G: EDUCATION, AWARENESS AND PUBLICITY

The AESG recognizes the urgent need to launch educational, awareness and publicity programmes to enhance the long-term survival of the Asian elephant both in Asia where the elephant exists and in the developed countries which are potential sources for funding for conservation projects. This campaign will need the services of a team of professionals drawn from WWF and IUCN with support from countries where the elephant ranges.

H: RESEARCH ON REPRODUCTIVE BIOLOGY OF CAPTIVE ELEPHANTS

Timber camp elephants in parts of India and Burma seem to be the most productive of captive elephant populations. These camps could become ideal sites for research into the reproductive biology of elephants that would ultimately help in conservation plans for captive as well as wild elephant populations. Examples of such research include study of fertility cycles in female elephants, development of contraceptive implants for ultimate use in over abundant wild elephant populations, control of musth in bull elephants, genetic profiles of elephants to determine their subspecific status, quantifying genetic variation in elephant populations, nutritional requirement of elephants and health care of calves.

I: UPDATING THE ASIAN ELEPHANT ACTION PLAN

Since its compilation in 1987, much of the information contained in the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Action Plan has become out dated and should therefore be revised to make it more authoritative but also to facilitate its implementation. This will be carried out by three sub-committees (for South Asia, Indo-Malayan and Indo-China).

Opening Address by the Director General

Ir. Sutisna Wartaputra
of Directorate of Forest Protection & Nature Conservation at the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group Meeting
20 May 1992, Bogor, Indonesia

Chairman, Distinguished participants,

It is a great pleasure to be here today and attend the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group Meeting - the first to be held in Indonesia.

In the late 1980s, international concern about the future of the African elephant led to the eventual shut down of the trade in ivory and signified an important achievement for those involved in the conservation of this spectacular species. But what about the Asian elephant? How has it fared so far?

Let us pause here to look at the facts: There are over half a million elephants in Africa and they range over a total land area of 7.5 million square kilometres. Their main threat is poaching for the ivory. But against this consider the plight of the Asian elephant: there are only about 55, 000 elephants in the wild in Asia and these are distributed discontinuously in thirteen of the Asian countries from the Indian sub-continent in the west to Indo-China in the east.The entire Asian elephant population inhabits a total land area of 500,000 square kilometres or about the size of Thailand! The principal threat to the survival of the Asian elephant is not poaching but habitat loss, which is far more diffcult to control given the pattern of human population growth in Asia and the relative poverty of the people and their aspirations to a better life.

But the Asian elephant has received only scant publicity throughout the world and its fate is even more precarious than that of its African cousin. It is here that the IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group could play a decisive role in reversing the decline of the world's largest terrestrial land mammal. But this is not going to be easy as the problem is not simply that of protecting the species. Throughout their existence in Asia, people have had to protect themselves from wildlife. While conservationists try to protect the elephant, the people in some areas suffer elephant depredations. At times they are even killed by elephants. In Sumatra, for example, in less than a generation, the situation has reversed from one in which a small population of human beings existed in an enormous area of tropical rainforest with its teeming wildlife including elephants, to a situation where the human population now surrounds islands of conservation areas with their elephants and other wildlife. In many instances, herds of elephants have become pocketed in patches of habitat that are surrounded by an inhospitable landscape dominated by man. Such a situation is a recipe for disaster. This is the crux of the elephant-human conflicts in Asia in general and Indonesia in particular.

Therefore given such a reversal in the status of the elephants in Asia it is not surprising that the ideas of elephant conservation frequently come into conflict with the current preoccupation by development agencies to convert forest into agricultural holdings. Protected areas with elephants alone cannot ensure the long-term survival of the species if they are looked upon in isolation with the events outside their boundaries. Over large areas in Asia, there is no longer room for elephants to move about and adjust their densities to changes in their habitats. Furthermore, their ranges are being compressed year by year as a result of the demands of an ever burgeoning human population.

Elephants are often looked upon by people as agents of destruction. This gives them a bad image. In reality, the picture is different. They are more often agents of change whose presence in a forest provides the opportunities for the survival of thousands of other less charismatic species that are sympatric with the elephants. Examples from Africa have clearly indicated that elephants have been responsible for the cyclic changes of the thick bushland to a more open grassland habitat and back again to bushland. Such facts need to be publicised to create a better awareness among the people so that the climate of public opinion will enhance elephant conservation.

IUCN is closely linked with one of the most influential non-governmental organizations, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF). Together these two organizations have the means to help the economically poor but resource rich countries in Asia to implement strong conservation programmes that set an example to the Governments concerned and thus spur them to action along such sensible lines. Such programmes must take into consideration the legitimate aspirations of the poor people for a better quality of life or a greater share of the national economic cake. Millions of people in the third World utilize a fraction of the world's resources. They earn a pitiful fraction of the world's income. But they bear the brunt of poverty, famine, depredations, disease and death. They want a better life. They also inhabit areas that are rich in biodiversity. It would be wrong for us to deny the right of such people to improve their lifestyles. Their countries in many instances are the custodians of endangered species including the elephant.

Many Asian countries with elephant populations are facing a dilemma: on the one hand, as custodians of biodiversity and charismatic megafauna such as elephants, rhinoceros, tiger etc, they are forced to assume respondibility for their protection. Yet at the sametime, most of these countries faced with expanding human populations, collapsing economies and crippling foreign debts are in desperate need of new resources to bolster their ailing economies and maintain their human populations. What the people in such countries are asking is a fair compensation by the world community for the non-use of their natural resources. Can the west deliver it?

Elephant conservation in Asia will be ineffective without the support of the people, especially those who, live along the periphery of the elephant reserves bearing the brunt of elephant depredations. IUCN and WWF must change their emphasis from rhetoric to action in the field. We need to invest more on field-based conservation efforts which address the needs of the local communities if we are to achieve any long-term success in elephant conservation. Many conservation efforts need to be integrated with some form of human activity. Conservation is also very much an issue on education. Often policies are enacted without the benefit of sound, reliable data.

I very much hope that the Asian Elephant Specialist Group during the three days will devote much of its energies into identifying key projects throughout Asia that need to be implemented. Time is running out fast for many countries to set aside additional conservation areas. The day is rapidly approaching when much of the wild elephant populations in Asia will be confined in a patchwork of parks, reserves and sanctuaries. What are the prospects for the Asian elephant in such a situation where barriers exist for its natural dispersal and movement? I leave it to the better wisdom of you, the Asian elephant Specialists to reach a conclusion that is comforting to hear!

With the blessing of Allah the Great, I open the Asian Elephant Speciallist Group Meeting officially.

ASIAN ELEPHANT CONSERVATION CENTRE PROJECT PROGRESS REPORT

Project Number and Title : WWF Project 1777 – Asia,
Asian Elephant Conservation

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Consolidated Report : Ist April 1991 to 31st March 1992.

1. DATA BASE

Questionnaires were sent out to the Forest Departments of the fifteen states in India which have elephants. The purpose of the questionnaire was to compile existing information on the elephant numbers, age-sex composition, forest area, habitat type, etc. in each forest division. Not many responses have been received so far, and a second set of questionnaires is being sent.