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Workshop on Preliminary Results of a Science-Based Adaptive Management Approach to the Conservation of Wild Elephants in Vietnam

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Introduction

A collaborative program between the Humane Society International (HSI), Viet Nam Department of Forestry (VN DOF) (under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development) and Dong Nai Forest Protection Department (FPD) was launched in 2019 to obtain information that can help better conserve the elephants in Dong Nai. From 30 to 31 August 2023, HSI, VN DOF and FPD co-arranged a two-day workshop to share the key findings of the program. Ten international elephant experts from USA, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia and Canada, and around 50 Vietnamese researchers and conservation managers from national and provincial levels participated in the workshop.

Workshop

The workshop commenced with a ceremony to declare it open. Before the technical sessions started, the delegates had an opportunity to visit an elephant exhibition located in a nearby park. The highlight of this outdoor exhibition was a realistic life-size model of an elephant mother and baby, made of lightweight aggregated plaster foam. This part was open to the public and most were keen to take photos with the elephants. The exhibition also had large outdoor photographic panels showcasing information about individual elephants identified through the program, the natural beauty and diversity of the landscapes and ecosystems in Dong Nai, the efforts of different stakeholders to conserve elephants and a call to the public to help protect elephants, to prevent them from extinction.

At the commencement of the technical sessions, Ms. Hoa gave an introduction to elephant conservation activities in Vietnam and the importance of conserving the Vietnamese elephants. Then the program conducted in Dong Nai was introduced by Dr. Prithiviraj Fernando from the Centre for Conservation and Research (CCR) Sri Lanka, who with Dr. Jennifer Pastorini also of CCR, voluntarily provided technical guidance for the program. The program took a science-based approach and consisted of three main initiatives: (1) elephant monitoring via camera traps; (2) monitoring HEC via the Airtable app; and (3) conducting a grid-based questionnaire survey of elephant distribution. Dr. Fernando explained the basis of the methodologies and reasons why those methods were appropriate for Dong Nai and Vietnam. After



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which Ms. Mai from HSI VN and Mr. Binh, a local ranger from Dong Nai FPD, briefly presented how the initiatives were implemented, the results and the challenges faced.

Camera trapping

Using camera traps to obtain photographs and identifying individuals via characteristic differences to obtain information on demography and health, was done for the first time in the country. From 13/06/2022 to 25/06/2023, 16,032 elephant photographs were captured at more than 30 locations. The photographs were analysed, and individuals identified, catalogued and named. The number of elephants in Dong Nai was previously thought to be 11–14 with 1–2 adult males and doubts had been expressed about the viability of the population. However, the presence of 25 individuals was definitively determined from camera trap pictures, with another two provisionally identified from previous photographs. The identified individuals consisted of adult males, adult females and juveniles. The M:F sex ratio was approximately 1:1. A number of the adult males were observed to come into musth. The average body condition of the elephants was quite high and on-going reproduction was confirmed. The results demonstrated the existence of a breeding population of elephants in Dong Nai that warrants in situ conservation.

This extremely encouraging data for the Dong Nai population is good news for elephant conservation in Vietnam. Applying the same methodology across all elephant range provinces in Viet Nam, especially in Dak Lak, Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Quang Nam which hold other populations, could provide detailed data for them also and help decide what actions needed to conserve elephants in those locations.



HEC monitoring

Monitoring HEC incidents showed that HEC occurred outside the perimeter electric fence, indicating that elephants crossed the fence. People mostly used confrontational methods to drive away raiding elephants, which is likely to lead to more conflict, indicating the need to adopt non-confrontational methods. With so few elephants left, even one fatality due to conflict is a disaster. Continued monitoring of HEC will help assess the effectiveness of mitigation strategies and enable the selection of appropriate strategies. An adaptive approach will enable the development of effective HEC mitigation.

Elephant distribution survey

The ongoing grid-based survey found elephant range to extend beyond the protected area boundaries, indicating the importance of 'outside' areas for elephants, hence in incorporating human-elephant coexistence in conservation planning for Dong Nai elephants.

The findings of the camera trap monitoring, human-elephant conflict monitoring and distribution survey were discussed, questioned and commented on by the participants. The officials from the Cat Tien National Park, Dong Nai Cultural and Natural Reserve, La Nga State-Owned







Forestry Enterprise and local authorities of Tan Phu, Dinh Quan and Vinh Cuu districts reiterated their commitment to conserving the elephants in Dong Nai. The sessions concluded with the awarding of certificates of recognition of the work conducted, to all hardworking dedicated experts, local officials and rangers.

Field-site visit

The second day was a field trip to the project site which was located about 100 km away from Dong Nai city. All the participants had an opportunity to visit and observe the sites related to the elephant conservation efforts that we are working on. Although, the delegates did not see elephants in the wild, they observed elephant signs such as dung, footprints, signs of feeding, and rubbing posts. A demonstration of camera trap deployment including hands-on experience in downloading data and replacing batteries from a camera trap location was conducted in the field by the rangers and Ms. Mai Nguyen.

Community event

After a long day in the forest, the participants were invited to join a community festival focussing on promoting human-elephant coexistence.

In the morning, a drawing contest titled "Elephant and humans are friends, let's coexist" was





held for the children in the community, who were organised into teams with 4–5 members and prepared colourful posters depicting the theme. When the delegates arrived at the community, the posters were displayed in a traditional community long-house, with each team interpreting and explaining their creation to the delegates. The delegates then gave them a score and the winners and participants were awarded prizes and their work appreciated.

Afterward, women's, farmers' and youth associations of Phu Ly commune held a dance competition with the theme "Kindness to elephants and coexistence". The event featured both traditional and modern dances, and awards were given to outstanding groups.

The day concluded with a shared dinner with the Cho'Jo ethnic community at the community house.

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