A NOTE ON THE SURVEY OF ELEPHANTS IN SRI LANKA

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Elephants have been associated with Sri Lankan culture, religion and folklore for so may centuries in the past, that it would be difficult to imagine the island without its elephants. However, their long-term future in the wild will depend not only on the availability of suitable habitats, but also on the degree of support given to elephant conservation in Sri Lanka by the rural people who live among the animals as well as the urban people who believe that without elephants, the country would be a poorer place. Throughout its range in Asia, the elephant is facing the threat of extinction in the wild, primarily as a result of human encroachment upon the habitat.

It was to assess the status of the elephants in the wild that a survey was carried out in June 1993 across much of the island. Such a survey was long overdue. It was undertaken by the staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, given the need to update the information on the structure, composition and abundance of the elephants which would be useful for their management in the wild. It was also carried out with the view to training the field staff on monitoring elephants on a regular basis.

It may seem an impossible task, but surveys of this nature have been carried out in many parts of India by dividing elephant habitats in the wild into blocks, which are then searched for elephants by trained staff. The main drawback with this method is that, even in the relatively open habitats in Sri Lanka, it is difficult to ensure that all the elephants within a survey area have been recorded or that elephants have not moved from one survey unit to another in the course of the day. But the main objective was not to estimate the total number of elephants but determine the structure and composition of the elephant populations in as large an area as possible so that future surveys could monitor the changes in them, in particular changes in the proportion of the calves and tuskers - two of the most vulnerable categories. Estimation of minimum population size was incidental to the main objective.

The success of this exercise was due to the concerted efforts of the entire field staff of the Department of Wildlife Conservation and the assistance given by numerous volunteers from NGOs, Universities, Government Departments and concerned individuals. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help given by Messrs W. Hendavitharana, Sarath Dissanayake of the Department of Wildlife Conservation; Mangala de Silva and Charles Santiapillai from the Department of Zoology, University of Peradeniya in organising this survey, training the field staff and analysing the data.