Elephant Conservation in Bangladesh – Bringing Conservation Effort and Humanitarian Response Together

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Introduction

2018 marks a new era of conservation in Bangladesh. The ongoing Rohingya refugee crisis has brought humanitarian and conservation actors to work together in biodiversity-rich Cox's Bazar. This article emphasises the importance of regular investments in knowledge generation in the conservation sector so that evidence can be used for on-the-ground action and to influence practice and policy.

In 2016, IUCN Bangladesh published two books after conducting thorough, nation-wide surveys on Asian elephants for two years. One book was on the overall status of elephants (IUCN Bangladesh 2016) and the other was an atlas of the elephant ranges (Motaleb *et al*. 2016) in Bangladesh. These resources filled the knowledge gaps we had since 2004, when IUCN published the first-ever survey on Bangladesh's elephants (IUCN Bangladesh 2004).

Because of those two recent publications, we now know how many elephants Bangladesh had in 2016, where they lived, where they and humans were in conflict, where the elephant corridors connected two or more forest habitats, and where they crossed Bangladesh's borders with India and Myanmar.

Translating knowledge into action

These two publications, however, did not lead to any immediate, concrete action on the ground over the next 12 months. Action was, in fact, waiting for another guiding document to come through with the Bangladesh government's endorsement – the Bangladesh Elephant Conservation Action Plan (BECAP) (MoEF 2018). The BECAP is a comprehensive document that aims to guide elephant conservation in Bangladesh until 2027.

Over the last year or so, the Bangladesh Forest Department has been preparing to implement The World Bank-funded US$ 175 million Sustainable Forests & Livelihoods (SUFAL) project (BFD 2018a; World Bank 2018a), which would include conservation of elephants. This new initiative would take forward the momentum created by its predecessor, the Strengthening Regional Cooperation for Wildlife Protection (SRCWP) project (2011–2016) (BFD 2018b), also supported by the World Bank with US$ 36 million (World Bank 2018b). The 2016 elephant surveys, publications, and BECAP are among the outputs of the SRCWP project.

This rather slow period of elephant conservation in Bangladesh, however, changed rapidly after August 2017.

Rohingya refugee crisis and elephant conservation

News items on elephants, their forests and corridors, and human-elephant conflict started appearing in the mainstream media in September 2017. This is because, starting from the 25th August 2017, elephants in Bangladesh were coming into conflict with Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. More than 723,000 people (UNHCR 2018) in hundreds of thousands of make-shift houses were creating the world's largest refugee camp, occupying 6000 acres of forest land (UNB 2018) – one of the last remaining elephant habitats in Bangladesh – and sometimes dying in elephant encounters.

UNHCR and IUCN started working together in November 2017 and began a project in January 2018 (IUCN 2018a) to tackle human-elephant conflict in and around the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Peninsula, which claimed nine lives between September 2017 and January 2018 (UNHCR & IUCN 2018a).

IUCN and UNHCR used IUCN's elephant atlas and elephant population status books of 2016 as the starting point to plan their programme. Knowledge on elephants and their habitats, once created to conserve already-stressed megafauna and their home, turned into planning and advocacy tools for one of the world's worst refugee crises.

Building on the existing knowledge

Kutupalong Extension Camp and other smaller camps of Teknaf significantly changed the landscape of Cox's Bazar-Teknaf Peninsula since the late 2017. Therefore, there was an urgent need for updated knowledge on elephants and human-elephant conflict of this region. Elephant surveys of February (UNHCR & IUCN 2018a) and May 2018 (UNHCR & IUCN 2018b) under the UNHCR-IUCN partnership informed us about the latest status of elephants, their encounters with the refugees, and possible intervention points to manage such conflicts.

The first survey of 2018 showed that 31–45 (mean 38) elephants were occupying Cox's Bazar South Forest Division's five forest ranges. It suggests that the elephants, which were recorded from the same forest ranges back in 2016 (range 28–42, mean 35), got trapped due to the mega Kutupalong Camp.

These animals could not go to Myanmar on the east via the Ukhia-Ghundhum Corridor (Motaleb *et al*. 2016), their traditional movement route that essentially connects them with related populations. These pieces of information were very crucial and created the basis of the conservation-humanitarian discourse in Bangladesh throughout 2018.

The 2018's surveys also showed where on the refugee camp boundary the refugees should be organized as Elephant Response Teams (ERTs) (Wahed *et al*. 2016), be trained, be supported with equipment and watch-towers, and be monitored, so that they could stop elephants from entering the camps.

From February to November 2018, elephants made about 30 attempts to enter the refugee camps in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf. But there were no casualties, since almost 550 members of 50 odd ERTs remained vigilant at night and dawn from about 100 strategically located watchtowers protecting more than three hundred thousand refugees.

This project is a good example of why we should regularly invest in creating new knowledge for conservation. It also shows the importance of gathering and utilizing evidence as we proceed to influence practices and strategies.

Beyond 2018, into 2019

As the UNHCR-IUCN project ends its first year, the need for creating new knowledge remains crucial. Bangladesh, for example, has never attempted GPS-collaring to track its elephants (Daly 2018). Elephant conservation in the current refugee crisis gives us an extraordinary opportunity to attempt that to better understand elephant behaviour in a distress situation, to follow their movement real-time, and to use data to issue early warnings of potential human-elephant conflict.

Opening a new elephant passage through the Kutupalong mega camp has also been discussed in recent months. A model run by IUCN experts suggested a 3.5 km long and 0.5 km wide passage might work (Daly 2018). That, however, would require resettlement of one hundred thousand refugees currently occupying that space and ensuring the quality of habitat in Myanmar.

Such pioneering, but challenging, efforts need an open and confident communication among humanitarian and conservation actors, which include UNHCR and the Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner's Office (the Bangladesh Government's agency managing

the refugees) on the one hand and IUCN, Bangladesh Forest Department (the custodian of Bangladesh's wildlife) and elephant experts, like Asian Elephant Specialist Group (IUCN 2018b) on the other hand. And such interactions need to be guided by knowledge and evidence.

As we approach 2019, the UNHCR-IUCN partnership can be a model for other parts of the world where human and wildlife are at distress from human-human conflicts.

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