

Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) Workshop Report

Ahimsa Campos-Arceiz^{1*} and Prithiviraj Fernando²

¹*School of Geography, University of Nottingham Malaysia Campus, Kajang, Selangor, Malaysia*

²*Centre for Conservation and Research, Tissamaharama, Sri Lanka*

*Corresponding author's e-mail: ahimsa@camposarceiz.com

Background

The human-elephant conflict (HEC) is the main threat for Asian elephants throughout their range. Although much effort and resources have been expended in pursuit of its resolution, little progress has been made in the past few decades. HEC occurs over a wide range of ecological and socio-economic scenarios. One of the factors retarding effective management of HEC across different landscapes is the lack of coordination and standardization of methods in its study and mitigation, which prevents lessons learnt in one context being applied to others.

The Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) is an informal network of researchers and practitioners that work on Asian elephant conservation, initiated in 2011. One of the main objectives of ECG is to standardize methods in the study of HEC and effectiveness of its mitigation. ECG is currently composed of 11 teams representing projects in 9 Asian elephant range countries consisting of Cambodia (FFI), China (ZSL), India (WWF and NCF), Indonesia (WWF), Malaysia (MEME), Myanmar (SCBI), Nepal (BirdLife), Sri Lanka (CCR) and Thailand (ZSL and WWF). Since 2011, ECG has held three workshops in which a common research project was designed and conducted, in each of the project sites. The previous ECG workshops took place in Sri Lanka, India, and Malaysia.

Here we report on the 4th ECG workshop, which took place at 'Wildlife Reserves Singapore' (WRS), on 20-24th August 2015 and was funded by WRS. The Workshop was attended by 27 people, including members of all 11 current ECG teams and WRS staff. The workshop consisted of

three days of discussions, a half-day public event and visits to WRS's Zoo, Night Safari, and River Safari.

Review of previous and ongoing work

On the first day we reviewed the results of previous and ongoing work. Each team conducted a brief presentation about their ongoing research activities. We then discussed the status and results of previous joint ECG initiatives.

Public event at WRS

On the second day, WRS and ECG held a public event called 'Elephants and us'. The event included an introduction by WRS's Dr. Sonja Luz, brief presentations by four ECG members, and a panel discussion and Q&A session with the Singaporean public. The event concluded with a lunch, where the public had a chance to interact with ECG members. The event was well attended.

New ECG projects

At the next session after intensive discussion, ECG members proposed 11 potential activities to be conducted in 2016. Each of the 11 participating teams voted for two of these activities in a ranked voting system in which each team voted for a top priority (2 points) and a second priority (1 point) activity. These points were then summed and the activities ranked based on the relative support. Four activities mustered more than 80% of support: (1) analyzing patterns of HEC-related human and elephant mortality, (2) electric fence effectiveness, (3) elephant occupancy in forested areas, and (4) study of elephant body condition.

After long deliberation, ECG members agreed to conduct two research activities in 2016; studying patterns of human and elephant mortality and conducting a comparative analysis of elephant body condition in the different landscapes where we work. The rest of the day was spent designing research methodologies and assigning timelines and responsibilities. The results of these new projects will be discussed at the 2016 annual ECG workshop.

ECG and the future of the group

ECG is a highly heterogeneous group that includes members from different organizations and organization types (e.g. NGOs, research groups). As such, it is always important to monitor where we stand as a group and where we intend to be in the future. The last half-day of the workshop was dedicated to discuss the future of ECG as a group.

So far ECG has done two main types of activities: (1) joint standardized research and (2) knowledge exchange between groups from different organizations working in diverse landscapes. It was agreed that these two types of activities should remain the core of what ECG does. However, it was also decided that ECG should address

policy issues pertaining to elephant conservation. Several members suggested the importance of producing policy briefs, summarizing the state of knowledge of HEC causes, impact, and appropriate management.

In terms of the group size it was agreed that the current size of ECG is already bigger than originally intended and that the group should not grow any further in the short term. ECG members agreed that the group does not need any formal structure (such as a chair, secretary, etc).

With regard to ways to support the Asian Elephant Specialist Group, it was decided to see how the Asian Elephant Specialist Group develops after the current changes in leadership and structure, and to offer any assistance that was needed.

Funding remains the biggest challenge for a group like ECG. The group agreed that it is highly unlikely that funds can be obtained for all the current members and funding objectives should be realistic and sustainable. As a group, we decided to prioritize obtaining funds to hold an annual workshop and each member to fund its in-country research activities, while exploring the possibility of obtaining funding to support research activities across groups.

