

## 9th Meeting of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group

Sandeep K. Tiwari\* and Vivek Menon

*Asian Elephant Specialist Group, Noida, India*

\*Corresponding author's e-mail: [sandeep@wti.org.in](mailto:sandeep@wti.org.in)

### Introduction

The 9th Meeting of the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) was held at the Avani Riverside Hotel in Bangkok, Thailand from April 25 to 27, 2018. Discussions on priorities and strategies for Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) conservation took centre stage during the three-day meeting, which was attended by about 131 people including 53 AsESG members, 13 government officials from all Asian elephant range countries, 19 potential AsESG members and 46 invitees from across the globe. The Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP), Government of Thailand provided the local support to organise the meeting.

Addressing the members, the Hon'ble Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, Kingdom of Thailand General Surasak Karnjanarat said that the meeting provides a good opportunity for experts on Asian elephants to look at various aspects of wild and captive populations and to provide technical support to governments and others on long-term conservation of Asian elephants. Welcoming the guests, the Deputy Regional Director of IUCN Asia, Dr. T. P. Singh said that the uniqueness and value of the IUCN Species Survival Commission and its Specialist Groups like the AsESG is that it embodies the spirit of IUCN's 'One Programme Approach'. Through this approach IUCN continues to play a convening role and bring together governments, civil society, research organisations, universities and other stakeholders to address emerging challenges in the long-term conservation and management of Asian elephants. Chairing the meeting, Mr. Vivek Menon, Chair AsESG spoke about the importance of the AsESG to save the flagship species and said that it was greatly heartening to see such an assemblage of skill and

passion among the members of the AsESG. As a group of scientists and experts, it is our duty to use these attributes to ensure the survival of the Asian elephants for generations to come. The Deputy Director General, Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation, Thailand, Dr. Pinsak Suraswadi said that he believes that the meeting will be a platform not only for discussing the action taken, identifying the priorities needed to tackle the Asian elephant conservation issues but also strengthen our collaboration to protect the Asian elephant in the future.

### Chair's report

Presenting the Chair's report, Mr. Vivek Menon informed that the AsESG consist of 90 members from 18 countries as well as ex-officio Government representatives from all 13 countries. He also spoke about the 2nd Elephant Range States Meeting in Jakarta, Indonesia in April 2017 and the Jakarta declaration, meetings attended by the Chair at various forums in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and United Kingdom and the constitution of the 12 working groups on diverse elephant conservation issues. As part of the report, the financial overview and the AsESG Action Plan were also presented. The main component of the AsESG plan till 2020 includes:

- Facilitate National Action Plans (NAP) on elephant conservation for 13 range countries in Asia.
- Ensure membership from all 13 range countries with diverse skills.
- Organise meetings of the AsESG members in 2019/2020.
- Mapping the distribution of elephants in all the 13 range states in Asia.
- Assist the Vietnam government in arresting

- the decline of elephant population in Vietnam.
- Developing guidelines/protocols for the conservation of Asian elephants by relevant working group.
- Facilitating MIKE in effective data collection and reporting.
- Developing Asian elephant database.
- Effective communications of AsESG activities through website and Gajah journal and fund raising to facilitate AsESG activities.
- Identifying elephant conservation emergencies and to plan mitigation measures with technical support from AsESG.

### *Rohingya crisis*

The Chair also informed the group about the Rohingya crisis that has gripped the world both from a humanitarian point of view as well as a wildlife point of view and offered AsESG assistance to Bangladesh Government and IUCN Bangladesh in undertaking HEC mitigation initiatives in the area. Mr. Raquibul Amin, Country Representative, IUCN Bangladesh said that his office with support from UNHCR and assistance of AsESG members from Bangladesh has surveyed the area to understand elephant movement, number of elephants and seasonality of movement based on direct survey and interaction with fringe villages.

The main challenge is how to address the increasing human-elephant conflict (HEC) in the region. Based on an initial survey by IUCN Bangladesh, elephant response teams (20 member teams) have been formed in the camp area and watch towers have also been installed along the western periphery of the refugee camp. The Chair has formed an AsESG working group to assist the Bangladesh government and IUCN Bangladesh team in preparing the mitigation plan.

