

The sad status of elephants in southern Assam, India

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I wish to inform you about something startling that has been reported by Peter Thorose of Shillong and subsequently I verified the same from some local sources. In the Eastern Cachar Dist. of Southern Assam, there exists some extensive elephant habitat, from the Cachar - Manipur border in the North to the Inner line Reserve Forest at the Cachar - Mizoram border in the south. The area may be around 1500 sq. km. and had some excellent habitat for elephants in particular. Extensive bamboo (*Melocanna bambosiodis*) and cane brakes mixed with pockets of evergreen forest cover this entire contiguous area and elephants had been resident here amongst many other interesting and important fauna. Several endemic species of plants occur here.

Several elephant 'Mohals' had been in operation here and it is here that in 1958 I had first accompanied a "Mila Shikar" party to see for myself and understand the intricacies of this method of elephant capturing. I don't think any reasonably accurate estimate of the elephant population of this area had been done during the earlier days. But my personal experience in this area makes me guess that there could have been 150 to 200 elephants in this area, if not more. I have come across 3 herds of between 31 and 47 elephants in this area during early sixties. But of late I had no idea of what was happening there.

Therefore, I gasped in disbelief, when Peter told me that according to his information there is only one cow elephant with her sub-adult tusker son roaming a part of this area! He told me that many of the elephants had been

killed and eaten, by some groups of people for whom elephant meat is preferred food item and may have been captured illegally by local 'Mila Shikar' "mohaldars" trained those inside the jungles and brought them out on false papers of ownership.

It sounded quite improbable that more than 100 elephants can disappear like this and there was not even a whimper and so I got this information checked through some other sources. But my worst disbelief was said to be a fact. I was further informed that by early this year even the sub-adult tusker was illegally captured by a local Mafia leader of the small township of "Haila kandi", after shooting several shots at the mother, who would not desert her son. When this tusker was being 'trained' the local D.F.O. got wind of the matter and with police help raided the site of training the elephant. But the accused ran away leaving behind a tightly roped young tusker, which had suffered untold torture and died soon after because of severe internal hemorrhage, even though veterinary help was provided at the last moment. A case has been registered, but the D.F.O. is under threat and the local civil and police administration is most uncooperative to provide any help. The cow elephant, which had been surely injured, has not been traced again.

A story goes around that some 'expert' people are capable of spiking the lower part of the elephant's hind foot from behind, when they climb hills during foraging. This is done by long pointed bamboo poles on both the hind legs in quick succession. This obviously immobilises the elephant, which generally kneels down. It

is then either speared or disembowelled from the side. I cannot still believe this account. But it seems to be a fact that wild elephants have disappeared from this area, even though the cover conditions have remained conducive for the species. The matter certainly deserves to be properly probed.

Elephant depredation in this region had been a common and widespread happening, even during the British period. I have myself witnessed menacing elephant problem in many localities of their region in the fifties and sixties. People had been harassed and naturally resentment was strong amongst these people. Elephant capturing was the only partial solution to curb this menace, as with capturing of elephants starting, most of the herds moved away from the vicinity of the human habitation. But since elephant capturing had been banned, people have had no respite. This might had been the chief reason, why the terrible news of slaughtering of the elephants (if true) and also

about illegal capturing did not filter out. Or is this complete apathy of the Forest Department?

However, this may be a dreaded example of how elephants can disappear from an area, even when the habitat is retained. I have been told that the number of elephants in the North Cachar areas and in the adjoining Khasi hills areas have also sharply declined during the last few years, mainly due to poaching for meat. Probably a thorough and accurate status survey is called for immediately. Unless ways and means are suggested and proper action taken in all earnestness, the elephant may be on its way out from many areas of the North East, despite Project Elephant. Lack of people's support and antipathy towards conservation of elephant will only hasten the decline.

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Gajah 11 (1993) 54

Book Review

Souvenirs of a Forgotten Heritage. Gamini de S.G. Punchihewa, Government Press, Colombo, 1989. 480 pp. ISBN 955-9073-00-1. Price: 263.75 Sri Lankan Rupees.

This book deals largely with the Veddas (the indigenous people of Sri Lanka) and their vanishing culture. Nevertheless, the chapters on the Flora and Fauna will be a useful reference work for anyone interested in the interactions of man and wildlife in the eastern part of Sri Lanka. The chapters on the elephants provide some useful information on how villagers dealt with the problem of crop depredations by marauding elephants in the Gal Oya region before the area was developed. Mr. Punchihewa mixes facts with myths to make the text interesting to read. Elephants, from the author's personal observations, appear to be migratory, appearing in the area during the Maha and Yala seasons (October to March and April to September), attracted by the ripening paddy, sugarcane, coconut and oranges. The book also deals with some of the salient points about the biology and behaviour of the elephants. There is also a reference to the use of electric fencing to ward off the elephants and how some elephants were able to overcome this obstacle. A chapter deals with the ancient ways of capturing elephants. There are some editorial inconsistencies, particularly with species names, but this should not detract from the value of the book to anyone interested in elephants and the vanishing culture of the Veddas in Sri Lanka. (Ch. S.)