

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Asian Elephant Conservation Fund - The First Ten Years of Support

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Introduction

In both Asia and Africa, conservation strategies focus on native species such as elephants. Although modern day elephants are not indigenous to the Americas, the United States government has been a strong supporter of elephant conservation initiatives through federal legislation authorizing the African Elephant Conservation Act in 1988 and the Asian Elephant Conservation Act in 1997. Both of these Acts enabled the establishment of funding to provide financial assistance to in-situ conservation and are managed by a federal agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) under the Department of Interior.

The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund (AsECF) has supported a variety of projects in all Asian elephant range states over the past ten years via a competitive grants' program. This support has been in the form of financial assistance awarded to applicants who submit funding proposals. A committee from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service evaluates these projects. All proposals submitted to the AsECF have matching funds.

During the past ten years, the AsECF has supported about 20 projects annually at an average funding amount of US\$ 47,000.00 per project. This has provided a total amount of funding assistance of US\$ 9,500,000.00 generating matched funds for these projects in the amount of US\$ 12,500,000.00. Project activities have covered a wide range of topics important to Asian elephant conservation, including applied research, surveys and monitoring, management plan development, protection of at-risk populations, efforts to combat illegal trade, transfrontier elephant conservation, law enforcement, capacity development, community outreach, conservation education, protected area management, habitat conservation

and management, and human-elephant conflict reduction.

As conservation needs evolve over time, the AsECF suggests that stronger collaborations and alliances between governmental agencies and various groups supporting conservation be explored, along with prioritizing issues from a landscape perspective and addressing conflicts with wildlife more effectively. In this article we explore some of these potential innovative approaches to tackle the increasing challenges faced by wild Asian elephants (and other wildlife) and the habitats that they rely on in a rapidly changing human landscape.

History of the Asian Elephant Conservation Act

The Asian Elephant Conservation Act resulted from the efforts of a former United States Congressman, Mr. Andy Ireland, who was seeking to support elephant conservation in a meaningful way by facilitating a private/public partnership. Mr. Ireland, at the time Senior Vice President of Feld Entertainment, parent company of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus and the Center for Elephant Conservation, had been a former Representative in Congress from the State of Florida for almost 20 years. In 1997, discussions with FWS personnel pointed to a need for an Asian Elephant Conservation Act modelled after the previously approved African Elephant Conservation Act (1988) and Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act (1994). With the support of Feld Entertainment, Mr. Ireland then spearheaded the effort to obtain legislation that would become the Asian Elephant Conservation Act. Mr. Ireland enlisted his former colleagues in Congress, the Honourable Jim Saxton, a Representative in Congress from

the State of New Jersey, and the Honourable Neil Abercrombie, a Representative from the State of Hawaii, who agreed to sponsor the legislation. They built support within the local U. S. conservation community by bringing together the American Zoo & Aquarium Association and the World Wildlife Fund, and, along with Feld Entertainment, formed a small coalition of private partners. This helped provide means for U.S. based organizations to aid Asian elephant conservation by supporting federal legislation encouraging such partnerships.

The legislation to create the Asian Elephant Conservation Act, H.R. 1787, sponsored by Mr. Saxton and Mr. Abercrombie, along with fifteen other co-sponsors, was introduced into the United States House of Representatives on 4. June 1997.

The legislation proposed “to assist in the conservation of Asian elephants by supporting and providing financial resources for the conservation programs of nations within the range of Asian elephants and projects of persons with demonstrated expertise in the conservation of Asian elephants.” On 31. July 1997, a public hearing was held on H.R. 1787. The hearing was held before the House Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans, Committee on Resources, in Washington DC.

The hearing was attended by the main sponsors of H.R. 1787: Mr. Neil Abercrombie and Mr. Jim Saxton, as well as several committee members: the Honourable Sam Farr, a Representative in Congress from the State of California, the Honourable George Miller, a Representative in Congress from the State of California, and the Honourable Don Young, a Representative in Congress from the State of Alaska.

In his opening statement, Mr. Saxton made the following comments: “... The fundamental purposes of this legislation are twofold: one, to create an Asian Elephant Conservation Fund, and, two, to authorize the Congress to appropriate up to US\$ 5 million per year to this fund to finance various conservation projects for each of the next five fiscal years. This legislation is modelled

after the highly successful African Elephant Conservation Act of 1988 and the Rhinoceros and Tiger Conservation Act of 1994. The new authorization would be separate from those funds appropriated for African elephants, rhinos, and tigers. Under the terms of H.R. 1787, the Secretary of Interior would carefully evaluate the merits of each proposed conservation project, select those that best enhance the future of the Asian elephant, and give priority to those projects whose sponsors demonstrate the ability to match some portion of the Federal funds. In addition, the bill stipulates that the Secretary may accept donations to assist Asian elephants and shall spend no more than 3 percent of the amount appropriated to administer the fund. Unless immediate steps are taken to conserve this magnificent animal, it will surely continue to disappear from much, if not most, of its traditional habitat. We cannot allow the Asian elephant, which has such a direct impact on so many other species, to become extinct. The goal of H.R. 1787 is to stop the decline and hopefully rebuild the population stocks of this irreplaceable species by financing with a small amount of Federal money a limited number of conservation projects...”

The hearing also received statements from several experts including: Marshall P. Jones, Assistant Director for International Affairs, FWS, accompanied by David Ferguson, Chief, Branch of Middle East, South Asia, and South African International Affairs, FWS; Dr. Eric Dinerstein, Chief Scientist and Director, Conservation Science Program, World Wildlife Fund; Andy Ireland, Senior Vice President, Feld Entertainment, Inc.; Dr. Terry Maple, President/CEO, Zoo Atlanta and President-elect, American Zoo & Aquarium Association (AZA); Dr. Mary Pearl, Executive Director, Wildlife Preservation Trust International; Dr. Michael Stüwe, Research Associate, Conservation and Research Center, Smithsonian Institute; and Dr. Raman Sukumar, Chairman, IUCN/SSC Asian Elephant Specialist Group. Furthermore, Dr. A.J.T. Johnsingh, and A. Christy Williams, Wildlife Institute of India, supplied additional material to the Committee.

The bill, H.R. 1787, was unanimously approved by the committee, and it was then sent to the

United States House of Representatives for consideration by all 435 members. The House passed H.R. 1787 on 21. Oct.; the United States Senate later approved it on 8. Nov. without a hearing. Finally, President Clinton signed H.R. 1787 into law on 19. Nov. 1997.

The Asian Elephant Conservation Act gave the United States Congress permission to create an Asian Elephant Conservation Fund managed by the FWS. The Act allows funds to be spent to specifically support Asian elephant conservation in range states, and the budget is re-approved on a yearly basis.

On 13. March 2007, the House Natural Resources Committee, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife and Oceans, held a legislative hearing on H.R. 465, the Asian Elephant Conservation Reauthorization Act of 2007, to reauthorize the Asian Elephant Conservation Act of 1997. During this hearing witnesses included: Mr. Kenneth Stansell, Acting Deputy Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Dr. Michael Fay, Wildlife Conservation Society and National Geographic Society; Dr. Sybille Klenzendorf, Director, Species Conservation, World Wildlife Fund; Mr. John Berry, Director, Smithsonian's National Zoological Park; and Mr. Josh Ginsberg, Vice President and Chief of Conservation Operations, Wildlife Conservation Society. H.R. 465 was approved and continues to support Asian elephant conservation projects today.

A decade of Asian elephant conservation support

The Asian Elephant Conservation Act is designed to support the conservation of Asian elephants by providing financial resources to programs in range countries of Asian elephants, and to projects of persons or organizations with expertise in Asian elephant conservation. A proposal review committee, consisting of members from the FWS primarily, reviews project proposals submitted to the AsECF, evaluating them using a scoring system as well as in-depth discussions about each proposal, and the assistance provided by the AsECF is leveraged by a matching support of both public and private funds.

