

Editorial

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Whose responsibility is it?

Today human-elephant conflict (HEC) has become a major socio-economic and political issue in many Asian elephant range countries. In spite of much effort at mitigating the conflict, it seems to be escalating over most of elephant range. On the one hand the number of incidents of HEC has steadily increased and on the other, the tolerance of people has decreased. With 'development' and changing attitudes, people are less willing to accept any losses due to wildlife in general and elephants in particular.

Where people traditionally considered part of their harvest was for the birds of the air and beasts of the ground, the farmer of today has little empathy with those who would partake of his harvest uninvited. Media, which frequently sensationalizes the damages and deaths caused by elephants drives the reducing tolerance. Currently it is becoming more common in Sri Lanka to stage public protests, burn tires, block roads and carry the mortal remains of persons killed by elephants to Wildlife Department offices, and to manhandle officials whenever an 'elephant incident' occurs.

It is not only the people who have changed but also the elephants. Where elephants of the past took flight at the mere sound of a human voice and generally kept away from anything 'human', elephants of today are more and more coming to accept conflict as the norm and responding to it in kind. In many areas elephants are increasingly raiding crops in the face of heightened efforts at confronting them as they are willing to accept ever greater levels of conflict. Attempted chasing of crop raiding bulls is increasingly met with violent responses from them that result in injury and death of farmers. Throw stones at a sleeping dog every day and he will jump on you even before you throw a stone one day. What we have with the elephants of today is the same situation. The HEC we have to deal with today is a monster of our own creation.

The response of most authorities to the increasing HEC is to up the ante. The Wildlife Department in Sri Lanka currently distributes tens of thousands of 'elephant crackers' (firecracker that is about a foot long and an inch in diameter, practically a small bomb) annually to farmers for battling elephants. A doubling of the amount is on the cards. Greater numbers of elephant crackers and shooting with 'repeater' shotguns are used for periodic 'elephant drives' undertaken by the Wildlife Department to move elephants to protected areas. People confront elephants with everything ranging from stones and sticks to home-made shot guns and throwing lighted fuel soaked ash on elephants that sticks and burns. The end result is over 220 elephant deaths and 50 human deaths in Sri Lanka in 2009 alone.

Is there no alternative to this escalating spiral of confrontation? What about passive barriers? Of the multitude of elephant barriers that have been tried and found wanting, electric fences stand out as the one method that has failed the least. The problem with electric fences is expense and maintenance. Currently electric fences cost around \$ 5000 per km. Who should bear this cost? Maintenance on electric fences consists mainly of clearing vegetation that would touch the fence and repairing any breakages. Someone needs to walk along the fence every few days and attend to it. Who should be responsible for such maintenance?

One school of thought would say that the need for a fence is because elephants are being conserved hence it is the responsibility of the conservation establishment. Such an argument would hold water if elephants were introduced to an area for the purpose of conservation and were subsequently causing problems. A parallel would be your neighbor acquiring some cows which then jump over the hedge into your backyard and eat the prize flowers. However the reality is that HEC is caused not by the introduction of elephants into what was originally human habitat but

development and settling of areas with elephants. If a person decides to build a house in an area with elephants, should he not take measures to safe guard his house or at the least lend a hand protect his house from elephants? If I cultivate in an area with elephants is it someone else's duty to guard my cultivation so that I can reap the benefit? As discussed in the note by the co-chairs in this issue, if a development agency undertakes a development project in an area with elephants that results in HEC, whose responsibility is it to institute preventive measures and take adequate safe guards to protect the development? If the development causes escalation of HEC in surrounding villages is it someone else who should take care of the problem?

Why we are faced with an escalating HEC that is rapidly becoming unmanageable in some areas is that in most cases those who settle, cultivate and conduct developmental activities in areas with elephants, undertake such activities irresponsibly, expecting someone else to solve the HEC that are born out of their deeds. This has gone so far in Sri Lanka for example that now there are millions of people, houses, paddy fields and other cultivations in areas with elephants, and the Department of Wildlife Conservation which has a thousand personnel in total is expected to 'guard' all of them. Billions of dollars are spent in development projects such as infrastructure, irrigation and commercial plantations, in areas with elephants. The budget for conservation agencies in most range countries are a few paltry millions at best with which they are supposed to address the problems created by the billions in investments. This mismatch in problem creation and solving is too lopsided in the case of HEC for there to be any meaningful results.

Take the case of human deaths and injuries caused by elephants. Unlike a man-eating tiger or lion there is no gain for an elephant in killing a person. No elephant goes around looking for people to kill. In Asia especially, elephants living as they are in a sea of people, have to actively avoid people all the time. In most instances of human deaths and injury there is something the person could have done different that would have prevented the incident. Many such incidents are

caused by drunkenness, walking alone or going on a bicycle or motorbike after dark in areas with elephants. Most instances of house breaking are due to storage of paddy harvest in the house. Elephant pushes wall, wall topples on those sleeping under it. People living in areas with elephants traditionally took many safeguards. They went to their fields in the evening while it was still light. They had a tree hut in the field, which afforded them protection from elephants, but today people are less and less willing to accept the fact that they are living in areas with elephants and to take necessary safeguards.

If we are to effectively address the HEC and prevent its escalation a change in paradigm is needed. We need to move away from the spiral of escalating conflict. Those in areas with elephants and those conducting developments in areas with elephants as well as funding agencies that support such developments need to realize that doing business in areas with elephants has consequences. They need to take responsibility for preventing, mitigating and managing HEC that arise out of their doings. Development and funding agencies investing in areas with elephants need to integrate HEC prevention and mitigation plans for the development and areas of increased conflict into project design and implementation. The costs of such activities have to be part of the project cost and mechanisms and funding for management of HEC have to be in place for the duration of the conflict and not just the project implementation period.

Finally, it is not to say that the conservation establishment does not have any responsibility for mitigating HEC, they need to come up with better ways to manage and mitigate HEC with least detriment to elephant conservation. However HEC is so complex, extensive and pervasive, that it is a battle they alone cannot even begin to fight. The precious and paltry sums of money that are represented by conservation dollars are less than a drop in the bucket that we are trying to douse a raging fire with. If we are serious about effectively mitigating HEC and elephant conservation, we need to think in terms of development scale investments in time, funds and effort to address the problem.