

Notes from the Chair IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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Dear members

As the year 2016 comes to an end I would like to wish all of you a very happy 2017 and hope that the group will have a productive and a fun-filled quadrennium. We will start the new year with the energies that we have shared at our meeting in Assam in which so many of you participated. While the most important outcome I had wanted from the meeting was only that most of us meet and discuss what we had done for elephants in the past decade, I think we did better than that.

We heard from all the Working Groups that were formed from the year before and the extraordinary amount of work all those members had put in voluntarily for the group. Their work has given the group a draft mandate, a draft logo and a draft communication plan. We have the mandate for *Gajah* finalised, which is published in this issue and we also have a new Program Manager in Dr. Sandeep Tewari. Finally, we have an approved membership guideline and a Membership Advisory Group that is chaired by Dr. Anwarul Islam from Bangladesh. They are busy finalising the membership for this quadrennium and I am sure that a number of you would have already received your new membership invites from the IUCN SSC Secretariat based on the new list.

New members are still being inducted as we speak and by the end of the first quarter we will actually have a strengthened membership that both covers more regions as well as balances the skill sets of individuals in the group. We have now more young members while having a number of Emeritus members to advise the group. A healthy balance of youth and experience is always a great advantage for any specialist group. I am glad that we agreed to have range state ex-officio members as well as representatives of our Strategic Partners also in that capacity.

Apart from all this, the meeting also had productive discussions on distribution and populations of the Asian elephant, captive elephant management and health and human elephant conflict mitigation. These topics and more need to be taken up in this new quadrennium so that the group has products that can be used by those who are working on elephant conservation.

I personally felt that the meeting really profited with the Chair of the newly instituted IUCN Task Force on Human-Wildlife Conflict Dr. Alex Zimmerman holding a back to back meeting on human-elephant conflict mitigation as well as by the participation of a senior representative of the IUCN Connectivity Conservation Specialist



Group in the meet. This sort of lateral integration even within the IUCN community is critical if we are to achieve consensus conservation. Finally, it was great to have a Strategic Partners meet that had participation of several leading zoo associations, NGOs and potential funders for the group chaired by the former SSC Chair Simon Stuart and facilitated by Kira Milleham. All this augurs well for the group.

Before all the excitement of meeting everyone at Guwahati, there were two great global meets where luckily some of us met, bonded and had useful preliminary discussion. First, in August the IUCN General Assembly was held at a rather grand location at Honolulu, Hawaii. Boosted by President Obama declaring the largest marine protected area in the world, the meeting had several important and contentious decisions. The most contentious of them that involved elephants was the motion that encouraged the global community to ban the trade in domestic ivory. Despite it clearly not getting consensus among all the attending members, which is a normal IUCN tradition, the motion passed. In between the frenzied dealings of the committees and my own rather late night sittings (as I served on the Resolutions Committee for the conference), some of us, notably Shermin de Silva, Anwar ul Islam, Aster Zhang, Arnold Sitompul, Alex Zimmerman and Peter Leimgruber met up to have some preliminary discussions on the group. This proved very useful later as many initial thoughts could be crystallized in the Guwahati meet of the AsESG.

The second meeting that was of importance for elephants and thus the group was the CITES COP at Johannesburg in South Africa that was held immediately after the Hawaii meet. I attended the meet as a Technical Advisor to the Indian delegation and Simon Hedges represented the AsESG formally at the meet. Here, too, domestic ivory trade bans dominated much of the meeting. A move to put all elephants on Appendix I was defeated as was a move to downlist further populations of African elephants that were already on Appendix I to II. In other words more of a status quo was achieved on the listing of elephants. In



all this debate the endangered Asian elephant was of course not a topic of direct discussion but we all know that the ivory trade endangers all extant elephants and those of us there followed the discussions with great attention to detail. The Asian elephant had its spot in the sun with a side event hosted by Elephant Family and in which Simon and I participated, which released a report on Live Trade in Asian elephants to coincide with an intended discussion on the same theme at the CoP. It was horrific to see evidence of large-scale illegal trade in live elephants in Asia as also the visuals of elephants being skinned for a new consumption pattern in China.

After a huge meeting each in September, October and November, I was happy to have some time off in December to relax but not far away from elephants. I was happy to be in Sri Lanka again to continue discussions for the planned Asian Giants Summit in early 2018 that Sri Lanka has promised to host and I was happy to see many elephants in Koudulla Sanctuary tear up the wewa grass in large clumps and feed. Across the straits, I spent the remaining days in Wayanad where large bulls kept me homebound every evening four nights in a row. What an elephantine way to finish off a year!

I want to thank each and every one of you for making the inaugural meeting that I chaired so meaningful and warm. It gives me the energy to hopefully take this group to newer and better heights for the benefit of Asian elephants.

Vivek Menon
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