

Editorial

Jayantha Jayewardene

The Asian Elephant Specialist Group stands out as an icon of the commitment of scientists, governments and civil-society entities to saving the Asian elephant throughout its range states. It is also committed to the conservation of Asian elephants in zoos and with private owners. Yet there is an overwhelming public perception that elephants are fast disappearing, and that the advice of scientists is not being heeded. Is our commitment actually working towards conserving these elephants?

As the focal point for advocacy on Asian elephant conservation plans and actions, there is no gainsaying that the AsESG has been less than effective, given the enormous task it has at hand. In the last six years or so the group has met only once or twice. Communication to members by way of newsletters, e-mails etc also have been minimal. The AsESG has amongst its members conservationists, researchers, scientists, managers, policy makers and amateur enthusiasts who are all interested in making an effort to conserve the Asian elephant. It is essential that the group gives leadership and support to the activities of these people and also makes information available to others.

The AsESG needs to have a programme of work, and such a programme needs to be developed through consultation with the membership, especially with those directly concerned with elephant conservation in each of the range states. There should be an annual plan and strategy, which should also address the issue of finances necessary for implementation. These plans should be prioritized so that funds, if not available in full, could be utilized for the more important actions. It would be interesting to know what the IUCN's budget for the AsESG is. If there are no funds coming in to the AsESG from the IUCN, it risks transforming the Group into little more than a talk shop: some clarity is needed

on the role of the AsESG and its relevance within the IUCN family.

When assessed, the actual accomplishment of the AsESG in the last five or six years has been minimal. The group met last in 2000. Each country was supposed to formulate an elephant conservation plan but this has not happened. In Sri Lanka, for example, neither the AsESG nor its members, in that capacity, have been influential in the debate on, for example, the efficacy of electric fences, the definition of range areas, the usefulness of elephant drives, the conservation utility of privately-owned elephants and the *ex situ* population. The public has a right to ask whether the AsESG exists purely to enable its members to wear a colourful badge that awards them a degree of self-importance in the international conservation bureaucracy.

The recent effort to merge *Gajah* with *Pachyderm*, the Journal of the African Elephant Specialist Group, clearly showed the insensitivity of some to real elephant conservation. It showed that though they thought they are in a position to try and dictate terms, they did not really understand the role *Gajah* plays and could play in the future. It also seemed that they did not understand the Asian way of thinking. It took a protracted and sometimes heated e-mail debate to concur to *Gajah* retaining its identity.

The debate that ensued in the e-mail network on the merits and demerits of continuing with *Gajah* also showed that little seems to have been transferred, in terms of capacity, to local conservationists in most of the range states by those who are carrying out various projects there, especially by some of those who continue to live there. Some wanted *Gajah* to be a peer reviewed journal so that their publications would have scientific credibility. While the quality of publication is undoubtedly important, others wondered how this would

help elephant conservation or strengthen the efforts of conservationists.

Many symposia, workshops, seminars and the like are held regularly, but what have they really achieved in terms of improving the prospects for survival of Asian elephants in each of the range states? Books are written, published and sold, but what effects have these on elephant conservation? Most of these books, in terms of costs, are out of reach of the conservationists working in the field. Of course, books by persons like Raman Sukumar, Richard Lair, Mike Schmidt, Susan Mikota *et al.*, have helped inform elephant conservationists, but much of the literature is purely academic and has little relevance to on-ground actions.

The members of the AsESG itself are not privy to the plans or annual budget of the AsESG, if there indeed is such a plan and budget. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that there is a

lack of transparency. In fact, the editor had to solicit funds for the publication of *Gajah*.

My intention is to help make *Gajah* a journal that would encourage those who wish to contribute their knowledge and experience to help the prospects of survival of the Asian elephant, rather than using it as a vehicle for personal academic advancement or for notching up 'publications'. There are, at the moment, many journals, which can accommodate scientific papers on elephant conservation. *Gajah* need not be merely another one of these. Instead, *Gajah* should be a means by which the members of the AsESG and others can communicate their experiences, ideas and perceptions freely, so that the others who are interested in and are committed to the conservation of the Asian elephant, can benefit, bearing in mind that the ultimate beneficiary must not be any one of us, but the Asian elephant.



Cross-tusker of Kumana, Sri Lanka, killed by a homeguard in January 2007
Photo by Palitha Antony