Gajah 32 (2010) 43-44

Human Aspects of Human-Elephant Conflicts

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Many lives, both human and elephant, are lost as a result of the human-elephant conflicts that are prevalent in most parts of the country. When an elephant is killed the carcass is buried or burnt. No further thought is given to the effect that the death of this elephant has on the herd it belonged to.

However, if a human is killed by an elephant there is an immediate effect on the family of the deceased. There is a pall of grief that descends on the family and friends of the victim. With time this grief is reduced in intensity. If, on the other hand, the victim was the breadwinner, there is an immediate change in the position of the family. A source of income, in many instances the only source, is cut off. With this loss many changes to the life style of the family have to be made. Adjustments have to be made with regard to food, schooling, clothing, plans for the construction of a house etc. Life for that family will never be the same again.

The majority of those killed by elephants are men. This is mainly because men move about more at night than the women do. This is also the time that the wild elephants also become active in their search for food. The men move about at night, going to their fields to protect their crops, returning from a bout of drinking or starting off or returning from a trip.

I have identified 74 families where one parent has been killed by a wild elephant. I assist 134 children from amongst these families, and assist them with the donation of schoolbooks sufficient for one year. This has been done for the last three years. I also assist in the construction of a house for those in dire need of a house.

In the course of my visits to these effected families over the last three ears, I have found three instances where there is great doubt as to whether it was an elephant that actually killed the victim. One instance is where the man living in Opanaike went to Madunagala to work in a stone quarry. Later his wife was told that he had been killed by a wild elephant. She has grave doubts that this was what actually happened. In another instance in Galewela the husband took his wife, in the late evening, to the forest purportedly to gather firewood. It was known that there were elephants in that forest. He came back after a while and said that the wife had been killed by an elephant. Strangely there have been no subsequent reports of elephant attacks in that area. The third instance is from Etaweeragolla off Medawachchiya where the victim was a home guard, who was on duty with three other home guards, at a security point on the edge of the village. Late at night the other three home guards had come and told the wife and others in the village, that an elephant had attacked them and that her husband Nimal Jayakody had been killed by a wild elephant. They said that they had managed to escape with great difficulty. The wife, however says that none of them had any injuries nor was there any damage to the bunker in which they were.

The attitudes of most children of the victims undergo many changes after the death of the parent. Most of the boys become difficult for their mothers to manage. They are disobedient, rarely at home, refuse to go to school, refuse to help the mother in anyway etc. The changes in the attitude of the girls are different. There is a lot of sadness reflected in the face of some girls. They become quieter, less inclined to study even though they go to school. Some children, both boys and girls, have stopped going to school because of the changed economic situation at home. They seek employment, however menial, just to supplement the family income. With their lack of a completed education the jobs they are able to get do not pay much.

In one instance a boy from Mahawewa off Galgamuwa had gone off to Colombo and found employment. He has come home, for a visit, sporting new clothes, a watch and a mobile telephone. However, the mother laments that he did not give her anything even though the family is living in abject poverty. In some instances it was found that the sudden state of poverty was an embarrassment to the child and he/she refused to go to school.

Poverty and the resultant inability of the surviving parent to support all the children, has pushed them to send some of their sons to temples to serve as acolytes and maybe later to be ordained as priests. From amongst the 76 families that we assist, there are 8 boys who have been sent to temples. In all these cases it has been the mother, driven by poverty, who has sent them. This move, even though it may not be the best for the child, has its advantages. The child gets an education, food and a comfortable place to stay. His education at the temple could go up to the level that the child is interested in learning. The child is always free to come back home.

In a number of instances when the mother is killed the father leaves the children and goes off. This may be because he cannot mange to look after the children by himself or because he wants to marry again. The children are invariably left with ageing grandparents, who themselves are not in a position to bring up these children properly due to their financial situation. There are also instances where the children have been left with an aunt or uncle.

Some wives of victims of elephant attacks have found employment in the Middle East. Though the children are deprived of the presence and love of either parent, they are financially stable because of the money that is sent for them. This at least ensures the children of some security.

The Department of Wildlife Conservation has a compensation scheme for families affected by the death of a member. They make a once and for all payment of Rs. 100,000. Of this Rs. 50,000 is given to the spouse. The balance Rs. 50,000 is distributed among the children who are under 18 years of age. However this money is placed in a Pass Book by the department and is available to the children only on their reaching the age of 18. If there is only one child he/she gets the whole amount. If there is more than one child the Rs. 50,000 is divided equally between the children.

The Department of Wildlife Conservation takes a long time to pay this compensation to the families of the victims. In most instances it is over a year before the money is received. The family of a recent victim in Medawachchiya was paid in June 2009 when the man was killed in March 2008.

Not all families of those killed by elephants are poor. A few of them are financially stable. These people are able to adjust more easily to the sudden drop in family income.

In our efforts to conserve our wild elephants, we must always be conscious of the damage that these elephants cause to humans. We must make every effort to alleviate, as much as possible, their hardships and difficulties so that their future would be a little better in spite of the major setback that they have had.

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Hut destroyed by an elephant (Sri Lanka)
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini