SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

MANAGEMENT OF ELEPHANTS IN CAPTIVITY IN SRI LANKA

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The elephant has always been an integral part of Sri Lankan culture, religion and even politics. To the Buddhists it is the only animal that is given the honour of carrying the sacred tooth of Lord Buddha during the annual Esala Perehara in Kandy. The recent death of Raja the Maligawa tusker was much mourned by Buddhists all over the island. It is also sad that Raja had no issue to carry on his noble task!

The number of elephants in the wild is decreasing as development programmes convert elephant habitat for other uses. In the past, the number of domestic elephants was augmented from captures in the wild. Given the relatively small number in the wild, there is a general concern towards the maintenance and viability of those in captivity. With this in mind, a project has been proposed to enhance the long-term survival prospect of the elephants in captivity in Sri Lanka.

About two decades ago, the number of elephants in captivity was estimated to be about 500. Today, it is more likely to be about 300. In the wild, slaugther of elephant continues. In 1987, between 40-50 elephants were shot and 12 calves that were found abandoned were brought to the zoo.

The first objective of the project is to determine exactly how many elephants there are in captivity in Sri Lanka today, where they are located, and to obtain data concerning their sex ratio, age, class structure, height/weight statistics etc. These data could then be stored in central data bank for use in captive breeding programmes. This would be followed by captive breeding programme, separate from that in Pinnawala and concerning the elephants that are in private ownership.

A sound programme to breed elephants in captivity is needed in view of the decline in number of elephants in the wild. Elephant is no doubt a slow breeder but even the addition of one animal in captivity through a breeding programme could be of enormous benefit. It is also financially worthwhile as a calf can be sold for about 2 lakhs of rupees! Captive bred animals can be used in timber extraction and timber hauling as is the case in Burma and Thailand.

A well designed breeding project, located in Kandy along the banks of the Mahaweli river could be another attraction for tourists. It can function as a centre where foreign and local researchers could come and learn how animals are trained and bred. A similar centre exists in Mudumalai in South India. Techniques such as artificial insemination practised in Western Zoos can be applied in the breeding programme.



Fig. 6.1: The curator, Mr. W.M. Ranbanda in Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage, Sri Lanka with some of the elephants. (Photo: W.M. Ranbanda)