been reported to the group and to the SSC and IUCN more generally (see, for example, the reports referred to above).

I would like to close by noting that there are appropriate and professional ways of raising concerns about a Specialist Group such as writing to the Chair or Co-chairs in the first instance, and allowing them a chance to reply before deciding whether to write to others such as the Chair of the SSC. Writing critical editorials in a Specialist Group's journal is certainly not an appropriate method of raising concerns: Specialist Group journals are scientific/technical journals, not newspapers, and need to treated as such by all involved in their production. Indeed, up until your last editorial you have followed such high standards and are largely responsible for building the high reputation that *Gajah* has today. I therefore found it especially sad that you closed your distinguished tenure as editor with this editorial, not so much because of its contents, but because of the way in which it was done. I am, of course, more than willing to put this behind us and work together with all of the AsESG for the good of our Specialist Group and the magnificent species for which we are responsible.

With best wishes,

Simon Hedges

Co-chair, IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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