News Briefs

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1. Dong Nai tries to curb elephant disturbances (Vietnam)

Vietnam.net - 4.1.2014

The Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has given the go-ahead to a project on supervising elephants in Dong Nai province, which aims to prevent elephant-human conflict and improve the natural landscapes of the Dong Nai Natural and Cultural Reserve. There are 11 elephants living in the forests belonging to the Dong Nai Natural and Cultural Reserve. Ten years ago, the group of elephants was believed to total 20 members. Meanwhile, locals all said that they have not tried to kill the elephants, because elephants are sacred animals.

According to the Vinh Cuu district People's Committee, local residents have to prepare every night to drive elephants away if they come to residential quarters. "In 2013 and the first nine months of 2014 alone, the elephants came 300 times, damaging 100 hectares of sugar cane, 60 hectares of cassava, 50 hectares of cashew and mango," a local official said. Local residents began asking for help to protect themselves from the elephants some years ago. The project began soon after it got approval.

The most important component is the installment of an electronic barrier to prevent elephants from entering residential quarters. This includes 20 kilometers of fixed fence and 10 kilometers of roving fence to be located in the forest area in two communes of Ma Da and Phu Ly of Vinh Cuu district. The barrier would operate with solar energy or electricity from the 220 V national grid. It would be designed in a way to just frighten animals, but not kill them.

2. Wild elephants of Khao Chamao still rile their neighbors (Thailand)

The Sunday Nation - 1.2.2015

The longstanding problem of wild elephants from Khao Chamao mountain ridge in Rayong roaming into residential areas or eating fruit in local plantations has continued despite various measures to try to stop this. The dredging of large deep canals to keep them from crossing to villages and farmland only works in part of the year. When the canals are full of rain-soaked clay the lanimals are able to cross. Many areas damaged by the elephants need to be declared disaster zones, and lengthy efforts and interviews with villagers have only upset them, he said, as people were angry about damage to their crops and property.

Building salt licks for elephants had been a little helpful but had not ended the problem, while growing banana trees for the elephants had also not resolved the problem, as thousands of banana trees were consumed in little more more than a week, Lamphun said. Awiruj Sapphaso, who has an 18-rai plantation where fruit is regularly eaten by the wild animals, said the planting of banana trees and building of salt licks could not save plantations from being ravaged by elephants from the wild.

A herd of 30 elephants entered his plantations on Tuesday and fed on various fruit grown on his property. They also broke water tubes to drink from them, as it is currently a drought period in the wild. Many fruit growers in the area have turned to cassava and rush to harvest crops - so the elephants don't dig up and eat up all cassava, while any fruit, either still on trees or harvested and stored for delivery, is moved promptly.

There are around 80 elephants in Khao Chamao national park, which connects to the Khao Chamao mountain ridge, where there are 280 to 300 elephants. Some herds return to the wild after entering residential areas or feeding on fruit, while many others stay overnight or a couple of days, before roaming to other areas and returning. The mountain ridge, which connects with five tambon in Khao Chamao district in Rayong, covers a vast area in four other provinces where around 23,000 residents - mostly farmers and fruit growers - live.

3. Tusker falls prey to wild cat attack at Valppara (India)

Express News Service - 25.2.2015

A 9-year-old elephant is suspected to have fallen prey to a marauding tiger near the tea estate in Valppara, bordering Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It is suspected that the pachyderm was attacked either by a streak of tigers or a marauding wild cat in the tea estate near Valppara when the elephant was grazing there. Earlier, tigers had hunted down two elephants, including a calf, in two separate incidents in the forests of the state a couple of years

The post-mortem report of the elephant had also reported that the animal died of fatal injuries suffered in the attack. The forest officials suspect that the jumbo might have been sick due to some other diseases, making it vulnerable to the attack by other predators.

4. Myanmar captures 9th rare white elephant in western Ayeyarwaddy

The China Post - 2.3.2015

Myanmar says it has found a rare, white elephant in the jungles of the western Ayeyarwaddy region. Forestry official Tun Tun Oo says the 7-year-old female was captured by his department on Friday, six weeks after it was initially spotted in a reserve in Pathein township.

White elephants, actually albinos, have for centuries been revered in Myanmar, Thailand, Laos and other Asian nations. Often pinkish in color, with fair eyelashes and toenails, the animals were normally kept and pampered by monarchs as a symbol of royal power and prosperity — and many people still believe they bring good luck to the country.

