Notes from the Co-chairs IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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As mentioned in the Note from the Co-chairs in the last issue of Gajah (back when the workshop was still in the planning stage), Ajay and I facilitated a Strategic Conservation Planning Workshop for Asian Elephants in Phnom Penh in Cambodia last month (20–24 October 2008). This strategic planning workshop was requested by range State delegates at the Range States' Meeting in Malaysia in 2006, and was similar – but not identical – to the Regional Strategic Planning Workshops for Central African Elephants and West African Elephants (which lead to regional strategies and national action plans for elephants in those parts of Africa).

In fact, last month's workshop took the form of two back-to-back Asian elephant conservation workshops. The first workshop focussed on a range-wide status review, attempting to map all Asian elephant populations and compile data about those populations (e.g. population size and trend, threats to the population). The second workshop aimed to take these "where to save the species" data and use them to draft an outline conservation strategy for Asian Elephants throughout their range (i.e. "how to save the species"). The two workshops were organized by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and WWF AREAS, with funding from WCS, the AsESG, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and WWF AREAS.

The process was designed to be fully participatory and conservationists from all 13 Asian elephant range States attended the workshop, as did other elephant conservationists from outside these States. Government representatives from 10 of the 13 range States participated in the workshops; there were to have been representatives from all 13 range States governments but some last minute problems including a border conflict between Thailand and Cambodia led to some people cancelling.

In the first workshop, the participants mapped and characterised known populations of Asian elephants, as well as areas that may sustain populations but where recent survey data are lacking. Participants also identified land which may act as linkages between known populations, and areas where the species might be restored in future. Preliminary maps were developed before the workshops, and then refined at the workshops.

In the second workshop, the focus was on strategic planning using the new IUCN/SSC Species Conservation Planning Task Force's recommended approach (the Task Force's guidelines were launched at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona immediately before the elephant workshops). The participants used the Status Review of the first workshop to develop a draft outline conservation strategy for Asian Elephants, again within a participatory process. The draft strategy identified a vision, goals, and objectives together with appropriate actions aimed at mitigating and eliminating threats to elephants.

The intention is that this draft outline strategy be completed over the November 2008 to January 2009 period through a process of wider consultation, review, and revision than is possible is a workshop setting. We would therefore like to ask the AsESG's membership to participate in the review and revision process. Our hope is that this process will be of value to all those engaged with the conservation of this important and charismatic species, including national governments and local and international NGOs. Outputs from the process will include up-to-date distribution maps, a detailed status report, and a conservation strategy for Asian elephants. The workshop process will of course also feed into the IUCN Red List.

The final strategy will be relatively high-level, but will be devised in such a way that it can easily be used within a national conservation planning

process, and hence help promote and aid national implementation of range-wide and regional goals and objectives. Recent successful examples of this approach include the regional strategies and national action plans developed for cheetahs, African wild dogs, African elephants, and Asian wild cattle and buffaloes.

National workshops are a vital part of the process since most conservation action is planned and implemented at the national or local level. We hope, therefore, that the October 2008 range-wide workshops will be followed by a series of national workshops, with the support of the AsESG and conservation partners such as USFWS, WWF, WCS, FFI, AZA, IEF, Smithsonian, et al. and so promote on the ground conservation action for elephants across Asia.

In other news, and indeed helping to achieve one of the draft strategies objectives, the AsESG's Human–Elephant Conflict Task Force has begun the process of compiling a review of human–elephant conflict (HEC) mitigation measures in Asia. This review will then be discussed during a 2-day HEC Mitigation Workshop in Beijing immediately before the Society for Conservation Biology's Annual Meeting in July 2009. In holding the workshop, the IUCN/SSC AsESG's Human–Elephant Conflict Task Force will bring together a group of people (including but not restricted to the HECTF's members) with practical experience of HEC mitigation work in Asia to:

(a) Review the causes of HEC
- Identify processes/actions that can stop (minimize) the creation of new HEC situations.
- Identify and review processes/actions that can stop the escalation of existing HEC situations and possibly reverse some of the factors that contribute to HEC.

(b) Review and list the types of HEC situations (i.e. dispersal, pocketed populations, etc.) and mitigation measures in place
- Compile a list of mitigation methods used across Asia.
- Review and compile a summary of what has worked and what has not, where, and why (if known).
- Develop a document listing best management practices and keep that current on the IUCN/SSC AsESG's website as 'a living document'.

No such compilation of HEC mitigation measures exists for Asia and consequently such a review was requested by the Asian Elephant Range States' government representatives at the Range States' Meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 2006.

The lack of such a review is unfortunate because of (1) the severity of HEC in much of Asia and (2) because there are many ongoing efforts to address HEC in Asia but many of these efforts are replicating existing methods unknowingly due to the poor dissemination of information about what has worked and what has not.

By holding the 2-day HEC Mitigation Workshop in Beijing immediately before the Society for Conservation Biology's Annual Meeting in July 2009, we will be able to take advantage of the fact that many people knowledgeable about HEC will be attending the SCB meeting at their or their institutions' expense, which will reduce the cost of holding the HEC mitigation workshop.

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Tusker (India)
Photo by Chelliya Arivazhagan