BOOK REVIEW

THE ELEPHANT IN SRI LANKA. By Jayantha Jayewardene

The Wildlife Heritage Trust, 1994
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In his book, *"The Elephant in Sri Lanka"*, Jayantha Jayewardene attempts to trace the decline of the elephant's range and numbers, critically considers its current status and recommends solutions to resolve the escalating conflicts between man and elephant. It is a book that is aimed at every concerned individual in the island and makes no pretence to be a scientific treatise. Since the publication in 1867 of Sir J. Emerson Tennent's classic account of the elephant entitled, *"The Wild Elephant and the Method of Capturing and Taming it in Ceylon"* much has happened to the elephant and its habitat in Sri Lanka and Jayewardene's book addresses the issues that have led to the remarkable decline in elephant numbers.

The book begins with an introduction on the evolution of the species *Elephas maximus* and its relationship with its African cousin, *Loxodonta africana*. It highlights the fact that while there are over half a million African elephants, distributed in 33 countries, across a range of 4.5 million km2, the Asian elephant by contrast numbers less than a tenth of the African Elephant and occurs in 13 countries, across a range of just 500,000 km2. This underlines the fact that the Asian elephant is far more seriously endangered than its African cousin.

The book traces the fortunes of the elephant in Sri Lanka from historical times when it was held in high esteem by the kings who used it in war and peace. King Dutugamunu rode to war on the elephant known as *Kandula*. The book refers to the status of the elephant in Sri Lanka under the Portuguese, Dutch and the British Colonial Powers. It deals with the senseless slaughter of elephants that was carried out by the British under

the guise of sport hunting. One Major Rogers was credited with the slaughter of over 1,500 elephants during his time (or at the rate of one animal killed every day for four years!). Elephants were so numerous then in the island that rewards were paid by the Government for the animals that were killed. In addition, elephants were also captured for export to other countries. Between 1853 and 1884, a total of 2,890 elephants were exported from Ceylon.

Jayewardene discusses the two subspecies of elephants known in Sri Lanka, *Elephas maximus maximus*, the forma typica and the *Elephas maximus vilaliya*, the Marsh elephant. The Marsh elephant's habitat used to be the fertile lower valleys of the Mahaweli Ganga, much of which had been developed under the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme. The Marsh elephant is characterized by its stockier build and the rarity of tuskers. The survey carried out by the Department of Wildlife Conservation in 1993, showed that only 2.3% of the bulls in the Mahaweli Region had tusks.

There are sections in the book that deal with feeding, reproduction, social organization and the phenomenon of "musth". One of the most useful chapters in the book is that dealing with the elephants in captivity. A census in 1946 revealed that there were 736 elephants in captivity. Today however, the number seems to have declined by 50% paralleling the decline of the elephants in the wild. For those interested in managing elephants in captivity, there is considerable discussion on the basic commands used by the mahouts in handling elephants. The poor breeding performance of the elephants in captivity at the Pinnawala Elephant Orphanage is obvious from the records of the births given in the book.

The book is particularly useful in the wealth of information it provides on the number of elephants that were captured, translocated, driven and sold over the past several decades. Jayewardene gives a fascinating account of the elephant kraals, quoting early sources. The book deals extensively with mitigating elephant-human conflicts in Sri Lanka.

Jayewardene has had several years of experience in observing and studying the elephant in the wild in Sri Lanka. His book makes a strong case for the conservation of the species at a time of dwindling forest cover and expanding human population. The urgency of protecting what is left of Sri Lanka's once magnificent population of elephants is amply outlined by the author. For the most part, this book is clealy written and easily understood by anyone. In particular, wildlife conservationists may find it useful. The book was designed to reach a large audience. Given the care with which the publishers have produced the book, it will certainly be read by everyone interested in conserving the elephant in Sri Lanka.

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