Myanmar has eight white elephants in captivity, most from the Ayeyarwaddy region. Five are now in the zoo in the capital, Naypyitaw, and three in Yangon. The capture of wild elephants for domestic use has become a threat to wild populations. India, Vietnam, and Myanmar have banned capture in order to conserve their wild herds, but in Myanmar elephants are still caught each year for the timber industry or the illegal wildlife trade, the WWF says.

5. Wild tusker returns to Nepal after trampling six to death (Nepal/India)

Press Trust of India - 5.3.2015

The wild elephant, which trampled six persons to death and seriously injured four others in Sitamarhi and Madhubani districts of Bihar over the last two days, returned to its natural habitat in Nepal during the wee hours today. Additional Chief Wildlife Warden said, “We successfully managed to send the wild tusker back to Nepal. It crossed the Royal Canal at the international border near Jainagar in Madhubani district at around 2.30 AM. We verified this with its footprints.”



Elephant bull spraying sand over his body
Photo by Ritesh Joshi

The elephant had strayed from its herd based at Parsa Wildlife Sanctuary in the neighbouring country during the ongoing mating season, after perhaps losing in a fight with some other tusker and entered Sitamarhi district on Tuesday last. It trampled four persons to death in Sitamarhi and entered Madhubani district yesterday, where it crushed two others.

Chaudhary said the wild tusker would have peacefully returned to its habitat, had the villagers not disturbed it by creating noise and chasing it.

6. Another wild baby elephant dies in Vietnam forest

Thanh Nien News - 26.3.2015

Locals in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak on Tuesday discovered the dead body of a baby elephant in a forest near their farms. The animal, weighing 100 kilograms, was found dead with a large loss of skin and damaged toes.

Initial investigation has shown that the baby elephant must have died while moving with its herd and being stomped on to death by other bigger members. Locals said they had witnessed a herd of around 30 elephants flocking out from the forest, searching for food in recent days.

7. Thailand issues world's first elephant ID cards

New Strait Times - 26.3.2015

Thailand has issued the world's first elephant identity cards, Thai News Agency (TNA) reported. The cards were presented to four elephant operators in Muang Hua Hin Municipality in Prachuap Khiri Khan province in the upper south at a ceremony presided by governor Weera Sriwatanatrakul late last month. The operators are Elephant Village, Hutsadin Elephant Foundation, Hua Hin Safari and Hua Hin Hills Vineyard.

Listed in the ID cards are details such as an elephant's name and age, photos, bodily marks, place of living, owner's name, ID and microchip numbers. The cards were issued in compliance with a new regulation implemented by the Interior Ministry and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to curb illegal ivory trade.

Prachuap Khiri Khan assistant governor Pongpan Wichiansamut said the move is hoped to prevent wild elephants from being kept and raised illegally.

8. In a first, an ambulance for jumbos (India)

Times of India - 21.3.2015

An ambulance, specially designed to ferry or rescue ailing elephants, is expected to hit the city streets shortly. The vehicle, which can transport jumbos weighing upwards of 5,000kg, is similar to a normal ambulance. It is equipped with a medicinal kit, emergency tools and syringe storage units. Besides, a veterinarian can also conduct minor operations on an elephant in emergency situations.

Sanjeev Jain, who designed the ambulance, said, "The vehicle was customized on a specific demand made by Wildlife SOS and is one of its kind in the country at present. It is 15 feet long, 8 feet wide and 11.5 feet in height, with two air-conditioned cabins for veterinary and his assistant." Coordinator of Wildlife SOS Baiju Raj said, "The ambulance is good enough to ferry elephants who are either being exploited by circus owners or have been suffering from a prolonged illness in jungles."

The ambulance, which was built in collaboration with a vehicle design company, cost Rs 50 lakh. The chassis of the vehicle is made of steel instead of customary aluminium or iron.

9. Electric fences kill more tuskers in Tamil Nadu than poachers (India)

NewsHub - 23.3.2015

Electric fences are wreaking havoc in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, killing four tuskers in the last six months. Erected illegally on private estates,

agricultural farms and resorts, these fences are being seen as the biggest threat to elephants in the Reserve that is home to almost 25% of the total Asian elephant population in the country.

All these fences had been drawing electricity illegally from connections meant for houses or sheds and in most cases, the officials concerned were aware they had been erected without permission. Owners of these estates have not been booked for the deaths. Equally responsible for the fences coming up are foresters, guards and watchers who patrol the forests, say naturalists.

