

COMMENT

It is a truism that, at any but the lowest density, large wild animals and human beings are fundamentally incompatible. As the densities of both large mammals and man increase, this incompatibility increases as well. Throughout Asia, increasing human population and increasing agricultural land use have substantially reduced the area once available to the elephants. The situation has reversed from one in which man lived in small settlements in areas dominated by elephants to one in which the elephants find themselves confined to small patches of habitat, surrounded by a man-dominated landscape. The elephants and other wildlife have lost so much of their former habitat, that they are often forced to invade the communities that have displaced them. This is the crux of the elephant-human conflicts in Asia. Depredation by elephants has become a way of life.

There is a relationship between tolerance of wildlife and human population density. In countries where the human population densities are low, there is generally an acceptance and tolerance of such large mammals as the elephant. Religious sentiments too reinforce this attitude to keep poaching, wanton killing and cruelty to animals to a minimum. However, when the human population becomes too numerous and too sophisticated, this relationship progresses through time from acceptance to intolerance. When this happens, even religion is powerless in preventing the slaughter of wildlife.

In Sri Lanka, despite a strong Buddhist culture a number of wild elephants had been killed in the recent past by irate farmers who had borne the brunt of elephant depredations. In some instances, the killings were carried out by poachers in order to supply tusks to a few carvers, who despite the international ban on ivory, continue to produce pendants and other trinkets from elephant ivory for sale to the tourists who seem to have re-discovered Sri Lanka. In a desperate effort to resolve the human-elephant conflicts in Sri Lanka, a consultant from abroad recommended the capture of some 500 wild elephants for domestication and subsequent sale through public auction! Such a harebrained scheme, if implemented, would adversely affect the long-term survival of the elephants in the wild. In most instances, much of the crop depredations are the result of lone bulls wandering in search of oestrous females to mate. The capture and removal of such animals will seriously undermine reproduction and recruitment in the wild. It would also lead to a significant reduction in the genetic variation in the population. Removal of chronic crop raiding elephants from an area of high human population makes sense if it involves only a few animals. But to recommend the capture and removal of almost 20 percent of the island's elephant population for domestication and sale to the public will only help accelerate the demise of the island's wild

elephant population. There are no instant solutions to the complex problem of human-wildlife conflicts in Asia. Time, money and trained manpower act in many cases as brakes on what can be done to resolve the problem. The root cause of elephant depredations throughout Asia is deforestation and conversion of forests to agriculture. Although human population pressure, land hunger and a need for fuel wood have all helped to cause deforestation, it has also been encouraged enormously by bad economics. Even the World Bank has realised that a tropical forest may be far more productive than the scrubland which often succeeds. But governments throughout Asia frequently assume that fragile forests can easily be cleared and farmed. They also frequently ignore the ecological costs of deforestation: soil erodes, rain fall diminishes, water supplies become less reliable, rivers silt up, dams get clogged, human-wildlife conflicts escalate and such extinction-prone species as the elephant and other large mammals often disappear.

It is now becoming increasingly clear that if we want to enhance the long-term survival of the elephants in Asia, some sort of accommodation between man and elephant must be reached. Man and elephant will have to live together by mutual adjustment. Furthermore, management policies must be designed to persuade people to change their attitudes, from intolerance to tolerance or from mere tolerance to acceptance. How can this be achieved? One way is through proper zoning of the conservation areas and their adjacent lands for types of use that integrate conservation needs with those of adjacent human populations. Another possibility is by improving the incentives for local communities to participate in the conservation of wildlife resources. The communities that bear the brunt of elephant depredations must be properly compensated for their losses. Such compensation could be provided through sensible insurance schemes or from revenues from nature tourism. Unfortunately, in many Asian countries, the local communities receive little or no benefit from tourism, whereas the true beneficiaries of tourism are the local tour operators and their international sponsors. Outdoor recreation is valued by a small segment of the more affluent section of the society while the poor remain alienated or indifferent. The local communities must participate fully in decisions affecting their land and resources. International efforts to protect and safeguard the Asian elephant populations throughout their range must include projects and programmes that involve the cooperation and participation of the local communities. Finally, conservation education must be given high priority. Conservation policies, however well-rooted they may be in science, can succeed only if they are intelligible to the people concerned.

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