# Saving the Asian Elephant

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International concern has been largely focussed on the plight of the African elephant but the status of the Asian elephant by contrast is very serious indeed given that only about 55,000 animals are found in the wild throughout Asia. In addition, there may be another 16,000 animals in captivity. What must be done to save the species from becoming extinct? This is the question the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group Members gathered here will be discussing at this meeting. But the solution is not easy.

If poachers were the only threat, then the elephants might be safe. The ban on the trade in ivory achieved at the meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in Lausanne in 1989 and subsequently re-emphasized more recently at the CITES meeting in March 1992 in Kyoto, Japan is indeed a great achievement. But as far as the Asian elephant is concerned, the species was put in the Appendix I long before the African elephant was included but nevertheless its numbers have continued to decline throughout its range in Asia with the possible exception in India where a combination of sensible planning, sound programmes and active support of the government and people at large has been responsible for an actual increase in the number of elephants in the wild. But in all the other countries in Asia, from Nepal in the west to Indo-china in the east, the elephants in the wild have declined both in range and number.

Unlike the African elephant where both males and females carry tusks and hence are potential targets of the ivory poachers, here in Asia, only the males and that too a certain proportion of them in the population carry tusks. In Asia, poaching is not the major threat to the decline in number of the elephants: poverty and the demographic pressure for land are an even more intractable threat. Asian elephant conservation must be seen against this background.

For the western tourist on safari, the nobleness of the elephant - the largest and most impressive terrestrial mammal - is all too apparent. But for rural people who live in the vicinity of elephant reserves, the elephant is frequently looked upon as a pest; destroying crops, pushing down houses, trampling trees and at times even children. It is easy enough for armchair campaigners in the west to insist on protection but with Asia's human population which is already too high in some countries and showing every sign of growing in the coming decades, there is not going to be enough space for the elephant.

The key to protection is to ensure local people receive some economic benefit from the animal. One way of doing this is through eco-tourism - another buzz word these days together with biodiversity!. But such schemes can only become meaningful and relevant in elephant conservation programmes provided that a part - a large part in fact - of the revenues goes to the poor people in the local communities surrounding elephant reserves and other protected areas. In addition, action must be taken to improve the incentives for the local communities to participate in the conservation of wildlife resources. The old fashioned way of keeping local communities out of conservation areas through force will not work anymore. Protection of elephant populations, their habitats and migration routes may mean that local communities lose their access to traditional land use and resouces. Such communities must be compensated for these losses by receiving some of the gains from conservation. Moreover, the local communities must participate fully in decisions affecting land and resources. Unless such imaginative actions are adopted throughout Asia, elephant conservation may not succeed in the long run. Integration of rural development with elephant conservation must be a high priority in our efforts given the current increase in human population in Asia and the consequent pressures imposed on the land and its limited resources.

Listing a species in Appendix I of CITES alone offers no guarantee to ensure its long term survival in the field. Legal provisons alone have failed to save the tiger in Java and Bali. Without imaginative action backed by strong political will and an unprecedented fevel of international co-operation, financial assistance and technical expertise, the Asian elephant like the Black rhino and the Blue Whale will be on the fast track to extinction. The key to the survival of the Asian elephant is the protection of its habitat. The future welfare of many elephant populations throughout their range will depend on the measures that we adopt today to safeguard our forests. More than half of Asia's elephant populations live under the protective umbrella of these forests. Therefore the best way to maintain these populations is to keep as much as possible of their forest habitat intact. Such a

move would benefit not only the elephant but thousands of other species of plants and animals that inhabit the elephant habitats.

Finally, the international conservation community must realise that the elephant together with Asia's unique stock of other large mammals represent a priceless part of the world's natural heritage. It is therefore not reasonable to expect economically poor Asian countries to undertake such a sweeping conservation programme without substantial assistance from outside: from the more affluent west. The African elephant continues to draw massive financial assistance from the west. At the last CITES meeting, the UK Government pledged one million US dollars for the African elephant conservation. But so far, the such international philanthrophy appears not to have noticed the more precarious status of the 55,000 Asian elephants in the wild!

Elephant conservation in Asia will not succeed without a massive effort not only by the range states but also by the economically more powerful international conservation agencies such as IUCN and WWF and other NGOs to highlight the plight of the species. In addition to lip service and pledges of help, the programme will also need substantial sums of money (about 10 million US dollars) over the next ten years. Problems in achieving conservation success in the past in Asia may be attributed to under valuing the cost of accomplishing the desired goal. The future of the Asian elephant must be a matter of extreme importance not only to the range states but must also become the responsibility of all nations as it is a part of the world's natural heritage and therefore the concern of all mankind. Man as the most dominant species on this planet has been responsible for the extinction of many species and so unless we are prepared to learn from the messages of the past, our future viability as a species might be no more hopeful in the long term than it is for the elephants.