In January 2012, in response to a petition, Madras high court directed the secretary of the state environment and forests department to remove illegally erected fences, solar and electric, in the elephant corridor in Nilgiris. Subsequently, an appeal was preferred against this order in Supreme Court, which dismissed it. Despite the high court order, farm owners and others continue to put up fences in the elephant corridor, say conservationists. Wildlife authorities said a case of an elephant being killed by an electric fence is always treated as a case of poaching. As the animal is categorized under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, the offender is imprisoned for a minimum of three years. In most cases, however, the owner of the resort, farm or estate who erected the fence goes scot free and only the caretaker is punished. Those punished get bail and come out of prison in a short time, admitted a forest officer who said this was a serious issue that had to be addressed by the authorities conceded.

10. Enumeration of elephants in ATR using new method (India)

Express News Service - 23.4.2015

An indirect enumeration of the elephant population in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve (ATR) will be conducted through the 'synchronised dung-decay rate' method from May 1. The results will enable the Forest Department to find why elephants are coming out of the forests. It will also help them assess whether people have encroached on elephant corridors, sources said.

Staff in all six forest ranges in the ATR will be involved in the enumeration. On day one, foresters, guards and anti-poaching watchers will mark fresh (under 24 hours old) elephant dung in the forests. They will also take the GPS reading of the spots where dung has been marked and also take photographs. Fresh dung samples will also be taken from 15 places across the six ranges the first day itself. The reserve has been divided into 15 sections to facilitate the process.

The process will be done seven times over 140 days to check whether the dung has disappeared or is intact. The Forest Department will get a clear picture of the elephant distribution in the reserve from the process. "We are counting the number of elephants through the 'synchronised dung-decay rate method'. This is the first time that we are doing it exclusively for elephants," said ATR Field Director V T Kandhasamy.

11. Vietnamese elephant injured by poacher's snare recovers after treatment

Thanh Nien News - 4.5.2015

A young elephant rescued from a poacher's trap in the Central Highlands is currently in better condition after being treated for severe wounds. Dak Lak Province's Elephant Conservation Center said the male, around three years old, was found by residents in the Yok Don National Park in February with trunk and leg wounds. The elephant was then brought to the center for medical treatment.

On April 18, Khajohnpat Boonprasert, an elephant veterinarian at Thailand's National Elephant Institute, and two Thai mahouts arrived at the center to help treat the elephant as requested. They anesthetized the elephant, cleaned the wounds and dressed them. After one week of treatment, the elephant got better. As his wounds start to heal, he walks more easily than before.

Home to one of the largest elephant herds, Dak Lak Province's forests used to be inhabited by more than 550 wild elephants in 1980. However, the number has significantly shrunk to five herds

with a total of 60-65 individuals. Some 20 wild elephants have died since 2009. Meanwhile, the number of domestic elephants in the province has also reduced from 502 individuals in 1980 to only 43.

12. Females have the last say in mating among elephants (India)

Express News Service - 9.5.2015

Female elephants control their mates and the manner of mating, reveals a study by post-doctoral fellow Karpagam Chelliah and Prof Raman Sukumar of the Centre for Ecological Sciences in IISc. The duo, who studied the mating preferences of elephants, have tried to find the importance of tusks, body size and musth in mating rituals. The data collection was carried out at Kaziranga National Park in Assam.

Mating preferences depend on several factors. "Some male traits may convey some information about male health and/or genetic quality to the female," explains Dr Chelliah. "The oestrous cycle of a female elephant is approximately 16 weeks, which means that if her egg is not fertilised within a day or two of ovulation, she would have to wait another 16 weeks for an opportunity to produce an offspring. So, paying attention to the current fertility condition of the males could be important in increasing the lifetime reproductive success of a female."



Wild elephant in Blang Raweu Aceh
Photo by Mahdi Ismail

The Asian elephant has elaborate mating rituals, one of which is the female walking in front of the male elephants to allure them. Males also compete with each other to copulate with an oestrous female, as well as 'guard' one or more females from other males. Research also showed that females are able to move away irrespective of the weight or height of the mounting male and found that this did not change even if the mounting male was in musth or had tusks. Besides, the duration of mounting is also controlled by the females.

13. Elephant sightings in Pu'er could be a sign for optimism (China)

GoKunming - 4.6.2015

Often when elephants make news in Yunnan it is for all the wrong reasons. However, snapshots taken this week in Pu'er show an apparently healthy herd of pachyderms meandering their way harmlessly through a coffee and tea plantation before disappearing again into the surrounding forest. The sighting took place outside of Manzhongtian, a small village midway between Pu'er City and Yunnan's border with Laos. Nineteen Asian elephants reportedly skirted a fence, walked through an open gate and then milled around with a herd of cattle for an hour.