### *2nd Range State Meeting*

Dr. Wahdi Azmi and Ms. Heidi Riddle briefed the meeting on the outcomes of 2nd Range State Meeting and the follow up activities by range countries. They also briefed the meeting about the Jakarta declaration for Asian elephant

conservation. The main priorities of the AsESG as outlined in the declaration were to maintain landscapes for elephant populations, work collaboratively on transboundary issues, address the root causes of HEC and develop long term solutions, ensure effective enforcement to prevent illegal killing and trade, strengthen international collaboration, coordination, and communication; cooperatively develop captive Asian elephant registration programs, ensure the welfare of captive elephants and develop where necessary National Asian Elephant Action Plan and its timely implementation.

### *Range country contributions*

The government officials from all 13 countries presented the status of elephants in their respective countries, conservation challenges and the conservation initiatives undertaken and proposed plans.

### **Working group reports**

The conveners of the 12 working groups presented the outcomes of their group.

### *Preparation of National Action Plans*

The working groups for the preparation of the National Action Plans for the conservation of elephants in Indonesia and Malaysia (Borneo) – the Sumatra draft NAP was presented by Dr. Wahdi Azmi and Mr. Donny Gunaryadi on behalf of the Indonesia Environment and Forest Department and the Borneo draft NAP was presented by Dr. Bennoit Gossens and Dr. Nurzhafarina Othman. The final plans are expected to be published by end 2018.



### *Arrest the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam*

Mr. Ajay Desai presenting the outcome of the working group to arrest the decline of the elephant population of Vietnam suggested short-term and long-term interventions and recommended listing the Vietnam population as “critically endangered”. The group also aims to provide technical inputs to the Vietnam government and advise them on decision making, assist in drafting guidelines and manuals on HEC mitigation measures, translocation, captive breeding, reintroduction, etc. and also to advise on expertise available within the AsESG and outside.

### *Develop guidelines for the welfare and use of elephants in tourism*

Dr. Sonja Luz and Dr. Janine Brown presenting the outcome of the working group to develop guidelines for the welfare and use of elephants in tourism said that there are no real guidelines in place for the care of captive elephants being used in tourism. The new guidelines for the welfare of captive elephants used in tourism were drafted based on research implemented by the ACEWG. The need for the guidelines and the key challenges faced for captive elephant welfare were explained and that the group will prioritize the development of specific protocols (e.g. for humane taming, training and managing elephants) once the guidelines are finalized.

### *Mapping the distribution of Asian elephants*

The working group for mapping the distribution of Asian elephant range states was presented by



Dr. Varun Goswami and Dr. A. Christy Williams who described the data need and ways to map the populations. The working group presented on the need to map the distribution of Asian elephant ranges and how it is needed for landscape level planning to conserve the species. They briefed on occupancy model and data requirements from range states.

### *Developing guidelines for rehabilitation of captive elephants in the wild*

The working group for developing guidelines for rehabilitation of captive elephants in the wild as a possible restocking option was presented by Dr. Chatchote Thitaram. The group presented the broad plan of action for rehabilitation of captive elephants back to the wild as a restocking program and why reintroduction is required from a conservation point of view.

### *Management and care of captive elephants in musth*

Introducing the term “musth”, Dr. Janine Brown informed its impact on male elephants and the signs and behavioural changes observed in wild elephants when in musth and compared the difference to that of captive elephants. Due to the abnormal behavioural changes displayed in captive elephants, they are subject to harsher management methods. She also briefed on the behavioural stereotypes displayed by captive elephants in musth and the aggression among the bulls, at time leading to accidents. Following the management criteria, she briefed on the musth control protocol that the group has drafted including use of short acting drugs that reduce aggression (suggested avoiding repeated use) and emphasised on the importance of training mahouts and also the use of the right tools to manage an elephant in musth.

### *Developing guidelines for creating artificial water holes*

Giving a background, Prof. R. Sukumar presented on past studies implemented in Africa on water holes installed there and mentioned that this is a critical debate which has been going



on in Africa and is now emerging in Asia as well. Water holes cause changes in home range/movement/distribution, have a localized impact on vegetation, impacts population growth and also has implications for other biodiversity. The impact of water holes on elephants and their habitats were presented in details.

#### *Involving AsESG members to strengthen MIKE*

Dr. N. M. Ishwar informed that MIKE Asia has been revived in 2017 and listed the MIKE sites in South East Asia (14 sites in 8 countries) and in South Asia (14 sites in 5 countries). He presented key learnings from AsESG members on MIKE carcass data sheet and reporting, MIKE site selection, Proportion of Illegally Killed Elephants (PIKE) and on population estimation and sought assistance of AsESG. The group felt that it will be good to integrate the MIKE carcass data template into the national action plans so the range state governments consider the same as part of their mandate.

#### *Human-elephant conflict guidelines*

Dr. Alexandra Zimmermann introducing the concept of IUCN guidelines explained that the guideline will be that of a guiding framework for principles and processes in all aspects of managing HEC across the range states. The guideline is formed around the three key aspects – principles of HEC, process for best practices in HEC mitigation and mitigation methods. A final revised version will be submitted to IUCN for formal approval process by early 2019 and the HEC guidelines were to be launched at the next AsESG meeting in late 2019.

#### *Communications*

The communications working group was presented by Dr. Sandeep K. Tiwari and Ms. Nilanga Jayasinghe. Dr. Tiwari presented the new AsESG website, which was approved by the members with some suggestions, which are being incorporated. The new website will be hosted by early September 2018. Ms. Jayasinghe emphasised the need of AsESG communications strategy and spoke on branding, visuals, blog, media and coverage.

#### *Way forward with the working groups*

All the working groups (except the one on HEC) will be modifying their reports based on feedback and comment by members during the AsESG meeting and plan to finalise their output by October 2018.

Dr. Sandeep K. Tiwari updated the group on the status of NAP's. He said that in the last few months, Myanmar and Bangladesh have prepared their NAP. Three countries (India, Bhutan and Lao PDR) that do not have a plan have assured to draft the National Action Plan and AsESG has offered support to help them in drafting the NAP.

Based on feedback of the members, the Chair also agreed to have working groups on minimizing impact of Rohingya refugees on elephants in Bangladesh, minimising the impact of linear infrastructures on elephant habitat, assisting with drafting the National Action Plans for elephant conservation for India, Lao PDR and Bhutan, on emerging diseases and nutrition in elephants and on invasive species in elephant habitats.

## Other presentations

Presentations were also made on important elephant conservation issues by invited speakers.

### *CITES DNA database requirement: Options available and lessons learned*

Dr. Ross McEwing from TRACE Wildlife Forensics Network presented on DNA registration system which is currently being used in Thailand and presented a conceptual framework on the use of DNA in the field of wildlife enforcement and its advantages. Informing the advantages of this system, he said that it will form a single calibrated system across south east Asian range states. The system will also avoid use of duplication and allow outsourcing to a single appropriate genetic service provider.

### *Wildlife forensic science laboratory in Thailand*

Dr. Kanitha Outhaven from the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant conservation, Thailand informed that the Wildlife Forensic Science Unit Laboratory (WIFOS) was established in December 2010 with aim of using forensic techniques in wildlife crime and confiscated animal investigations. The lab also aims to establish a DNA database and DNA bank for wildlife in Thailand. Said that the key challenge faced is that in Thailand many wild elephants are brought in to captivity illegally. As a solution to this, the DNP established the captive elephant database and an Asian elephant DNA parentage system. Each elephant in captivity has a legal document known as the elephant passport. This along with the captive elephant genetic database is helping the DNP keep a check on illegal capture of wild elephants for captivity.

### *Research and progress for managing elephant endotheliotropic herpes virus (EEFV)-HD globally in captive and wild elephant populations*

Dr. Sonja Luz, Chairman, Asia EEHV Working Group and members AsESH informed about the EEFV virus and its resulting Hemorrhagic disease including the symptoms and its impacts on elephants, individuals and populations. She

said that in Asia the disease is being recorded with increasing frequency both in captive and wild elephants. Dr. Luz stressed on the importance and need to raise more awareness and inform regional stakeholders about the currently available knowledge and best practices to better coordinate research on this disease. The EEHV working group was set up to help facilitate the same. The recommendations of the first Asia EEHV strategic meeting have been published as an information brochure. An EEHV task force has also been formed in Thailand in 2015. The working group's collaborations with other institutes were also presented. The working group also recommends training for mahouts and veterinary trainings for doctors and assistants to help treat EEHV-HD in captive elephants.

