

Asian Mahout Partnerships Working for Conservation

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For a number of years the International Elephant Foundation (IEF) has been supporting Indonesian government conservation agencies to implement long term projects in Sumatra-Indonesia using trained camp elephants and their mahouts for direct conservation interventions. Previously neglected camp elephants and their mahouts now actively patrol protected areas reporting on illegal activities, providing assistance and support during wild elephant translocations and/or radio-collaring, and supporting local communities to mitigate human-elephant conflict (HEC).

The success of these Conservation Response Units has led to additional units being established by the government conservation and national park agencies around Sumatra. Following on the accomplishment of the Sumatra work, primarily based on enhancing the skills and motivation of mahouts so they are not just elephant handlers but accomplished field conservation staff, IEF has expanded collaborations during the past few years and provided support in Myanmar to develop similar units using trained elephants, their mahouts, and field staff.

The Myanma Timber Enterprise (MTE) has a long history of using trained elephants for a specific purpose: logging. In recent years as laws have changed and logging quotas have been drastically reduced, Myanmar is facing an increasing number of former logging elephants and their mahouts needing to be re-purposed for other types of work. Currently MTE manages approximately 3000 elephants. In addition there are more than 2500 elephants managed by private owners in Myanmar, and a small number of elephants managed by the Forest Department.

One component of IEF's support has been to enable exchanges of field staff between the Indonesian Conservation Response Units from Sumatra and Myanmar mahouts and field staff to develop partnerships for improved conservation outcomes. During the past few years several such opportunities have occurred: Sumatra field staff taught a course on field navigation using GPS units in Myanmar in December 2014; field staff from Myanmar participated in the 7th Indonesian Mahout Communication Forum Workshop in February 2015 and visited several Sumatra camps to learn more about the use of trained elephants for patrols, for various HEC migration strategies, and for tourism. In November 2015, field staff from Myanmar spent time with Sumatra Elephant Response Units in Way Kambas National Park participating in and learning about the use of routine elephant patrols to support local farming communities and mitigate conflict with wild elephants.

As a result of these collaborations, MTE has now set up eight Elephant Emergency Response Units (EERU) around Myanmar. Each EERU consists of former logging elephants and their mahouts as well as other field staff. The EERU teams are located in the Ayeyarwaddy, Rakhine, Bago East, Bago West, Magway, Sagaing, Nay Pyi Taw, and Mandalay regions.

Every EERU team's primary responsibility is to address and mitigate HEC in their area. However, some teams have little experience and knowledge about HEC management. Therefore it was decided to bring together the Team Leader, Co-Leader, and senior mahouts from each EERU team and train them on best practices of

addressing HEC. From March 28-31, 2016, with support from IEF, MTE organized a training workshop for the newly established EERU teams from around the country.

The first two days of the workshop were held in Yangon, at the MTE headquarters, and addressed theoretical aspects of elephant conservation. Resource persons from MTE, Forest Department, senior Indonesian mahouts from Sumatra with proven experience working consistently and effectively for conservation and HEC mitigation, as well as a few NGOs (IEF, Wildlife Conservation Society, Smithsonian Institution) gave presentations about the status of elephants (wild and captive) in Myanmar, the present and future use of captive elephants in Myanmar, and the utilization of camp elephants and mahouts for conservation work in Sumatra.

Following these presentations, each EERU team gave a short update about wild elephants and HEC in their specific area. Each EERU team was represented by the team leader and two mahout staff who were either senior mahouts (Singaung) or mahout leaders (Sinoak). During the second day, workshop participants decided on five main topics for discussion and divided up into working groups to discuss the following:

1. Protocol development for EERU teams
2. Need for budget, supplies, and equipment for the EERU teams
3. Law enforcement and involvement of other Myanmar Government Departments
4. Administration of EERU teams
5. Education and awareness

Later in the day each working group made a brief presentation to update all participants on the result of their discussions. The working groups all agreed that the outcome of this workshop will be officially presented to the Government, and Myanmar's wildlife laws will be reviewed to ensure they are actively enforced by the EERU teams. Participants agreed that the Government has the primary responsibility to provide the budget and basic needs for long term operation of the EERUs. They also decided to discuss law enforcement with other Myanmar Government

Departments such as the Forest Department and the General Administrative Department. The EERU teams plan to develop and provide local community education and awareness programs while on patrol and/or mitigating HEC. They will build local community collaborations to share information about wild elephants (Fig. 1). In addition, workshop participants acknowledged that as the EERU concept is new and only just beginning in Myanmar, there is a need to ensure good organization and cooperation among the units to allow effective HEC work.

The next two days of the workshop consisted of field training for the EERU units at the Myaing Hay Wun elephant camp, which is under the administration of the Bago West Region. Field staff and mahouts from the successful Sumatra Elephant Response Units operating in Way Kambas National Park led the practical sessions and instruction which included field navigation with GPS units and maps (Fig. 2), use of other field equipment such as digital cameras and laptop computer, recording and record-keeping of data, and HEC conflict mitigation strategies.

The Sumatra mahouts, who are already well experienced in applying all these techniques during patrolling and HEC mitigation work in Sumatra, had spent a week at the Myaing Hay Wun camp prior to the training workshop, and worked with the camp staff as one EERU unit is based there. To ensure effective field training and subsequent project implementation, field equipment (8 GPS units, 8 digital cameras, 1



Figure 1. Local community outreach by EERU and Sumatra mahouts.



Figure 2. Sumatra mahouts training EERU in GPS and field navigation.

(laptop computer) was donated to the EERU units by IEF.

In addition to the training workshop assistance, IEF had earlier (in June 2015) provided a one month long English language class to MTE

field staff and mahouts. The English language class experience allowed better communication between Myanmar and Sumatra staff. IEF intends to continue providing this assistance in order to improve the ability of the Myanmar staff to effectively communicate and report on field activities with international colleagues, scientists, and potential supporters.

To date the partnerships between mahouts and other field conservation staff within Asia have provided tremendous motivation and increased the skills and professionalism of mahouts. There is now greater awareness and knowledge about conservation issues among the mahout staff, and a better understanding of the use of trained elephant and skilled mahout teams to successfully participate in meaningful conservation activities. IEF plans to continue encouraging and supporting these Asian mahout partnerships as an effective approach to help protect forests and wildlife in Asia.



Figure 3. EERU and Sumatra mahouts group photo.