Gajah 32 (2010) 3-5

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

Ajay A. Desai and Simon Hedges

Recently there was a discussion on developing a 'tiger filter' – this was about identifying 'no go' and 'go' areas for development in and around tiger habitat. Two important doubts or worries were expressed. First, do we actually need an analytical tool to identify such areas? And second are we then, by default telling developers to do what they want in the 'no go' areas? Will we then not be identifying certain areas as being 'unimportant' and sending the wrong message?

Tiger conservation, claimed a retired Director of Project Elephant in India, had one drawback. It created 'elitist' tigers, i.e. those living in Tiger Reserves. The apparent neglect and the subsequent loss of tigers living outside the Tiger Reserves (actually the bulk of the tigers) possibly led to the decline of tiger populations. He warned that elephant conservation should not follow a similar path.

Elephant conservation has not really had elephant specific Protected Areas (PAs) as in the case of Project Tiger in India. People involved in elephant conservation (governments, conservationists, scientists, etc.) have always recognized the need to deal with all elephants. This may have to do with the fact that elephants, wherever disturbed by man, cause conflict that is very visible. They are probably the only species that brings the fight back to people whenever their habitat is lost or degraded. Thus highlighting their problem and setting off warning bells.

Back in the 1980's AsESG members and several elephant conservationists spoke about 'Managed Elephant Ranges' (MERs) outside the PAs as being a complete solution to conserving elephants. It was recognized that range states would find it difficult to set aside large areas that would meet the conservation requirements of the species in standalone PAs. It was also not possible to declare all elephant habitat as PAs. So MERs were critical for elephant conservation especially since the bulk of the population (> 60%) ranges outside PAs. Unlike PAs, MERs would have multiple uses allowing resource use by man but in a manner that was not detrimental for elephants. MERs would provide connectivity between PAs or provide additional habitat outside PAs and thus address the spatial requirements of elephants. It would also address the need to secure habitat for populations living outside PAs.

Most Asian elephant range states are currently facing problems related to protecting forests, due to rapid development. Growth in Asia has hit exponential levels and with communication (via TV and printed media) reaching even the most remote areas, economic aspirations of the people have risen very sharply. Everyone wants to be a part of the rapid economic growth. The bulk of development unfortunately is based on using or exploiting forested areas. Forests and conservation are therefore a low priority on most governments' or publics' mind. In India it is mining, agriculture and infrastructure development. In Sri Lanka it is agriculture and infrastructure development. In Malaysia and Indonesia it is agro-forestry and logging. In other parts of Asia similar developmental pressures exist.

Habitat across the elephant range is being lost rapidly and elephants are being rendered homeless. Human-elephant conflict is naturally increasing because of this. Governments unable to resolve existing HEC effectively are actually pursuing or allowing land use practices that are creating new HEC situations or are exacerbating existing ones. Consequently retaliatory killing is emerging as a major cause for elephant deaths and it is exceeding poaching in countries like India. So where does this leave elephant conservation? Are we headed towards what some AsESG members pessimistically felt in the 1980's – that elephants will be conserved only in PAs in future? Or will there be MERs as envisaged by them, covering large areas and making elephant conservation meaningful?

Elephant habitat is far from secure; loss, fragmentation and degradation have been the biggest and least addressed part of the elephant conservation problem so far. The focus, internationally, has been on the illegal killing of elephants for ivory and other elephant products. While poaching may pose an extinction threat in some range states, it is not an immediate threat in others. Habitat loss on the other hand is a range wide problem but it rarely gets the kind of international or national attention that poaching does. We also need to note that PAs too are far from secure; they too are threatened by habitat loss and degradation in many areas. This is not to deny that poaching is a serious threat that needs to be addressed urgently, but rather to suggest that there is a clear need to focus on habitat conservation on an equally serious and urgent basis.

Currently development is eating into elephant habitat in an *ad hoc* manner. This results in fragmentation of habitat, creation of pocketed populations or creation of poorly structured habitat patches that escalate HEC. Effective and functional MERs can be created only if there are suitable, adequate and connected habitat patches. We are currently running out of time to create MERs as *ad hoc* development is undermining the conservation potential of most remaining habitat patches.

