

## News Briefs

*Compiled by the Editor*

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#### **1. HC admits PIL on man-elephant conflict (India)**

*Assam Tribune  
February 22, 2008*

The Gauhati High Court today admitted a public interest litigation (PIL) on protection and conservation of wild elephants arising out of frequent human-elephant conflicts and for protection of human life and property from elephant depredations in the State.

The Division Bench of Chief Justice Jasti Chelameswar and Justice Hrishikesh Roy, while admitting the petition (WP-C – PIL No 06 of 2008) issued notices to the respondents who include State's Forest Commissioner and Secretary, State's Principal Chief Conservator of Forests (Wildlife)—who is also the Chief Wildlife Warden of the State, Assam Union Environment and Forest Secretary, Director General of the Union Department of Environment and Forest.. The court also fixed April 7 next as the next date for the case.

In his petition, noted elephant handler and owner Bijoyananda Chowdhury said inter alia on behalf of the public charitable trust Human Elephant Learning Programme (HELP) that due to the apathy of the State Forest Department there had been a gradual aggravation of the natural habitat of the wild elephants. This has resulted in frequent human-elephant conflicts. The herds of wild elephants are frequently intruding into the human habitations causing massive damages to property and incidents of killing human beings are also taking place frequently in the State.

The damages so caused frequently lead to fierce retaliation through poisoning the wild elephants by the affected people. Though such incidents are on the rise, the State authorities concerned are not

taking any substantial step to stop the recurrence of such incidents, said Chowdhury, a founder executive member of the charitable trust.

Though the Government of India has issued circulars to the states and Union Territories suggesting, inter alia, the minimum compensations to the victims of wild animal attacks and accordingly, a number of States and Union territories had implemented such guidelines. The Government of India had instructed all the State Governments and Union Territory authorities to raise the amount of compensation to the kin of those killed by wild animals to Rs 1 lakh per person way back in 1999, Chowdhury said.

However, Assam is far from implementing such guidelines and this particularly has impaired the wild elephant conservation in the State. This is despite the fact that Assam accounts for more than fifty per cent of the total elephant population of the country, Chowdhury said.

He said that while Assam Government is paying compensation at the rate of Rs 40,000 to the kin of each of those killed by wild elephants, Andhra Pradesh Government is paying Rs 1 lakh since 2003. The Government of this South Indian state has now proposed to raise the compensation amount to Rs 2.5 lakh per person. The Maharashtra Government is paying Rs 2 lakh to the kin of each of those killed by wild animals, while the Governments of the Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Meghalaya are also paying compensation at the rate of Rs 1 lakh per person in such cases, Chowdhury claimed. Chowdhury himself pleaded his case in the court today.

#### **2. Myanmar's wild elephants helping cut down their forest habitat**

*Agence France Presse  
February 18, 2008*

Elephants in Myanmar have long been invaluable

labourers in the country's timber industry, nimbly finding their way through forests and dragging heavy fallen trees to rivers for shipping. But as Myanmar's ruling junta expands logging in the country's teak forests, more wild elephants are being captured and trained for clear-cutting operations that destroy the very habitats in which they roamed freely, activists and industry insiders say.

"On account of the loss and fragmentation of their habitats, the size of the wild elephant population has declined," said Uga, chairman of local environmental group Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association. "To obtain elephant power for logging, wild elephants are being captured and recruited," said Uga, who uses only one name.

Employing elephants is normally more environmentally friendly than using heavy machinery, which requires roads cut into forests, which cause more damage than elephants would. About 4,500 elephants are believed to be working in the logging industry, including 2,500 owned by the state-run Myanmar Timber Enterprise (MTE), Uga said.

As logging operations have dramatically expanded, especially in remote regions of northern Myanmar near the Chinese border, some companies are turning to private entrepreneurs to capture and train elephants, business owners said. One owner of domesticated elephants in Taungoo, about 150 miles (240 kilometres) north of Myanmar's commercial capital Yangon, said that 100 elephants had left in June to work on a timber operation in Sagaing province, hundreds of miles to the north.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, he said the elephants had been loaded into trucks to work for a company making veneers and plywood for export. He had one elephant in the group, which he said was taken on a three-year rental agreement to clear cut forests to make way for new towns in so-called replacement areas, where villagers are being relocated to make way for the Tamanthi hydropower project.

The dam on the Chindwin river, in a remote corner of northwestern Myanmar, will provide electricity mainly for export to neighbouring India. Ethnic minority groups in the region estimate that at least 35 villages will need to be relocated.

Officially, the MTE uses a selective felling system for its logging and employs elephants to drag the logs to the nearest waterways for transport. Under that system, only the most mature trees are logged, leaving younger ones to keep growing in a cycle meant to last 25-30 years. But the government has openly started clear-cutting forests as it embarks on the Tamanthi project and other dams around the country, with neighbours China and Thailand financing much of the construction.

One retired MTE official told AFP that orders to follow selective felling guidelines were often ignored. "Deforestation would not be occurring if we used the selective-felling system, adhering to the forestry law," he said on condition of anonymity. "But the advice of experts is ignored... by orders from the government."

According to the most recent estimates, some 1.5 million cubic metres (53 million cubic feet) of timber worth 350 million dollars was exported from Myanmar to China in 2005, most of it illegal, according to Britain-based forestry watchdog Global Witness. That was a 12 percent gain over the year before, and roughly double the amount exported in 2000, the group said.

Much of the logging takes place in remote areas of the country where it's impossible for outside experts to assess the extent of the environmental damage, but activists have long warned of the devastating consequences. "This is a particularly destructive approach to logging that causes huge environmental damage," said Mike Davis of Global Witness. For the elephants working in logging, the clear cutting means they are assisting in the destruction of their own habitat, Uga said. "Wild elephants are running out of pasture in the forests," he said. "Elephant conservation is important. We should follow forestry law to protect wild elephants as well as to protect the forest".

### **3. Thailand a key player in illegal wildlife trade**

*Apinya Wipatayotin, Bangkok Post  
March 1, 2008*

Thailand is a key player in the wild elephant trade, with the country being used as a transit point for jumbos from neighbouring countries on their way to foreign zoos, according to a report from the Thai Wildlife Protection Network.

Nikom Puttha, the network coordinator who commissioned the report on the wildlife situation in Thailand in 2007, said wild elephant calves from Burma are transported to Thailand via five border districts - Mae Sariang, Mae La Noi and Sop Moei districts in Mae Hong Son and Umphang and Phop Phra in Tak. It is estimated that at least 50 elephants are being smuggled from Burma to Thailand each year. The smugglers then apply for registration documents from authorities to certify they are captive elephants. The documents enable wildlife traders to legally move their animals to elephant shelters where they are trained for three years before being sent to foreign zoos.

“We have found that 70% of them will be trained at shelters in the northeastern provinces, such as Surin and Chaiyaphum, while 30% of them will be sent to elephant shelters in the North,” said Mr Nikom. Twenty per cent of the smuggled elephants die during transportation, the study has found. Mr Nikom urged the government to strengthen law enforcement to prevent the illegal trade of wild elephants and other wild animals.

Soraida Salwala, Secretary-General of Friends of the Asian Elephant, said the elephant export business grew rapidly after the controversial export of nine elephants to Australian zoos in 2006. The exports, she said, had set the precedence that wild animal exports for “research and study” purposes under government-to-government contracts are acceptable. She added that Thailand exported four elephants to Germany, five to China and 11 to Malaysia last year.

Wildlife activists recently stopped the transportation of 30 elephants to China via Laos.

“And as far as we know, China has ordered some 300 elephants from Thailand to entertain visitors at the Olympic Games.

The newly-released report also found that the country is still a regional hub for the illegal wildlife trade, which mostly takes place in Bangkok, Chon Buri, Chiang Mai, Surat Thani and Tak provinces, where the major markets are. The five most-wanted wild animals are wild birds, turtles, pangolin, the slow loris and the tiger. The top destinations for the wildlife trade are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and some EU countries. The wildlife trade is valued at about one billion baht a year, making it the third most profitable illegal business after drug and arms trafficking.

### **4. Rumble, rumble. Who’s there?**

*Science NOW Daily News  
May 31, 2007*

Elephants know the difference between good vibrations and bad, according to new research into the big animals’ low, rumbling alarm calls. They pay attention to seismic waves made by elephants they know and ignore those of strangers.

Behavioral ecologist Caitlin O’Connell-Rodwell of Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, discovered in 2004 that African elephants communicate with each other from kilometers away through ground vibrations. Although they make the calls with their trunks, the sounds also travel several kilometers along the surface of the ground, about as far as airborne sounds. O’Connell-Rodwell witnessed groups of Namibian elephants stopping in their tracks, leaning forward onto their toes, and pressing their trunks to the ground. The animals often adopted this listening posture before the arrival of another group of elephants. O’Connell-Rodwell recorded various elephant calls and found that wild elephants responded to ground vibrations alone. Researchers aren’t sure how elephants detect the waves, but they have vibration-sensitive cells in their feet and trunks.

In the new study, O’Connell-Rodwell asked

whether the elephants can tell who is making the alarm calls. So the team recorded alarm calls made by elephants encountering lions in Kenya and Namibia. Then they converted the sounds into seismic waves and played them back to Namibian elephants visiting a water hole. The elephants responded to the Namibian vibrations by freezing, huddling, and leaving the area sooner. The elephants appeared to detect the Kenyan calls--they sometimes paused and looked more alert, for instance--but did not react dramatically. The Namibian elephants also ignored control recordings of synthesized sounds that had similar frequency and duration. The research is slated to appear in the August Journal of the Acoustical Society of America.

The scientists don't know why elephants respond differently to the alarm calls, but O'Connell-Rodwell suspects it is not due to dialect differences. The calls from the two countries are similar in frequency and duration. More likely, she says, is that the elephants trust the calls from animals they know but not those of strangers.

Behavioral ecologist Jan Randall of San Francisco State University in California, who studies kangaroo rats that use foot drumming vibrations to communicate, agrees that the elephants may be gauging the trustworthiness of the calls and heeding only the ones from reliable sources. That might help them avoid expending unnecessary energy responding to bogus calls. But alarm calls are hard to capture in the wild, and the researchers need to test more samples, Randall says. "It's an exciting result and it's really suggestive, but it needs some of the follow-up work to really pin it down."

