

EDITORIAL

A PLEA TO HELP SAVE THE ASIAN ELEPHANT

The public appeals for saving the African elephant from extinction have been so positive and widespread as to give the impression that no other elephant exists in the world. It has become prestigious for organizations and individuals to be identified with actions aimed at preserving the African elephant. Conservationists had forgotten or ignored the fact that an elephant as stately and more majestic, an elephant which served and still serves man in war and peace, in agriculture and industry, and in religion and ceremony living in Asia, is making a last ditch stand against that same man.

When a closer look was at last taken at the plight of the Asian elephant, what people saw was a bizarre picture of these amiable giants fleeing their age-old homes or being massacred as they cowered in new hiding places. Elephants which were once counted in their tens of thousands in the rain forests or on the plains across a dozen national frontiers, were suddenly reduced to pathetic little herds in pockets of equally pathetic forest fragments.

Today it is doubtful if, the wild populations in all thirteen countries of the species range would add up to 50,000 animals. That is a gloomy prospect when we consider the vastness of its range from Sri Lanka, India & Burma as far as Vietnam and China. It appears like a lot of land but in actual fact there are only some 500,000 km² of wild habitat left and this is declining at an average rate of 4000 km² per annum.

In comparison, Africa still has 7,000,000 km² of forest for its estimated 600,000 elephants, more than 10 times the number in Asia. And what is more, some countries in Africa such as Zimbabwe, South Africa & Zambia have elephants to spare for the ivory trade!

However the Asian elephant was not altogether sacrificed to politician and developer. In each country scores of dedicated and courageous wildlife conservationists & enthusiasts kept the 'enemy' at bay, so speak and swayed the public to campaign for total protection for elephants. Several Asian countries have strong legal enactments for wildlife conservation in general, and elephants in particular. Enlightened Heads of State actively support such measures but the pressure never slackens. Annual losses of both elephants and habitat keep elephants on the critically endangered list.

In 1978, the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of IUCN responded to the repeated calls for a long-term plan to save the Asian elephant. It formed the Asian Elephant Specialists Group (AESG) to pool expert knowledge and experience available in the region and elsewhere to formulate and implement just such a plan.

From small beginnings with a State membership of only seven under the chairmanship of the erstwhile Mr. J.C. Daniel of the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), the AESG has grown into a strong, hard-working (and sometimes hard-hitting!) body of forty six members representing all thirteen countries in which the Asian elephant occurs in a wild state.

These countries are India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia (both West and East), Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos and China.

Although the AESG is primarily an advisory body, its members have, in several instances, persuaded their respective governments to rethink development plans which would seriously diminish elephant habitats and further endanger elephant populations. Such action has been made possible

because, the group has moved away from anecdotal information to building up solid scientific data based on applied research and practical experience in the field.

Today the AESG is in a position to forewarn governments against initiating development schemes which will be inimical to the environment and hence far from being useful to settlers in the long term. Much habitat has been saved by such timely intervention. Further, where conflicts arise through previously unplanned 'development', the AESG is able to move in with practical solutions, depending on the way in which the conflict manifests itself, eg. vulnerable cultivations are being protected with electric fences, a method now readily applicable because its success has been tested in the field. Capture and translocation of 'problem' elephants using immobilizing drugs has also been rendered so safe as to be frequently used as a conservation tool.

We are happy that AESG members now share available knowledge and expertise to either save elephants in distress or to help farmers protect their crops. Such sharing is done even across borders. Recently where three elephants 'invaded' an outlying island belonging to Singapore, the services of Malaysia's elephant capture and translocation team were solicited. They responded at once, and within a week the elephants were safely back in a reserve on the mainland of Malaysia. Similarly an AESG member lent his expertise on electric fencing to erect electrified barriers to deter elephants from raiding crops in China's Yunnan province. These instances, occurring as they do across national borders, make an impression on their respective governments.

Extending the group's membership into the Indo-Chinese region, two or three years ago, augured well for the elephant populations of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Members from these countries are now even exploring the possibility of forming a common protected area for some 300 elephants which move across their borders during seasonal migrations. This idea is being actively pursued and if accepted by their governments, will be a unique reserve, and the first of its kind.

But we have a great deal more to do. For instance we have put together an Action Plan but lack the resources to implement it. We have to work closer with governments to help solve environmental problems utilising the knowledge and experience gained over the past 10–12 years, but again lack the institutional framework for effective action. In an attempt at organising ourselves and building up resources, we established a Secretariat in Bangalore, India, with the blessings of WWF International.

We feel that this Secretariat, known as the Asian Elephant Conservation Centre (AECC) is a logical step in our progress. Governed by a Steering Committee of AESG members and managed by member Dr. R. Sukumar, also of the Indian Institute of science, the AECC has the following aims and objectives:

1. Identify the target elephant populations in Asia, which offer the best hopes for long-term survival and concentrate on safe-guarding these key populations through government and field actions.
2. Carry out in-depth ecological studies in these selected populations and their habitats in order to obtain the best, most reliable and quantifiable data as a basis for sound management of elephant populations and their habitats.
3. Design a mechanism for sharing practical knowledge especially in solving problems concerning herds migrating within or across national borders. This will also involve strengthening the capabilities of staff through training programmes, workshop, etc.

4. Compilation of records of all the publications to date on the elephant and its habitat. This is particularly relevant today when research on elephants has become widespread and the publication of books has gathered momentum.

The AECC, if it is to really become a useful venue for scientist to meet and work, must have a good library, stocked with all the books on elephants and their habitats. The secretariat also hopes to subscribe to relevant journals in association with the Centre for Ecological Studies in Bangalore (where it is sited) and the BNHS.

We should address all those organisations (especially zoos which keep and breed Asian elephants), associations and individuals interested in the future of this noble animal. Our first priority is to establish a Trust Fund of at least US\$ 30,000, in order to generate income sufficient to achieve some of our objectives. I was overwhelmed by the generosity of one Zoological Society in the USA, that donated US\$ 5000 towards this figure even before I sent out this appeal. I hope that the response to this explanatory editorial will be equally encouraging.

May I take the liberty of thanking you in advance!

Lyn de Alwis

ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTRE (AECC)

The idea for the AECC came up at the last AESG Meeting held in Chiangmai, Thailand in 1988. The AECC was subsequently established at the Centre for Ecological Sciences, at the Indian Institute of Science. It is headed by Dr. R. Sukumar who is assisted by Mr J.A. Santosh and Miss Uma Maheswaran. The Centre is funded by a generous grant from WWF—International.

Progress:

1. *Training:* Ms Uma Maheswaran attended a workshop on database management conducted by Dr John MacKinnon at Bogor, Indonesia from 15 August to 13 September. Her training enables her to assist the AECC in building up its own database.

2. *Workshop:* The AECC held a Workshop on Censusing Elephants in Forests from 2—10 January, 1991 in Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary and it was attended by over 30 participants.

3. *Database on Asian Elephant:* A number of documents have been collected on Asian Elephant: its status, distribution, biology and conservation. A bibliography of some 600 references on Asian elephants has been computerised in dBase and can now be accessed through key words. This will soon be brought out as a report. Setting up of a computerised database on the Asian Elephant has begun. The database will begin with India and Sumatra for which the most detailed information has been collected.

The AECC is in touch with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre in Cambridge, UK, regarding the acquisition of a Geographical Information System. This would ensure that the database maintained by the AECC is compatible with those used by the entire SSC network.

4. *Population Viability Analysis (PVA):* Dr R. Sukumar, the Coordinator of AECC worked in collaboration with Dr. N.V. Joshi