

Report of the Seventh Elephant Conservation Group Workshop

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Background

As Gajah's readers know too well, Asian elephants (*Elephas maximus*) are endangered, and taking effective actions for their conservation is difficult, very difficult. The human-elephant conflict (HEC), Asian elephants' main threat, is a wicked problem; this is, a problem difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wicked_problem).

Despite considerable efforts being made across the species range, the progresses in mitigating the negative effects of HEC on people and elephants are, at best, modest. In this context, knowledge exchange among stakeholders, particularly among conservationists working on the same issues in different geographical, ecological, and sociopolitical contexts, can help improve our capacity to address the wicked issues of Asian elephant conservation and HEC mitigation. Here we report on the 7th meeting of the Elephant Conservation Group (ECG) that took place in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysian Borneo, on 1.–3. December 2019.

ECG is an informal network of Asian elephant conservation researchers and practitioners that began operating in 2011 with the main objective of generating peer-to-peer knowledge exchange about Asian elephant conservation issues in different countries, landscapes, and socio-ecological contexts (<https://elephant>

[conservationgroup.wordpress.com](https://elephantconservationgroup.wordpress.com)). ECG members gather regularly (every 1–2 years, generally in a range country) and spend 3–4 days discussing different aspects of our work, concerns, and things we would like to learn from each other. ECG's meetings are run on a budget — generally renting a big house in which we stay in shared rooms and conduct presentations and discussions in the living room. The essence of ECG meetings is the quality of the discussions, the openness and comfort of the exchanges, and the opportunity to develop personal relationships among members.

ECG had already met six times since 2011. This 7th meeting in 2019 was attended by 19 people, representing 12 organizations from 9 range countries. The participants included representatives from Cambodia (FFI), China (ZSL-China), India (NCF), Indonesia (Indonesia



Elephant Conservation Association), Malaysia (MEME, Seratu Aatai, WWF-Malaysia), Myanmar (WWF-Myanmar), Nepal (IUCN-Nepal), Sri Lanka (CCR), Thailand, UK (Elephant Family) and the USA (WWF-US). Some individuals and organizations have attended all seven meetings, while for a few this was their first ECG meeting.

Below we present a very succinct summary of the activities and discussion topics, as well as three consensus statements that were agreed upon on the course of the discussions.

Group reports

The first half of the meeting was allocated to group reports in which each organization delivered a short presentation describing progress and new ideas since the previous meeting in April 2018.

Among this session's highlights, Prithiviraj Fernando (CCR) presented on the controversy around wild elephant feeding by the public in Sri Lanka. While some people consider this situation problematic for elephant conservation, he argued that elephant feeding can be managed in a positive way for both wild elephants and people.

Paing Soe, from WWF-Myanmar, reported on the recent skin-related poaching crisis in Myanmar and how WWF's conservation initiatives seem to have been effective at curbing elephant killing in recent months and years.

Ananda Kumar, from India's NCF shared the perception that, in the landscape where they work (Hassan), for each problem elephant removed (e.g. killed or translocated) more problem elephants seem to appear. Whether this is actually



happening, and the underlying mechanisms, definitely merit further investigation. He also shared an anecdote about a massive bull walking tamely among people without seemingly posing any threat to people. Why would this big male behave in such a docile way while other individuals are so aggressive? Similar cases of extremely tame elephants have been reported from the Lower Kinabatangan, in Sabah. On the other hand, Becky Shu Chen from ZSL-China showed us a movie of very aggressive elephants, walking through villages chasing people they encounter.

Sreedhar Vijayakrishnan, also from NCF, reported how in their long-term elephant monitoring in Valparai, they have recorded home range shifts in some family groups, confirming that such shifts do occur in Asia.

Nurzhafarina Othman, from Sabah's Seratu Aatai, presented a booklet on elephant behaviour that her team has developed, especially to promote safety among villagers and plantation staff in HEC-affected areas.

Thematic discussions

We allocated the second half of the meeting to discussion sessions whereby we addressed topics previously proposed by ECG members. The discussion topics included: (1) the role of habitat enrichment on HEC mitigation, (2) can HEC mitigation lead to more habitat encroachment by people?, (3) palm oil plantations and their attitude towards elephants, (4) effect of infrastructure on elephant habitat connectivity, (5) how to use behavioural science for elephant conservation, and (6) decision-making in elephant translocation.





Consensus statements

In this ECG meeting, we tried for the first time to produce consensus statements on some of the issues discussed. Due to the complexity of the topics, we did not attempt to reach consensus on all topics. On the topic of habitat enrichment, we reached the following two consensuses:

1. **Habitat enrichment can be used to concentrate Asian elephant presence or certain activities and behaviours in specific areas.** For example, if we want to attract elephants to a road underpass, we can use preferred food plants to attract them there.

2. **There is no evidence on whether habitat enrichment can reduce HEC.** Although habitat enrichment is frequently considered as one of the options to mitigate HEC throughout Asia, we think there is no evidence of such an approach being used effectively at the moment. We agreed that it is appropriate to test its effectiveness as long as it is properly monitored and we can learn from the experience.

Furthermore, we did not reach a clear consensus on whether habitat enrichment can be used to increase elephant populations. In any case, we agreed that manipulating natural vegetation (e.g. tropical forests) is complicated and can lead to unexpected and undesired negative consequences.

We also discussed about ‘what we talk about when we talk about HEC mitigation’, and reached the following consensus:

3. **Traditional HEC mitigation strategies throughout Asia have focused on reducing costs for people, not elephants.** This is important because the general perception is often the opposite. It is not unusual to hear arguments such as ‘the government care more about elephants than about people’. We are noticing, however, a shift in paradigm with new approaches focusing on human-elephant coexistence. Human-elephant coexistence approaches really consider some benefits for elephants. Despite the ongoing change, there are still few human-elephant coexistence success stories to bank on.

Final remarks

Peer-to-peer exchanges such as those at the ECG meetings are an important resource for conservation researchers and practitioners. These slow, deep, informal, and open discussions are very different to what happens in formal learning environments and academic events, such as courses and conferences. These discussions allow participants to learn from colleagues with generally similar but slightly different experiences and even to co-produce knowledge by the common interpretation of information.

We encourage more of these initiatives to take place, including forming informal groups within countries and regional blocs. We also encourage ECG members to continue finding the time and resources for future meetings and perhaps exploring further the potential of consensus statements to move forward in our understanding of what drives HEC and the potential mechanisms to promote human-elephant coexistence in Asian landscapes.