There are several steps we need to take urgently to implement MERs. First there is a need for a focused and sustained effort to make governments accept MERs as a means to conserve elephants. Second there is a need to identify all elephant habitats that are currently suitable for such actions including those which can be restored without major resettlement of people or infrastructure. We need to map and analyze elephant habitat to identify MERs. To do this we would need to know and understand what the spatial requirements of elephants are in different habitat types. We would also need to take into account elephant behaviour, genetic requirements, carrying capacity and population size. The various aspects of HEC, ranging from size and shape of the MER to the intensity of conflict would have to be taken into consideration. It would also require the development of acceptable model(s) for MERs and their management. We would need to define which human activities/uses of elephant habitat would be compatible (to an extent) with elephant conservation. And how those activities or uses would need to be regulated and their adverse impacts (if any) mitigated.

The creation of MERs will not completely stop habitat loss brought about by unavoidable or essential development. This is where a tool (like the tiger filter) that helps identify ‘go’ and ‘no go’ areas for development will be important. Development will continue with or without such tools or even MERs. The absence of these has in fact facilitated unplanned development causing far more damage. This unplanned development has severely undermined the conservation potential of whole areas. A GIS based analytical tool that helps assess if the planned development is acceptable or not will be a great help. Where acceptable or where habitat loss is unavoidable it will give us the ability to identify areas whose loss (or disturbance) will cause the least damage. However such planned development can only happen if there is integrated development planning. Such planning should involve the development and conservation agencies at all levels of planning in and around elephant habitat. In addition it would require a dedicated elephant specific ‘Environmental Impact Assessment’ (EIA). Such an EIA would use the GIS tools coupled with existing knowledge of elephant behaviour, ecology and HEC to determine the impact of any planned development. An EIA assessment is ultimately an assumption based on our limited knowledge of elephants about their likely responses to development or loss of habitat. We need to go beyond that with systematic and sustained monitoring of elephants in and around the developed area to assess actual impacts. Such monitoring would be able to identify all the impacts and consequently hold the concerned development agency responsible for all adverse impact. The costs of elephant conservation and HEC mitigation originating from development should be borne directly by the concerned development agency. Only then will unplanned and unnecessary development by government and private agencies be regulated.

Talking of costs, we need to recognize that there will not be enough room for all elephants even when MERs are created. What to do with elephants living outside MERs for whom there may be no hope for conservation (doomed populations)? This is a difficult question that we need to answer collectively. But more importantly we need to make sure that the government and private agencies that cause habitat loss are made aware of and held responsible for creating doomed populations. The general public also needs to be made aware of how unplanned and unregulated development is condemning many populations to the 'doomed population' category.

At present all development in elephant habitat is seen as having no direct cost in terms of elephant lives. This is a fallacy, whenever elephant habitat is lost or fragmented a part of the population is destined to die out eventually due to resource crunch. This is little understood and rarely highlighted or even thought about. It's time that everyone is made aware of this so that we place a higher price on elephant habitat and on elephants. Recent studies by Prithiviraj Fernando and his team in Sri Lanka are giving us new insights on such impacts and the impacts are very serious – elephants are dying when habitat is lost.

Elephant habitat in most countries represents the few large tracts of forests remaining. The ecosystem services that these forests provide are critical to the ecological security of man. Elephants through HEC are not only making us aware of their plight but are also reminding us of our own bleak future. Habitat loss directly equates with the loss of elephants eventually and also with high levels of HEC. So we need to make the development agencies take direct responsibility for this. Only that may stop or minimize our onslaught on elephant habitats in future. Aside from our site specific conservation work we need to rapidly move towards targeting elephant conservation at the national level because elephants require that urgently.

We would also like to thank Ravi Corea and his team for putting out the HECTF document online. We also thank Jayantha Jayewardene and his team for their efforts in publishing the *Gajah* and Hank Hammatt for hosting the AsESG website.

Co-Chairs' e-mails:
ajayadesai.1@gmail.com
shedges@wcs.org



Elephants in the Nilgiri North Forest Division, India
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini