

Expanding the Conservation Network of Asian Mahouts

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Mahouts are critical to elephant conservation programs across Asia. India, in particular, has for many years used trained elephants and their mahouts for direct conservation efforts. Although in many state Forest Departments the mahouts are from traditional families of mahouts, according to recent reports the Karnataka Forest Department (KFD), in southern India, is actively recruiting new mahouts because of the rising trend in human-elephant conflict (HEC) in various parts of Karnataka state. This state is home to the largest population of wild Asian elephants, presently thought to number approximately 6000 elephants. Currently there are about 122 trained elephants in all KFD camps, and the KFD has 71 posts of mahouts and 90 posts of kavadis (assistant mahouts).

It is generally felt that mahouts require ongoing awareness and updating on various management methods and current technology. Hence a series of awareness programs were arranged for the mahouts and kavadis of the Balle, Dubare, Rampura, and Sakrebyle elephant camps in Karnataka starting in January 2015 and continuing to date. A total of over 100 mahouts have participated in the programs so far. The goal of these sessions is to achieve recognition of mahout professionalism; to increase the capacity and competency of mahouts in elephant conservation work and habitat protection efforts; to create an information and communication system between mahouts locally and regionally; and to increase the welfare of mahouts and elephants.

In the state of Karnataka, the majority of Forest Department mahouts are tribal whose families have been working with elephants for gener-

ations, with fathers passing on their knowledge and skills to their sons. These mahouts are rarely exposed to new information about captive elephant management, and previous opportunities for casual information sharing have been well received.

Issues addressed and discussed during the sessions include the problems faced by the mahouts in their elephant conservation and habitat protection efforts, finding solutions to improve the care and management of India's wild and captive elephants, improving the welfare of the mahouts and their elephants, and creating an informal network with colleagues locally and in the region.

The main goals of these Mahout Awareness Sessions are as follows:

1. Sharing knowledge and experiences with Karnataka Forest Department mahouts by:
 - Presentations by representative camp mahouts about utilizing mahouts and elephants for conservation duties, followed by discussions about the different local experiences in camp elephant management.
 - Presentations by representative camp mahouts about the work each camp is doing to address issues such as HEC.
 - Discussions about local experiences and knowledge of elephant care, husbandry, and training.
 - Discussions about building capacity within the mahout community for improved skills in forest protection and wildlife conservation, and improved job performance and welfare of these individuals.

2. On-going mahout education via the following topics:

- Introduction to general elephant biology.
- Asian and African elephants - physiological differences, conservation management similarities (i.e. HEC).
- Captive elephant management in other forest camps in Asia and in non-range countries.
- Training elephants for veterinary care and treatment.

3. Pre and post training survey:

- To better understand how the program contributes to enhancing the capacity of mahouts in their daily elephant care and conservation work, participants are asked to complete a survey before and again after the session that gives an indication of what has been learned and what type of information is needed by mahouts.
- Survey results are important to understand the effectiveness of the programs and results will indicate where changes are needed.

Indonesia is a country with a more recent captive elephant and mahout experience. For a number of years NGOs have been supporting Indonesian government conservation agencies to implement long term projects in Sumatra 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 HEC.

The success of these patrol 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, during the past few years collaborations have expanded to other Asian countries (i.e. Myanmar) to

develop similar units using trained elephants, their mahouts, and field staff.

The following opportunities to exchange field staff and improve conservation outcomes 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 HEC migration strategies, and for tourism. In November 2015, field staff from Myanmar spent time in Sumatra with the 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 exchanges, the Indonesian Mahout Communication Forum (FOKMAS) extended an invitation to KFD mahouts to participate in the 2017 Indonesian Mahout Workshop which was held from May 16-18, 2017 in Taman Satwa Lembah Hijau, in Lampung province, Sumatra.

The Karnataka Forest Department is very interested in opportunities to provide continued training for KFD mahouts and showcase the KFD work in forest protection, so two KFD mahouts were deputed to participate in the Indonesian Mahout Workshop. The two KFD mahouts, Mr. Vasantha from the Mattigodu Elephant Camp and Mr. Nayaz Pasha from the Dubare Elephant Camp, attended the workshop and spent a few



Figure 1. Sumatra mahouts demonstrating elephant foot care.

days with one of the elephant patrol units in Way Kambas National Park.

The Indian mahouts are both from traditional mahout families. They first spent time at the Tegal Yoso Elephant Response Unit base camp located on the boundary of Way Kambas National Park. The KFD mahouts participated in activities such as a routine patrol and were shown the basics of GPS navigation by the Sumatra mahouts (Fig. 1).

The KFD mahouts then attended the Indonesian Mahout Workshop in Lampung (Fig. 2). The workshop hosted about 70 participating mahouts from facilities all across Indonesia (government camps, zoos, safari parks). Topics covered during the workshop included the role of trained elephants in HEC mitigation, training elephants for medical procedures, and using more humane training methods. The KFD mahouts had a very dynamic session; the Sumatra mahouts asked many questions about their activities, mainly how the KFD deals with HEC in their region. Practical workshop activities included topics such as the use of ultrasound in reproductive assessments of the elephants at the Taman Satwa Lembah Hijau Park. The KFD mahouts also demonstrated several traditional Indian elephant husbandry practices including the use of oil

(Neem and Castor) on elephants' forehead and feet, and the reasons for its use.

Regional 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 elephants and skilled mahout teams to successfully participate in meaningful conservation activities. These Asian mahout partnerships should continue to be encouraged and supported as an effective approach to help protect forests and wildlife in Asia.

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Figure 2. Mahout workshop group photo.