### **5. Suspected viral infection kills elephants in Kerala (India)**

*Times of India*  
April 28, 2008

A suspected case of viral disease has resulted in the death of two wild elephants in the Wayanad district in Kerala in the last one month. The latest incident was reported from Chithalayam forest range in the district on Saturday. The Chithalayam

forest range, 50 km from the district headquarters Kalpetta, borders the Bandipur sanctuary in Karnataka.

"A nine-month-old calf was found in the forest in a very weak condition Friday. The elephant herd was seen trying to help the calf stand upright. Though we tried to help the calf, the herd did not allow us to approach. The next day the calf died," forest range officer T. Pradeep said.

"We did not find any external injuries like snake bite on the carcass," he said. A month earlier a nine-year-old elephant was found dead in the same forest range. According to officials, elephants get stressed and become susceptible to diseases during summer when water and fodder are in short supply. Veterinary experts who examined the carcasses suspect that the deaths were caused by viral infection." There are similarities in both cases. It is a haemorrhagic disease. We are yet to confirm the cause of death. The body parts have been sent for examination.

### **6. Mob sets 'killer' elephant on fire (India)**

*Times of India*  
June 20, 2008

People of a town in Orissa's Keonjhar district executed a barbaric revenge on an elephant that had killed eight people over the last two years.

On Tuesday evening, when the elephant raided the area for fruits, a mob doused it with petrol and set it on fire. Its entire body in flames, the elephant ran wildly in all directions looking for water. But the mob beat drums and threw firecrackers to block its escape routes. Blinded with pain and disoriented, it would crash to its knees, struggle to its feet and run around again.

The elephant was on the verge of collapse when a downpour put out the flames. He was last seen on Wednesday, severely burnt but walking on NH-215. Forest officials said they have no information about the condition of the elephant. "We have no information about this incident. I will definitely start an inquiry," assistant conservator of forests Bimalendu Acharya said.

## **7. Extinct Javan elephants may have been found again - in Borneo**

*WWF Press Release  
April 17, 2008*

The Borneo pygmy elephant may not be native to Borneo after all. Instead, the population could be the last survivors of the Javan elephant race – accidentally saved from extinction by the Sultan of Sulu centuries ago, a new publication suggests.

The origins of the pygmy elephants, found in a range extending from the north-east into the Heart of Borneo, have long been shrouded in mystery. Their looks and behaviour differ from other Asian elephants and scientists have questioned why they never dispersed to other parts of the island. But a new paper published today supports a long-held local belief that the elephants were brought to Borneo centuries ago by the Sultan of Sulu, now in the Philippines, and later abandoned in the jungle. The Sulu elephants, in turn, are thought to have originated in Java.

Javan elephants became extinct some time in the period after Europeans arrived in South-East Asia. Elephants on Sulu, never considered native to the island, were hunted out in the 1800s. “Elephants were shipped from place to place across Asia many hundreds of years ago, usually as gifts between rulers,” said Mr Shim Phyu Soon, a retired Malaysian forester whose ideas on the origins of the elephants partly inspired the current research. “It’s exciting to consider that the forest-dwelling Borneo elephants may be the last vestiges of a subspecies that went extinct on its native Java Island, in Indonesia, centuries ago.”

If the Borneo pygmy elephants are in fact elephants from Java, an island more than 1200 km (800 miles) south of their current range, it could be the first known elephant translocation in history that has survived to modern times, providing

scientists with critical data from a centuries-long experiment.

Scientists solved part of the mystery in 2003, when DNA testing by Columbia University and WWF ruled out the possibility that the Borneo elephants were from Sumatra or mainland Asia, where the other Asian subspecies are found, leaving either Borneo or Java as the most probable source.

The new paper, “Origins of the Elephants *Elephas Maximus* L. of Borneo,” published in this month’s Sarawak Museum Journal shows that there is no archaeological evidence of a long-term elephant presence on Borneo. “Just one fertile female and one fertile male elephant, if left undisturbed in enough good habitat, could in theory end up as a population of 2000 elephants within less than 300 years,” said Junaidi Payne of WWF, one of the paper’s co-authors. “And that may be what happened in practice here.”

There are perhaps just 1000 of the elephants in the wild, mostly in the Malaysian state of Sabah. WWF satellite tracking has shown they prefer the same lowland habitat that is being increasingly cleared for timber rubber and palm oil plantations. Their possible origins in Java make them even more a conservation priority.

“If they came from Java, this fascinating story demonstrates the value of efforts to save even small populations of certain species, often thought to be doomed,” said Dr Christy Williams, coordinator of WWF’s Asian elephant and rhino programme. “It gives us the courage to propose such undertakings with the small remaining populations of critically endangered Sumatran rhinos and Javan rhinos, by translocating a few to better habitats to increase their numbers. It has worked for Africa’s southern white rhinos and Indian rhinos, and now we have seen it may have worked for the Javan elephant, too.”