### *Influencing international transportation policy and practice for more wildlife-friendly roads challenges in the 21st century*

Mr. Rob Ament from the Western Transportation Institute, Montana State University, USA introduced about the Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group (CCSG) and their role. He emphasised on the importance of landscape level conservation, especially the need to connect habitats and also spoke about the challenges faced (existence of multiple jurisdictions, authorities, organizations, cultures, spatial scales and multiple time frames to work with). Mr. Ament gave a brief introduction to the Transport Working Group under CCSG that aims on improving transport systems for species and ecosystems. He informed on the challenges faced by the working group and the mitigation strategies like change in behaviour of animals (using deterrents), change in driver behaviour and means to separate drivers from animals using underpasses, bridges, animal corridors etc. He included proven solutions like underpasses and corridors, which have helped in mitigation threats posed by roads and railways. However, some of these like wildlife corridors are expensive. Mr. Ament presented a few case studies / examples of these solutions including tunnels for salamanders in Waterton Lakes National Park Canada, signage and early warning systems along railway tracks, elevated railways in the Tibetan plateau etc.

*Illegal trade in live Asian elephants: A review of current legislative, regulatory, enforcement, and other measures across range states*

Ms. Heidi Riddle informed that the CITES resolution recommends that all elephant range States have in place legislative, regulatory, enforcement, or other measures to prevent illegal trade in live elephants. She spoke about the project goal and objectives based on the CITES recommendations. The team conducted questionnaire surveys to help with their research on illegal trade of elephants in the area. Ms. Riddle also presented the key findings of the survey.

*Threat of elephant poaching for skin in Myanmar*

Dr. A. Christy Williams told the gathering on survey in Mong La, Myanmar by WWF Myanmar that was able to highlight the emerging trade on elephant parts (skin) in the region. Based on their recent records, 7 out of 19 elephants poached had collars. Of these 20 were poached from a single site in March 2017. Based on market survey in 2014–2015, the team found 700 pieces of skin available for sale in 16 shops largely being sold to Chinese buyers. Dr. Williams presented the response to this threat taken by organizations in Myanmar. The teams worked towards responding at three levels – immediate response in the field, fixing national policy to fix this threat, increasing awareness and support to close markets which deal in trade of elephant parts. They also trained Forest Department staff and local communities on patrolling.

*Report on elephant killing and carcass processing at Rakhine Yoma elephant range*

Dr. Martin Tyson from Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Myanmar presented the background of the Rakhine Yoma elephant range in Myanmar and informed that the threats to elephants come from the Ayeyarwady villages on the east of the range. He informed of the indicators of hunting in the area, based on anecdotal evidence from rangers, confiscated items from poachers, confiscated wildlife products from

poachers and also spoke about the challenges faced and the need to help address this threat to elephants in the region. WCS in Myanmar is working with the department and has pressed for a 7-year jail sentence on convictions. He also informed on the lack of proper weapons by the patrolling team compared to the poachers and raised doubt that the local police may be involved in the trade. Hence, need of good informer system in field. He suggested having multi-agency armed patrolling teams, additional captive elephant unit in northern Rakhine Yoma elephant range and satellite collaring of elephants for protection and research.

*Skinned – an investigative report from Elephant Family*

Ms. Belinda Stewart-Cox presented on Elephant Family's investigation in to the recently emerged trade in elephant skin and their work on addressing this threat to Asia's elephants. Elaborating the report "Skinned: The growing appetite for Asian elephants" she briefed the group on the history of Elephant Family's work on the above issue, and their contribution which resulted in addition of 'live elephant trade' to resolution 10.10 in CITES CoP 16. The findings of the research indicate that since 2014, there has been increase in poaching and trade / sales with main source of elephant skin being Myanmar and the products being produced are beads / pendants, skin pieces, powder. These are manufactured in Myanmar, Laos, China and the by-products being elephant trunks, a delicacy. The main market is China and the trade could result in indiscriminate killing of elephants of both sexes, threatening the fragile elephant population.

**Next meeting**

The next AsESG meeting is planned for late 2019. Four verbal offers were received from members (Sri Lanka, Malaysia-Borneo, Bangladesh and China) and the venue will be finalised in consultation with members based on support available for meeting from the local government and other agencies.