Since funds became available in 1999 and through 2007, the AsECF has assisted over 20 projects per year at an average amount of US\$ 47,000.00 per project. The total amount of financial assistance provided by the Asian Elephant Conservation Fund through 2007 was US\$ 9,500,000.00 and these funds generated matching support for the projects in the amount of US\$ 12,500,000.00. These programs have been implemented in all thirteen Asian elephant range states, and cover a wide variety of work supporting the conservation of Asian elephants. Project activities supported by the Fund include applied research, surveys and monitoring, management plan development, protection of at-risk populations, efforts to combat illegal trade, transfrontier elephant conservation, law enforcement, capacity development, community outreach, conservation education, protected area management, habitat conservation and management, and human-elephant conflict reduction. Some project examples include: identifying corridors, poaching and the trade in ivory, protection and strengthening law enforcement by supporting anti-poaching camps, vehicles, and personnel field gear, use of captive elephants for conservation, publication of legal digest on wildlife laws and of "Gajah," various meetings and workshops (such as the Asian Elephant Range States meeting), innovative education programs, the Monitoring of Illegal Killing of Elephants (MIKE) program, and emergency relief post tsunami in 2005.

In the first few years of the AsECF, program areas with the most supported projects were: survey and monitoring (24%), conflict resolution (23%) and habitat management (16%). Between 2004 and 2007 20% of projects primarily focused on applied research, 18% on human-elephant conflict mitigation efforts, and 11% on capacity building. In the 2008 funding cycle, close to 40% of the projects supported had a human-elephant conflict mitigation component.

The number of proposals received by the Fund each year averaged around 30 until 2007. During the 2008 funding cycle more than 80 proposals were received by the AsECF. With rapidly increasing loss of habitats there has been escalating human-elephant conflict and this

has been reflected in the proposals received by the Fund. Additionally, there has also been an interest in looking at diseases affecting elephant populations, such as *Mycobacterium tuberculosis* and elephant endotheliotropic herpes virus. Over the years, great advances have been made in surveying techniques and technologies with many of these supported by the Fund. Much has also been invested to improve law enforcement training and implementation, as well as increased local capacity. Despite this, it appears that in many range areas wild Asian elephants continue to walk a very tight rope and may be losing ground. Clearly, greater collaboration between Governments and non-governmental groups is essential if we hope to maintain healthy wild elephant populations and healthy habitats. These same habitats also serve as the watersheds and lungs that help maintain healthy human populations.

Suggested direction for future Asian elephant conservation support

As conservation needs change with time, it is vitally important to evaluate what has been done and what needs to be done to address environmental issues important to elephant conservation and habitat protection such as climate change and the need for forest restoration work, as well as linking this work with the establishment of corridors. In an era of accelerating global climate change, burgeoning human populations, rapidly dwindling wild habitats, and greatly increasing competition for natural resources, it is urgently important to work together on conservation issues ensuring the long-term viability of healthy landscapes to support healthy populations of humans and wildlife, including wild elephants. The very habitats that support wildlife are also increasingly important for their ecosystem services, including such vital essential elements as fresh water sources, flood control, ground water recharge, topsoil regeneration, global climate moderation, and disease minimization.

The time for habitat restoration has clearly been recognized by many, and projects that include such a construct along with human health, ecosystem health, human family planning, environmental

education, are all ideas that beg further consideration. A paradigm shift is necessary to offer solutions to the problems. Clearly, such an approach to wildlife conservation requires coalitions that include wildlife biologists, social scientists, health-care professionals, creative educators, micro-credit financiers; essentially a truly interdisciplinary approach is needed to understand and address the complexity of the problems. Many lessons can be learned from work being done to support the conservation of species other than Asian elephants, including some of the projects that are being supported by other Multinational Species Funds within the FWS. Education and community awareness projects should be creative, train the trainers and teachers, and be prepared to update their resource materials, learning lessons from other areas, including other range countries and beyond. The AsECF is in no position to solve human poverty alleviation problems, but applicants who form capable coalitions that can tackle both wildlife (particularly Asian elephants) and human needs could apply to the AsECF for start-up/bridging funds and leverage other sources of funding that support human needs such the World Bank or Global Environmental Facility (GEF).

