

15th International Elephant & Rhino Conservation and Research Symposium

Sarah Conley

International Elephant Foundation, Azle, Texas, USA

Author's e-mail: sconley@elephantconservation.org

As 2016 came to a close, the world's top elephant and rhino researchers, conservationists, keepers, and experts met up at the Singapore Zoo for the 15th International Elephant & Rhino Conservation and Research Symposium on November 14th through the 18th. For the fourth time, the International Rhino Foundation (IRF) joined the International Elephant Foundation's (IEF) in producing this prestigious bi-annual event. Hosted by Wildlife Reserves Singapore Group, attendees and presenters enjoyed the beautiful facilities at the Singapore Zoo with a special visit to the Night Safari park.

The symposium featured over 90 talks in just four days. Presentations fit into a number of categories, including habitat management, veterinary management, elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus (EEHV), captive management, reproduction, human-elephant conflict mitigation, behaviour, nutrition, population management and protection, genetics, and education. Attendees came from nearly every corner of the globe, with a strong representation from Asian range countries, as this was the first time the symposium has returned to Asia since 2008.

Long-time IEF Advisor and founder of Riddle's Elephant and Wildlife Sanctuary, Heidi Riddle, gave a fascinating keynote address about the relationship between captive elephants and conservation efforts. Given the centuries long history of elephants and humans living and working together, it was clear that one cannot be removed from the other and that solutions moving forward must take this into account to be successful and effective. IRF Board Member Terri Roth delivered the "State of the Rhino" address, painting a dismaying picture of rhino populations around the globe, but peppered with glimmers of hope.

With over 20 presentations given per day, the highlights are too numerous to cover completely. Dr. Imke Lueders presented a cutting edge technique for bronchoscopy, bronchial lavage and gastric fluid sampling in elephants to be used when wild status or lack of reliable training makes the standard trunk wash testing inaccessible. Dr. Gary Hayward of Johns Hopkins University discussed his detailed research on genetic variation of EEHV stains, which has been used as the foundation for much of the work done in EEHV, including the potential development of



a vaccine by Dr. Paul Ling, who presented his promising work.

Dr. Alfred Roca discussed speciation and hybridization in African elephants, making a strong case for considering the African savannah elephant and the African forest elephant as separate species. Also in genetics, the latest research into the expression of elephant p53, the cancer-fighting gene, and its implications for increasing cell death in human cancer cells was presented by Dr. Lisa Abegglen. Her research makes a powerful argument for the developing and preserving the symbiotic relationship between humans and elephants, as it can be beneficial to both.

Mitigating human-elephant conflict (HEC) and turning it into human-elephant coexistence (HECx) was a huge theme of the event, with 15 papers devoted to all aspects of the topic. While strategies like deterrent crops, beehive fences, alternate transportation methods, corridors, and more were discussed, the overarching conclusion was that HEC mitigation methods are incredibly dependent on location and the needs of the community as well as habituation of the elephant population. No “one size fits all” solution was found, but the most successful methods nearly always included an element of community outreach and education as it is those actually sharing their land with elephants, who will ultimately make the difference in their survival.

Among the internationally recognized experts were also new faces, including members of



the Elephant Response Unit (ERU) teams from Myanmar and Sumatra, Indonesia. These mahouts and wildlife officers gave a first-hand account of what it is like being on the front lines of conservation, the challenges they face, and how taking a job caring for elephants has morphed into a passion for conservation. Their presentations and the presentations of others underlined the many aspects and needs in the conservation of habitat and wildlife and the importance of listening to all perspectives to find lasting solutions.

Thank you to everyone who attended, presented, listened, and supported the great effort to make the symposium possible. More information about the symposium presentations will be posted on our website at www.elephantconservation.org.

The International Elephant Foundation is honoured to work in such a strong community of committed professionals and we look forward to our next symposium in Africa in 2018!

