DOI: 10.2305/NZVL5580
News and Briefs
Gajah 57 (2024) 42-44

Report on the Eighth Elephant Conservation Group Workshop

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Background

The Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) was created in 2011 during a technical workshop on human-elephant conflict (HEC) management held in Sri Lanka. The purpose was to have a network to share ideas and discuss issues regarding Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) conservation and also to conduct research projects across the range. While the latter didn't work out so well due to time and financial constraints, we managed to hold workshops every two or three years where in-depth discussions on all kinds of topics related to elephants were held.

From 18th to 21st March 2023, we held the eighth ECG workshop at Jim Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, India. As in the years before, we organised the workshop back-to-back with the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) meeting, as most ECG members were also attending the AsESG meeting, making the travel expenses more worthwhile. The ECG workshop was attended by 14 people and another 2 members joined via zoom. The participants came from 8 range states (China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia - Peninsular and Sabah, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam) and 3 non-range states (Australia, UK, USA).

Presentations from the participants

Ee Phin Wong (**Peninsular Malaysia**, MEME) talked about her team's research on the impact of roads on elephant movement, social return of investment and HEC. The Wildlife Department collared translocated elephants, giving the possibility to study their movements after translocation and also how elephants cross major roads. MEME is also working closely with plantations towards achieving coexistence with elephants since a lot of oil palm estates are affected by conflict.

Nurzhafarina Othman (**Sabah**, Seratu Aatai) shared information about her work in investigating the mysterious death of elephants in Sabah. Her team, including Sabah Wildlife Department and research organisations, are trying to bring down the number of elephants deaths due to HEC in her study area. They are working on figuring out the cause of deaths – which is very complex. Seratu Aatai also conducts outreach programs with communities, to assess damage caused by elephants and figure out how the people might get compensated for their losses via insurance.

Cheryl Cheah (**Sabah**, WWF) explained to the group about her team's efforts to evaluate the possible impacts of the new road being built from Sabah to the new capital of Indonesia, which is currently under construction in Kalimantan, on the Indonesian side of Borneo. As the new road goes through forest and elephant home ranges, some wildlife under- and overpasses are planned to ensure uninterrupted connectivity. WWF teams in Malaysia and Indonesia are working together to examine the impact of the road on elephants. Cheryl has also examined the movement of elephants in plantations and works with plantations on HEC.

Wishnu Sukmantoro (**Indonesia**, Forest and Wildlife Society) talked about reducing HEC through participatory spatial planning, habitat enrichment for elephants and agroforestry system initiatives. With proper landuse planning and elephant monitoring, his team is trying to tackle HEC. All stakeholders need to be included to make coexistence between the communities and elephants possible. He briefly

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shared the results from an elephant occupancy study in Sumatra.

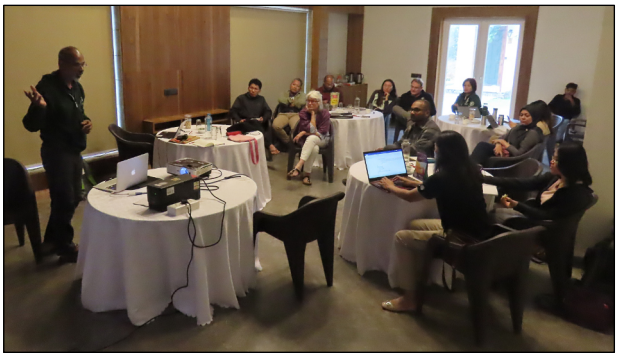
Ananda Kumar (**India**, NCF) updated us about his work in Hassan and Valparai. HEC is more severe in Hassan, but the patterns are quite different from Valparai. His team has set up an early warning system in Hassan – similar to what has been successfully used in Valparai since years.

Sreedhar Vijayakrishnan (**India**) studied male elephants which regularly cross the river Ganges at night to go crop raiding on its other side. When the river flow is high, they get carried about 500 m down the river before reaching the other side. He told us about elephants feeding on oil palm and rubber trees in southern India. He also informed us about captive elephants being used for various processions in Kerala.

Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz (**China**, XTBG, Chinese Academy of Sciences) talked to us about the work of the newly created "Megafauna Ecology and Conservation Group". His team studied the wanderings of the famous Chinese elephants that went way out of their normal home range. The goal was to find out why the elephants actually undertook that journey.

Aek Jitwijak (**Thailand**, WWF) gave us an update on the elephants at Kuiburi National Park. There are now around 300 elephants at Kuiburi and tourism is increasing. However, they also cause HEC in the areas surrounding the park. Various actions are being taken to mitigate the conflict, not all of them being beneficial for the elephants. There are also first efforts to plan a corridor to connect Kuiburi to other landscapes.





Mai Nguyen (**Vietnam**, Humane Society International) talked about her work on the elephants in Dong Nai. As elephant numbers in Vietnam are very low, this population is important. Thanks to camera traps it became possible to take photos of these elusive elephants and get information on their demography, health and reproductive activity. They come into conflict with the communities bordering the park, therefore Mai's team is also studying HEC.

Narendra Pradhan (**Nepal**, IUCN) presented his work on HEC around Bardia National Park. His team is trying various mitigation measures (electric fences, alternative crops, early warning system through mobile phones) to ease HEC for the communities. Raising awareness is key to better protect the elephants in that area.

Becky Shu Chen (**China**, ZSL) is currently doing a PhD on koala conservation in Australia. Her focus is mostly on communication with the communities to make people more tolerant towards koalas. The new approaches taken are very interesting and of course those communication skills could also be used for elephant conservation efforts.

Natasha Zulaikha (**Peninsular Malaysia**, MEME) gave us insight into her PhD work on human and ecological dimensions of human-elephant coexistence in Malaysia. Her work is more from a social science perspective, which for most of us was an entirely new way on how one can approach HEC issues.

Prithiviraj Fernando (**Sri Lanka**, CCR) gave an update on their team's efforts to change the way HEC is being managed in Sri Lanka. Community-based electric fencing is a very valuable non-confrontational tool to enable human-elephant coexistence. CCR helps develop and im-

plement policy and trains officers from government agencies responsible for people's welfare, to implement community-based fences. Currently several large-scale development projects are funding their implementation – which enables Sri Lanka to tackle the issue at a relevant scale.

Belinda Stewart-Cox (**UK**, Elephant Family) talked to us about a project in Myanmar which Elephant Family has been funding. They are conducting awareness programs, erecting electric fences and work on other simple HEC mitigation techniques to enable the communities to tackle the problems they face with elephants.

Discussions

The ECG group discussed continuing and promoting multi-country research efforts. For example, examining the past and presence occupancy range for wild elephants (5 km X 5 km grid, with 3 interviews within each grid) and to examine elephant body condition scores in different range countries using agreed standardised methods. However, we noted the time needed to publish the studies in individual countries first before having a combined research paper together. Additionally, there was interest in examining human dimensions in conflict and coexistence with wild elephants, to gauge tolerance towards elephants in communities. The discussions highlighted opportunities to conduct post-doctoral research that supports early career researchers, by visiting different elephant range countries and carrying out research together with the hosts. However, this will rely on individual projects to seek the funds needed.

The ECG group discussed at length on insurance and compensation for HEC, elephant behaviour, and movement analysis. We discussed possible ways to utilise field data for spatial analysis, incorporating HEC reports, field data, and GPS collar data to examine habitat connectivity together with the occurrence of conflict. It was suggested that the Smithsonian Institute should have a workshop on spatial analysis, for elephant researchers in range countries, whereby researchers can bring along their data to be analysed together during the workshop.

Lastly, the ECG group discussed membership criteria based on who can contribute and who can learn. Since this is a voluntary group, and members and the projects are mostly self-funded, the group will try to synergise with the efforts of the AsESG and channel its findings back to the AsESG.