The concept of “sustainable development” may require serious re-evaluation; it may be well past the time when any development can be considered, sustainable or otherwise. A better approach would be to think in terms of “sustainable management” of natural resources. With accelerating global climate change and worldwide recognition of the need for restoration and conservation of natural forests for the purposes of carbon sequestration, protection of ecosystem services, and natural disaster mitigation, there is now further possibility of expanding ideas on habitat protection. It is important for conservationists to look at ways to make communities benefit from forest protection and restoration, such as by providing carbon credits directly to the communities involved in habitat protection and restoration efforts. Some carbon credit funds could also go to support protected area management efforts, continued training for protected area managers, or similar immediate benefits. Such efforts would help provide greater habitat security for elephants and

other wildlife. Clearly these efforts would also benefit from coalitions, such as a partnership between ecologists, educators, human and veterinary health-care professionals, business management specialists, social scientists, micro-credit experts, to name just a few. Whenever and wherever a project is developed, “sustainability” should always be given serious consideration. Sustainability is not solely limited to sources of funding, but also includes important aspects such as the long-term viability of efforts continuing beyond the life of the specific project, the importance of the area with respect to elephant populations, biodiversity, and ecosystem health. Applicants could explore the use of the AsECF to leverage these other non-traditional sources of funds for potentially non-traditional approaches to wildlife and habitat conservation efforts.

The AsECF strongly encourages groups to work together, and there is more effective information sharing so efforts are not duplicated. It is also important credit be given where it is due, and credit be shared among partners so partners do not feel alienated – everyone’s contribution to conservation is important. Many conservation groups prefer to stake out their own areas of work (such as a territory), but this has not always been very helpful to the natural resources they wish to conserve. Networking helps conservation in many ways: for example, it is important to know the reasons for successes or failures of mitigation measures in various regions, and make current data widely available to most effectively prioritize issues such as wildlife corridors or habitat restoration. Just as Asian elephant populations share habitats and resources with other wildlife and human populations, it is time for conservationists to better share information and resources, and to formulate multidisciplinary approaches to tackle the modern day issues of Asian elephant conservation.

Conclusion

The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund has supported many noteworthy projects during the last decade and will continue to do so. As problems faced by wild Asian elephants and their habitats continue to further escalate, projects should be

designed considering important issues such as: accelerating climate change, increased need in connectivity of habitats including transboundary corridors and connectivity between protected areas, urgency for habitat restoration, as well as important coalitions that can approach and tackle problems from a multidisciplinary perspective and knowledge base. The AsECF will continue to encourage such collaborations and projects that have greater prospect and hope for sustainability, for wild Asian elephants and their habitats, and for the peaceful co-existence with humans living near them.

Supplemental information regarding grants under Asian Elephant Conservation Fund

The Asian Elephant Conservation Fund

Administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior and authorized by the Asian Elephant Conservation Act, United States Public Law 105- 96, 111 Stat. 2150, 16 U.S.C. 4261-4266.

Objectives

To provide financial assistance to support the effective long-term conservation of Asian elephants. This program provides support for projects that focus on one or more of the following areas: applied research, including surveys and monitoring; enhanced compliance with treaties and laws that prohibit the take or trade of Asian elephants or regulate the use and management of their habitat; conservation education and community outreach; development and execution of conservation management plans; enhanced protection of at-risk populations; habitat conservation and management, including protected area and reserve management; local capacity building; reduction in human-elephant conflicts; transfrontier conservation; and wildlife inspection, law enforcement, and forensics skills.

Assistance

Through a competitive grants’ program.

Uses and restrictions

Project work should occur within the range of the Asian elephant, or, if work is to be conducted outside of the range, the proposal should show a clear relevance to Asian elephant conservation. Applied research projects should address specific management needs and actions. Funds provided under this program will not be used for: the purchase of firearms or ammunitions; buying of intelligence information or paying informants; gathering information by persons who conceal their true identity; law enforcement operations that prompt suspects to carry out illegal activities so they may be arrested (entrapment); or any activity that would circumvent sanctions, laws or regulations of either the U.S. or the country in which the activity would occur. This program is administered in compliance with the Federal Grants and Cooperative Agreement Act of 1977, as amended. These funds may not be used towards training U.S. Federal Government personnel.

Applicant eligibility

Applications may be submitted by any Asian government agency responsible for Asian elephant conservation and protection, and by any other organization or individual with demonstrated experience in Asian elephant conservation. Non-governmental applicants should include a recent letter of support from the appropriate local, regional, or national governmental wildlife or conservation authority, and these endorsement letters should make specific reference to the project by its title, as submitted on the proposal.

Application procedure

Proposals must be submitted in English. Documentation must demonstrate the participation and/or endorsement of the local government(s). Projects with matching funds (cash) or in-kind support (salaries, equipment, etc.) equal to or exceeding the amount requested from the FWS are preferred. The Notice of Funding Availability and Application Instructions are located on this program's website. Hard copies are available upon request from the Division of International Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 100, Arlington, Virginia 22203, USA. A proposal will not be considered complete if all required elements are not submitted as instructed.

Projects are reviewed and competitively selected for funding based on established criteria contained in the Asian Elephant Conservation Act (16 USC 4261 4266). Review criteria can be found in the application information at the website.

Deadline

This program has two annual deadlines. The first deadline is November 1 each year. The second deadline is April 1 each year.

Decisions on funding of projects are made within 180 days after receipt of the project proposal.

Matching requirements

To the extent possible, grant funds are matched by nonfederal funds (i.e., non-U.S. Government funds). In determining whether to approve project proposals, preference is given to projects for which matching funds are available.

Length of assistance

Funding is for one year or less. Projects that require more than one year of funding will be required to compete on an annual basis through submission of additional proposals. Awarded funds must be spent during the performance period that is approved for each Assistance Award, and in accordance with program financial and performance reporting procedures.

Reports

Each grant recipient is required to submit regular progress and accounting reports. A final report that evaluates the success of meeting goals is required within 90 days of the project's completion. Complete reporting requirements can be found at this program's web page.

Range of financial assistance

Variable amounts. Due to the limited funding available and the desire to support diverse projects, preference will be given to proposals requesting \$ 50,000 or less. Higher amounts may be requested with appropriate justification.

Related programs

15.619, Rhinoceros and Tiger Conserv. Fund
15.620, African Elephant Conservation Fund
15.629, Great Apes Conservation Fund
15.645, Marine Turtle Conservation Fund.

Funded projects

Annual summaries of the projects funded under this program can be found at the website. Hard copies of this information are available upon request from the Division of International Conservation.

Proposal selection criteria

Proposals will be reviewed on the basis of criteria developed from the Asian Elephant Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 4261-4266). Due to the limited funding available and the desire to support diverse projects, preference will be given to proposals requesting \$ 50,000 or less.

Contact information

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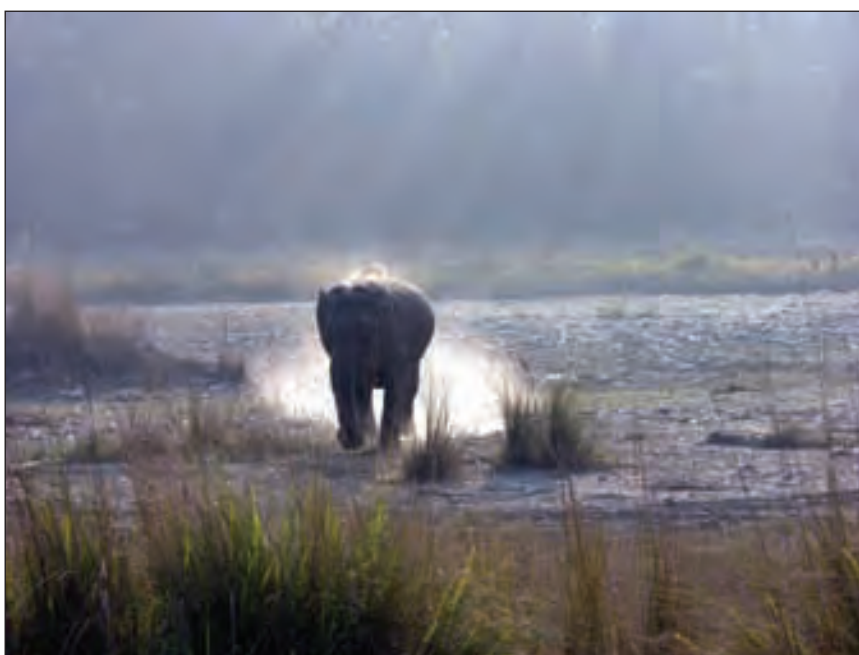
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Charging elephant, North-west India.
Photo by Ritesh Joshi