

Notes from the Chair IUCN SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group

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Dear members

I would like to wish all of you a very Happy 2018 and I am sure the group will have a very productive quadrennium and will contribute significantly for the conservation of Asian elephants. We will continue in this new year all the good work that we initiated last year, the most important being the 11 working groups formed to come up with concrete outcomes for the welfare and conservation of elephants in Asia in the wild and in captivity.

I am happy that Dr. Wahdi Azmi and his team has been able to come up with the report of the 2nd Asian Elephant Range State meeting held in Jakarta in April 2017 which is quite comprehensive and has come up with useful recommendations and we as a group have to now take the responsibility to take this forward along with Range countries. The report could be downloaded at <www.asesg.org/PDFfiles/2017/AsERSM%202017_Final%20Report.pdf>.

As informed earlier, the next AsESG members meeting will be held at the AVANI Riverside Hotel, Thonburi, Bangkok, Thailand from 25th to 27th April 2018 followed by two days optional field trip to Kui Buri National Park on 28th and 29th April 2018. I would request all the members to mark the dates and make travel arrangements to attend the meeting. The ex-officio range state AsESG members (government) will also be attending the meeting along with other invited experts.

I had the opportunity to attend the twelfth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP12) at Philippines as Technical Advisor to the Head of Delegation, Government of India from 23-28th

October 2017. This was the first time CMS has convened a COP in Asia since the international treaty was adopted in Bonn, Germany in 1979. In a session on 'Mitigation of the impact of human elephant conflict in the eastern region of India' organised by the Indian Government, I presented an overview of the status of wild elephants in Asia and trans-boundary elephant conservation issues and urged Parties to support the inclusion of the Asian elephant into CMS appendices when India would submit the proposal in the next COP.

The Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) Asia program has been re-launched in 2017 and MIKE office is working closely with AsESG to improve the data collection protocol and to build better synergies between MIKE and SSC activities in the region. We will have a separate session on MIKE during the next AsESG members meeting in Bangkok, Thailand in 2018.

As you may be aware, the influx of Rohingya refugees due to political instability in Rakhaine state of Myanmar to Bangladesh has created an unprecedented situation in Bangladesh for the people and the biodiversity of the area. About 900,000 Rohingya people have moved across the border into Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh and have been temporarily resettled in Balukhali, Ukhia, Kutupalong, Tangkahli, Hakimpara, Jamtoli, Chakmarkhul, Moynarghona, Smhamplapure, Leda and Noyapara areas of Ukhia and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar south division. Since 25th August 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees have moved to this area in less than a month's time to join the Rohingya refugees earlier resettled in the Kutupalong area. These people have taken refuge in the natural forest and in the centre of the elephant corridor. More than 5000 acres of forest have been cleared off to accommodate the Rohingya refugees. The new Rohingya refugee camp has been set up right in the middle of the



Ukhia-Ghundhum that is used by about 50–60 elephants to move from Myanmar to the Ukhia Reserve Forest through Nihongchori areas (IUCN Bangladesh). The blocking of the corridor has further increased human-elephant conflict in the region and at least 11 Rohingya refugees have lost their life since September 2017 due to elephants.

Dr. Sandeep Kr Tiwari, Program Manager AsESG in consultation with Bangladesh Forest Department and AsESG members from Bangladesh visited the Rohingya camp along with members from IUCN Bangladesh to understand the magnitude of the problem and to explore possible interventions to minimise human elephant conflict and find a solution to the ecological and human tragedy. He also met with officials from the UN International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commission (RRRC), Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG), UNHCR and Forest Department to understand the relief measures being undertaken, future plans and ways to reduce the ecological impact. The major



Visiting the elephant corridor near the Rohingya refugee camp (Photos by Sandeep Kr Tiwari).

ecological impact of this crisis has been the loss and fragmentation of forest due to settlement and unregulated fuel wood collection, increased human-elephant conflict, water and air pollution, spread of disease, soil erosion, landslide and depletion of ground water. The camp has also lead to loss of old plantation, has affected the forest dependent economy, local price escalation and law and order problem. The human-elephant conflict will further increase during the cropping season (by March 2018) and there is possibilities of land slides and inundation of low lying areas during monsoon and possibility of further loss of forest cover to accommodate people from low lying and land slide areas.

A report is being compiled by Dr. Tiwari in consultation with officials and AsESG members on the scenario and possible interventions to minimise the ecological damage and conflict. I would like to thank the Bangladesh Forest Department, Prof. Anwarul Islam and other AsESG members from Bangladesh for facilitating the visit of Dr. Tiwari and Mr. Raquibul Amin, Country Representative IUCN Bangladesh, and his team for facilitating him in the field and discussion.

I would like to thank each and every one of you for actively contributing towards the conservation of the species in Asia and I look forward to having you all for the upcoming AsESG members meeting in Bangkok from 25th to 27th April 2018.

Vivek Menon
Chair AsESG, IUCN SS