

Sustainability of Asian Elephant Conservation: Linking Conservation and Sustainable Development

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The conservation of large mammals like the Asian Elephant is far more complicated compared to that of other small species, such as insects. Elephants require a large habitat area to live, and therefore often compete with humans. Rapid human population growth, particularly in the Asian region, has resulted in the conversion of extensive elephant habitat into development such as agricultural areas and human settlements. To reduce poverty in the community, most governments in developing countries in Asia prioritize economic development. As a consequence, the protection of elephant habitat is always in conflict with development programs. This experience can be found in most Asian elephant range countries and is predicted to continue in the next five decades.

Scientists, on the other hand, suggest the need to focus elephant conservation strategy on habitat protection such as by creating new protected areas. Despite the importance of these strategies, the implementation is very difficult. This is probably due to the limited direct economic benefit given by the protected area to the local economy. As a result, it is difficult to get the establishment of new protected areas endorsed by the community and the government. In this complex situation, we need to develop a more innovative and sustainable elephant conservation strategy, such as by linking elephant conservation directly to economic improvement at local and national levels.

Many studies have identified the major issues in elephant conservation in the Asian region as habitat loss, poaching and human-elephant conflict. These issues are strongly linked to extensive poverty, which causes low economic growth. If the community continues to live in poverty, and if the national economic growth

remains low, it will be very difficult to ensure the sustainability of elephant conservation. In this context, linking elephant conservation to local economic development in a local community is critical.

The important challenge is how to develop an elephant conservation strategy that can be strongly linked to economic development. Elephant conservation and economic development can be linked to at least three issues. First, elephant conservation through habitat preservation can have a direct economic benefit on the people as it will ensure the sustainability of ecosystem services (such as clean water supply, local climate control and prevention of natural disasters). This issue might have been raised by a few conservation programs. However, the implementation is very limited and mostly for valuation purpose only. For example, many studies have confirmed that elephant habitat provides substantial ecosystem services such as water supply for agriculture, carbon sequestration to reduce climate change, and prevention of extensive floods and landslides. All these services need to be economically valued and used to pay for the management of elephant habitat including the implementation of community development programs in areas adjacent to elephant habitat. Payment for Environmental Services (PES) or Carbon Credit schemes need to be included as an integral part of development programs and the heavily embedded in national strategic development plans.

Second, elephant conservation can have a direct impact on economic development in the community through the operation of sustainable ecotourism programs. This initiative has been successfully implemented in some countries (e.g. Thailand) but need to be expanded in

other elephant range countries. It is important to integrate professional tourism programs involving intensive marketing strategies with elephant conservation programs. The direct economic benefits from tourism will contribute value to elephant conservation programs. Therefore, elephant conservation programs will be seen as a strategic national program that can directly contribute to the national economy.

Third, elephant conservation through the market education program can support sustainable industries with the requirement to produce sustainable products that will be accepted in the market. In this way, the global market can play an important role in protecting the environment through the recognition of products resulting from sustainable management (eco consumer demand). Market pressure can ensure the private sector will improve their business behaviour to become more sustainable and produce eco friendly products.

For example, oil palm, pulp and paper industries are currently making a significant contribution to Indonesia's economic growth. Most of these industries are located in Sumatra and are mostly oriented to land based production. As a result, a significant extent of elephant habitat is converted to oil palm and pulp and paper plantations. Such business activities need to be re-evaluated in the future. Producers need to be aware that their products will only be accepted by buyers when produced through sustainable management. If there is control from buyers (including

both government-owned and privately-owned companies), then there will be a chance to stop the conversion of elephant habitat to large scale plantations. In this case, conservation as a concept of market education and awareness is critically important. Furthermore, elephant conservation programs should acknowledge best practices from the private sector that promote sustainable products. It is, therefore, important to enhance direct collaboration with the private sector to promote "elephant friendly" practices in their concession areas.

Implementing the above issues at national level is a challenging task. However, this is not impossible, if all stakeholders on the national and global levels are willing to work together to find a solution. I strongly recommend that elephant conservation be further developed on a broader context. The traditional conservation strategy should be expanded to be more advanced, such as by introducing the concept of sustainable development and green economy. If the concept is applied, it will be more likely to get political support from the government, and social support from the community. Furthermore, the private sector, an important stakeholder in elephant conservation activities, will be more willing to include the conservation agenda in their business plan. When all stakeholders recognize the significance of the conservation agenda as a "need" and not simply as an "obligation", then it will be much easier to convince them that it is important for elephants to exist on this planet to ensure human existence in the future.



Tourists can easily observe elephants in the Minneriya National Park (Sri Lanka)
Photo by Jennifer Pastorini