Plantation owner Bai Yingfu told reporters it is the third time they've visited", adding a similar occurrences took place last summer and again in early 2015. Each time, the elephants ate a bit of corn or bananas and bathed in a pond on Bai's land, never causing any trouble other than slightly spooking his cattle. This is a marked change from typical news accounts concerning elephants in southern Yunnan, which often involve poaching for ivory or maulings.

On the surface, Bai's may sound like a simple feel-good story, but the farmer believes there is a deeper underlying meaning. "That the elephants come back means the environment here is still very good," he said, citing his plantation and those in the surrounding area adopting the organic and sustainable farming methods often required by coffee buyers such as Yunnan's Ai Ni Group.

14. Wild elephants found chomping on garbage (India)

Times of India - 7.6.2015

Garbage heaps are now making a presence in the country's forests too. The reserve forest near Bhakra range, 10 km from Haldwani city, has a large garbage heap bang in the middle of an important elephant corridor. On occasion, one catches sight of a majestic tusker making a meal of the mess. Forest department officials, asked if the garbage - which includes medical waste - might endanger the lives of wild elephants, said the "situation is being monitored".

A forest officer of the Terai Central and East divisions said, "Patrolling has been heightened in the area. CCTV cameras will soon be installed to keep vigil on such spots. Violation of wildlife laws and damaging flora and fauna will not be tolerated." The garbage heap lies in the elephant corridor between Fatehpur to Gadgadia. The district forest officer said the movement of elephants is not quite seasonal, though there is much movement in summer months when the animals head about in search of water too, among other things.

The use of a reserve forest area as a garbage site violates four pivotal laws: Forest Conservation Act 1980, Environment Protection Act, 1986, Public Liability Act, 1991 and Biological Diversity Act, 2002.

15. Wild elephant attack kills villager in SW China

Global Post - 22.6.2015

A villager was killed and his wife injured by wild Asian elephants while working in farmlands in southwest China's Yunnan Province, said local authorities on Monday. Villagers found Zhao Si dead and his wife Ming Ba injured in their own croplands Sunday morning in Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. The scene was chaotic with footprints of the wild animals.

The attack happened on Saturday. Ming Ba was buried in a collapsed shed in the croplands, which saved her from further attacks by the elephants. She was sent to a hospital for treatment. The county forestry bureau has strengthened monitoring of the wild Asian elephants nearby.

There have been several attacks in Xishuangbanna, which is home to 250 to 300 wild elephants, in recent years. In 2012 and 2013, two women died in such attacks in the area.

16. Inside an elephant capture (India)

Peepli - June 2015

The escalating conflict between man and elephant in Hassan left the authorities with no option but to order the capture. A dozen or so tame elephants were sent to Hassan to assist in the process, and once they reached the venue, it began. Sharpshooters armed with tranquillisers set out into the forest on foot to track the elephants. At first, they focused on the males — and when one was found, they brought it down with tranquillisers.

Forest officials and their helpers roped up the stunned elephant. The tame elephants then assisted, forced, and coaxed the captive to where the flat-bed lorries waited — a long, tedious procedure during which the wild elephant occasionally collapsed from the stress and the effort of resistance and had to be revived. Once at the loading zone, the tame elephants acting in concert with the commands from the mahout head-butted the wild elephant from in front, forcing it backwards into the lorry.

17. Success: Two rehabilitated elephant calves return to the wild in India

One Green Planet (IFAW post) - 2.7.2015

Two months in an elephant's lifespan is a relatively short amount of time. But when two rehabilitated juvenile females, Tora and Rani, were monitored traveling with wild elephants for a period of more than 60 days, we celebrated it as an extremely important milestone: We are

witnessing what could likely become the first-ever successful reintegration of rehabilitated calves into the wild herds in Assam. We are eternal optimists. It is our optimism and never-say-die attitude that bore fruit after eight years of hard work trying to re-wild rescued elephants through a protocol of rescue, rehabilitation, release and reintegration.

The story goes back to February 2007 with the IFAW-WTI Elephant Rehabilitation Project in collaboration with the Assam Forest Department. In eight years that followed, this project has translocated 19 rescued elephant calves for rehabilitation to Manas Tiger Reserve in Assam. Nine elephant calves are currently monitored through radio-telemetry for periods varying from nine months to 38 months in the release habitat. The complexity of the process of rehabilitation of a rescued elephant calf is well-documented with an overall success rate of rehabilitation at 47.3 percent. Assimilation and integration of hand-raised young calves, deprived of normal social life during infancy, is critical for these animals to learn the long-term survival and successful reproductive skills from the society of wild elephants.

Both Rani and Tora were about two months old when they were rescued, albeit two years apart. They were translocated and released together, when Rani was two years and eight months old and Tora was four and a half years old. When the eldest elephant Jakhala, who was released with these tow, refused to associate with them, these two calves managed to find acceptance in the wild herd that they are now part of.

18. Spotting the elephant not in the room (India)

Science Blog - 10.7.2015

An automated thermal detection system that can discern wild elephants from background and other animals in infrared images, could save lives in parts of the world where the animals roam free and often enter villages and other human habitations. Siva Mangai and colleagues at Karunya University, in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, explain how encounters between humans and elephants are a critical safety issue in the Western Ghats.

"The movement of wild elephants crossing the forest borders and the preventive measures taken causes damage to the lives of both people and elephants," the team explains. They suggest that automated processing of infrared images from cameras placed at strategic locations might provide an early-warning system and reduce such encounters to the mutual benefit of both elephants and people.

However, object recognition remains a challenging task. The team has now developed a clustering-based image segmentation approach for accurate elephant recognition in infrared images. Segmentation is a process of grouping a set of objects into segments of similar characteristics.

19. Ikarra Vasu, the elusive elephant killer (India)

The Hindu - 12.7.2015

Ikarra Vasu, the elusive poacher wanted for the wild elephant killings in Vazhachal, went by the name Varattupara Veerappan. Wildlife enforcers said that his uncanny hunting skills had earned him the sobriquet. Vasu lived on the fringes of lush tropical evergreen forests that teemed with game.

Very much like his namesake, he took to hunting at an early age. Soon, he graduated to big game. He spent hours in their smithies on the Kerala-Karnataka border fashioning 'Damascus barreled' muzzle loaders designed to withstand potent gunpowder charges that could propel 12 mm steel slugs with lethal accuracy. Investigators said that Vasu and his gang had been operating in Munnar, Vazhachal and Parambikulam forests with impunity for the past several years.

However, he never came under the radar of wildlife enforcers. His operations came to light when a gang member, Kunjumon, defected and turned informant. Kunjumon stated that the

elephant poachers routinely camped on a rock formation adjacent to a stream near Vilangumpara deep inside Vazhachal forests. According to Kunjumon, the gang hunted at least 20 wild elephants for their tusks since November last.

Wildlife enforcers have launched a manhunt for Vasu. Several of his collaborators are already in custody. The raids to retrieve the tusks of the elephants is still on.

20. The last generation of working elephants (Cambodia)

Phnom Pehn Post - 18.7.2015

Consensus has long ruled against the capture of wild elephants. Now that the existing domestic population is in old age, owners are left wondering what comes next. Standing in front of a traditional thatched roof Bunong house, 41-year-old elephant owner Han Samoeun watched as two tourists were led back into his village, Putang, atop his brother's pachyderm.

Like most of the domestic elephants in this hamlet, an elephant tourism hotspot in Mondulkiri's Sen Monorom district, Samoeun's female elephant Noeng Pajal, aged 56, is in her twilight years. Almost all are aged over 50, and with an elephant life expectancy of about 65 years, the population is starting to dwindle.



Elephants near Veppankulam (Sri Lanka)
Photo by Sampath Ekanayaka

The Forest Administration does not allow villagers to catch elephants. From building Angkor Wat to farming in Cambodia's most remote corners, elephants have for centuries played a central role in Cambodian society, nowhere more so than the ethnic Bunong communities in the country's east. However, trapping and taming wild elephants has been outlawed since the 1990s, and importing them from other countries is illegal.

Cambodia only has somewhere between 400 and 600 elephants remaining in the wild, with habitat loss and poaching continuing to threaten their numbers. But for the Bunong, who have kept elephants for centuries, the inability to recruit new animals to supplement their ageing herd means confronting not only a significant loss of income, but also a future without the creature at the heart of their animist religion.

21. When humans and elephants collide (China)

ECNS - 24.7.2015

The war between humans and elephants rages in southwest China's Yunnan Province. This year alone, three people have been killed by wild elephants there, and three elephants are known to have been killed by either pesticides or gunshot.

A villager named as Wang from Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, was detained by police on Sunday for killing a pregnant wild elephant. The villager opened fire with a homemade gun on a group of wild elephants that had invaded his land. A female elephant weighing more than 3 tonnes was later found dead in Wang's fishpond with a bullet in her head. The cow was carrying a 99-kilogram male calf and was almost ready to give birth.

On June 26, two immature bull elephants were found dead with blood oozing from their mouth, trunk and anus. Police found pesticides in the stomachs of both and have not ruled out the possibility that they were poisoned by farmers. As many as 16 wild elephants were seen in the area at the end of November and various incidents have since been reported.