

## Report on the Sixth Elephant Conservation Group Workshop

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### Background

The Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) was founded in 2011 to conduct common projects across the Asian elephant range and to exchange ideas and experiences regarding elephant conservation.

The sixth workshop was attended by 13 participants from nine countries. The meeting was held in Bangkok, Thailand from 22<sup>nd</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> April 2018 preceding the Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) meeting. As eight ECG members are also AsESG members, this arrangement saved travel costs and time. The meeting was held in a house rented through Airbnb where the participants also stayed.

### Summary of activities presented by each team

Jackson Frechette (**Cambodia**, FFI) informed us that landscape management was the most important issue for them to better conserve elephants. Studies using camera traps and line transects were undertaken. Dung samples were collected for a genetic study, and the bush meat market and ivory trade routes were investigated.

Becky Shu Chen (**China**, ZSL) told us about last year's elephant stakeholder meeting. Studies were done on human-elephant conflict (HEC), individual elephant identification, distribution, population estimates using DNA, plants consumed and landuse. An alarm system using camera traps around the village was tried and elephant-friendly rice and tea was promoted.

Ananda Kumar (**India**, NCF) informed us about the translocation efforts in Hassan and a study on elephant and people deaths at four sites. We got an update on the SMS alerts in Valparai, which have

now also been introduced in Hassan. Having a Forest Department quick response team on duty was found to be useful for mitigating HEC.

Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz (**Malaysia**, MEME) talked about the elephant distribution survey conducted by them, a study on social organisation using camera traps and 50 elephants that were collared in the last six years. The seed dispersal study continued, with DNA being used to identify plant species in dung. MEME was also involved in developing policies, and focused on communication with the general public.

From John McEvoy (**Myanmar**, Smithsonian) we heard about the collaring efforts of 28 elephants and new habitat maps. HEC was studied and electric fencing was introduced. A new poaching crisis came to light as seven collared elephants got killed for their skin.

Narendra Pradhan (**Nepal**, IUCN) reported on a study of HEC, which showed that 75% of human deaths due to HEC were due to negligence. An awareness program would help to avoid deaths.

Prithiviraj Fernando (**Sri Lanka**, CCR) reported about their collaring program, a study of elephants at garbage dumps, collaboration with a hotel to give tourists a better experience when observing elephants, ongoing electric fence work, distribution survey results, awareness programs and updating the national elephant policy.

Eileen Larney (**Thailand**, ZSL) talked about their camera trapping and elephant sign surveys in the Western Forest Complex. HEC incidents were investigated and new mitigation techniques tried. Main threats to elephants were found to be agricultural encroachment, cattle, logging and poaching.

## Research activities

Ananda Kumar gave an overview on dung counts. He pointed out that visibility and climate are key factors and that defecation and dung decay rates need to be specific for the study area. They are currently studying dung decay rates at Valparai.

Sreedhar Vijaykrishnan (India, NCF) presented his PhD project on the response of elephants to drives. He studied distribution in different seasons with dung line transects and used camera traps to ID individual elephants in Valparai in agricultural and forest landscapes. He also monitored FGM hormone levels and body condition of elephants.

Ee Phin Wong (Malaysia, MEME) presented her study, which evaluated hormone levels from collared elephants, combining the results with the elephants' actual movement data. Parasites were also investigated. The goal was to compare translocated elephants with resident ones.

## ECG Projects

Three years ago ECG started a study on elephant and human mortality due to HEC. All teams collected data but as the numbers were still low, it was decided to collect data for another year.

The second ongoing project is to study elephant body condition from photographs. All teams brought photographs to the workshop, which we scored as a group, providing training to the less experienced. We discussed how such data can be used to compare males and females, different sites or different seasons. As we also want to compare countries, it was decided to keep collecting data.

The distribution survey has now been completed at all sites. We discussed the status of data analysis for each team. Three teams are preparing a publication. Others have not started analysis yet but were motivated to do it soon.

## Discussions

We held an open discussion on sustainable solutions to address HEC. Confrontational methods were found not to be very useful

as elephants get used to them and respond aggressively. Compensation was difficult as damage value is difficult to determine and payment of compensation reinforces the idea that the payee is responsible for elephants. For crop insurance to be viable, all farmers and not only those affected would need to be involved. Electric fences can work but maintenance is a big issue and also elephants with tusks can break them. Alternative crops may work but most people do not want to change for socio-cultural and economic reasons. Overall we agreed that proper studies on HEC mitigation methods across sites would be very useful.

Nilanga Jayasinghe (WWF) gave us further insights into the poaching crisis in Myanmar. An impressive campaign was launched called "Voices for Momos". They put up life-sized elephant sculptures and invited people to come and take selfies – which 50,000 did in the first week. A touching movie was produced and a music festival with famous artists organized. The sale of ivory souvenirs at the Shvedagon pagoda in Yangon already stopped as a result.

In the last session we discussed the future of ECG. Our common projects have not worked as well as expected. Most teams already have a lot going on and it is difficult to add new activities. However, we all agreed that we are open for new projects if something interesting comes up that can be managed beside the ongoing work. All participants felt that the ECG meetings are worthwhile to exchange experiences and build a personal network. This allows data sharing on a personal basis and facilitates visits to other team members' sites to learn at first hand.

