

Editorial

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In the world of animals, elephants are giants, mega vertebrates, the largest mammals on land. In the evolutionary history of species, there is a tendency of becoming more powerful, stronger or bigger, either to avoid being preyed by potential enemies or to remain a potential predator. Only a few species at the top of the food chain have achieved this role, some examples are the big cats, the rhinos and the elephants. The population is not the limiting factor pressuring the predators any more, availability of food, hunger and drought took its place. It is obvious, that huge animals need huge habitats to find what they need.

Before man learned to use fire, started to settle and became superior to the mega vertebrates, there was a fine equilibrium between the different species, between predators and prey, and their habitat use.

Man changed the world. His ability to prevail over species, of which he had been afraid or who had never been part of his diet, crushed the fragile equilibrium. The destroyed habitats due to the growing human population accelerated the process. Possible new big prey and easy to hunt animals as the elephant bird, the dodo, the American bison and possibly the mammoth, were the first to be exterminated. Competitors to humans such as the lion, the tiger or the snow leopard came soon after. Looking back at this sad history, there has never been a case where animals came back into a habitat in which humans and beasts lived together in a natural balance. Animals have either become extinct again or a concise conservation management plan was employed, mainly for areas where people could be kept out, for example national parks or reserves. Where the mega vertebrates leave the reserve, they are seen as threats to man and his cultures. One sad example was the poaching of Asiatic lions in the Gir forest two years ago, that began as soon as some animals started to leave the small reserve regularly.

What can we learn from history for elephant conservation? It is illusionary to believe, that there will be a new equilibrium between humans and elephants in the same habitat without a sound conservation management plan. If we want to have a chance for a long-term survival of the species, the stakeholders have to agree to the answers of all relevant questions and there have to be pragmatic approaches to this conservation management plan.

There are challenging questions to be tackled: Where can habitats for the Asian elephant to survive in viable populations be found nowadays? What is the targeted size of a coherent population to secure long-term survival? How can isolated populations be avoided? How can Human Elephant Conflicts (HEC) be kept under control? How can the population be controlled in the long-term as not to destroy its own habitat?

The Asian Elephant Specialist Group (AsESG) can help finding answers to these questions, but it is the governments who have to decide on the management plans, as well as executing and controlling them. However, the main part of the stakeholders is neither the governments nor the AsESG, it is the local population. If we fail to include the local people into the conservation plan, total failure is not far. The main way of convincing them of the necessity of the elephants' survival, is through education. For the plan to be successful, it is important to convince them of the intrinsic value of the elephant in its habitat and to teach them how to live with the 'neighbour elephant'. As Baba Dioum said: "In the end we will conserve only what we love. We will love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught." This is true locally and internationally. Also zoos and elephant institutions far away from their habitats, can put pressure on the governments and can help, with money, to make this happen.