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SAVE THE ASIAN ELEPHANTS

# Save The Asian Elephants

## BRIEFING NOTE

### Asian Elephants in Peril – Endangered and Victims of Cruel Abuse

The plight of the African elephant is well known. There is, however, much less awareness of the threats facing Asian elephants. Numbers of wild Asian elephants have declined from estimates of a million or more in the nineteenth century to barely 40,000 today; an estimated reduction in population size of at least 50% over the last three generations.<sup>1</sup> There are three subspecies of the Asian elephant:

- The Indian elephant: there are around 28,000 in India; 4,500 in Myanmar; 2,800 in Thailand; 2,600 in Malaysia; and another approximately 2,000 in Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Laos, China, Cambodia and Vietnam.
- The Sri Lankan elephant; the wild population is estimated to be about 5,800.
- The Sumatran elephant; only around 2,600 animals remain in the wild.

Revered but exploited, after 55 million years this ancient species has been brought to the brink of total extinction. This dramatic decline is chiefly attributable to the fragmentation and degradation of its natural habitat, coupled with hunting for ivory and live capture. Surviving populations are generally small and isolated as ancient migratory corridors are obstructed by human activity. This impedes gene-flow, exposing the creatures to greater vulnerability to disease and illness.

#### Threats facing Asian elephants

##### *Capture from the wild & the brutal 'breaking in' process*

Elephant calves and juveniles are snatched from their forest homes to supply tourist attractions such as rides as well as religious and cultural festivals and the logging industry. Many wild elephants are caught in Myanmar and smuggled across the border to supply Thai tourist attractions. Capture often entails slaughtering the mothers and other herd members who attempt to protect their young.

The captured animals are forced into a pen known as a 'training crush' and tied to prevent them moving. They are deprived of water, food and sleep. They are brutally, often fatally, beaten with sticks, chains or

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<sup>1</sup> Report on Status of Elephant Populations to Standing Committee of CITES, 2011 (SC61 Doc. 44.2)



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bullhooks (metal hooks used to wound the animals) and stabbed with knives and nails. This practice – known as “pajan” – is designed to break their spirits and make them submissive. So brutal are the beatings that many die during this inhumane ‘domestication’ process.

For nearly all captive elephants, life involves great suffering, chained tightly for most of the time, causing abrasions and infections, all reinforced by the deliberate application of fear and pain with the use of spikes and bullhooks (the “ankus”). This is generally combined with malnourishment and sensory and social deprivation, with animals kept in solitary confinement and unable to interact with others kept in the same facility.

### ***Use of elephants in temples and festivals***

Many captive elephants are used for religious ceremonies in and around temples and for festivals. With 700 captive elephants, Kerala has the largest captive population in India. Most of the Hindu temples in Kerala own elephants; the Guruvayur temple has around 60. Many temples keep elephants to give blessings to visitors, for which a fee is paid. Surrounded by crowds and noise, the animals are often chained by their legs to posts. They suffer from heat exhaustion and, as a result of standing on the hard stone temple floors in their own waste, from foot diseases and painful infections that wear away the soles of the feet. The severity of the abuse was highlighted by a recent report by the Heritage Animal Task Force of Kerala of a blind elephant being forced to carry the idol of the Guruvayur temple, which reported that the elephant had been blinded as a result of practices by its mahouts and wounded on its back by sharp weapons.

Elephants owned by temples and individuals are rented out, for payment, for use in festivals and processions. They are transported long distances in dilapidated trucks and walk for hours on tarred roads, and are forced to take part in long, noisy parades involving loudspeakers and firecrackers. The elephants are also hired to promote goods in trade fairs and by political parties for campaign processions.

### ***Poaching for ivory***

Poaching of Asian elephants for ivory and meat is a serious problem. The Wildlife Protection Society of India reports the loss of over 121 elephants due to poaching in the period 2008-2011.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.wpsi-india.org/projects/elephant\\_poaching.php](http://www.wpsi-india.org/projects/elephant_poaching.php)



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### *Loss of habitat*

Loss, degradation and fragmentation of habitat are major threats for wild elephant populations. The rapidly growing human population of tropical Asia has encroached on the elephant's dwindling forest habitat. Expanding human settlements and farming, as well as industrial operations and roads, have eaten into and fragmented elephant habitats and blocked their traditional migratory routes. The increasing proximity of human activities to elephants' natural range gives rise to human-elephant conflicts. Forced out of their ever dwindling forest habitats, elephants can trample and eat crops, leading to financial losses for farmers. Both people and elephants are killed in such conflicts. In addition, each year elephants are killed in rail and road accidents and by electrocution following contact with unprotected electric power lines run through their habitat.

### *The ecological importance of elephants*

Elephants are referred to by ecologists as mega-gardeners of the forest: they prune the trees as they feed, disperse billions of seeds in their droppings, and each produces on average a tonne of manure weekly which fertilises the forest and increases its productivity. Many of India's natural forests are now deprived of the ecological function of the elephant. As the critical role of the forests in storing carbon, generating rainfall and stabilising our climate is better understood, elephants, as a super-keystone species, should be part of national and international planning.

### **Public opinion**

A poll taken in the UK in November 2015<sup>3</sup> showed that 80% of the public oppose the taking of elephants from the wild for use in the tourist industry. An overwhelming majority said that the use of elephants in tourist trekking and entertainment is unjustified (86%) and that the use of elephants in temples is unjustified (87%).

### **Actions needed**

1. We respectfully request the Governments of India and countries in south-east Asia to take urgent steps to:
  - end pajan – the brutal process of domesticating wild-caught elephants
  - end capture from the wild and poaching for ivory and baby elephants

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://stae.org/news/>



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- end cruel practices including beating, wounding with sharp implements and keeping elephants chained; enclosures that replace chains must meet international welfare standards
  - end the use of elephants in tourist interactions
  - ensure that elephants used in temples, festivals and processions are kept with high standards of animal welfare, and in the medium term such uses should be phased out
  - further develop their programmes for containing and reducing human-elephant conflicts and reducing elephant mortality due to road and rail accidents and electrocution
  - step up initiatives for developing corridors for migration routes and for returning elephants to the wild where they can play their natural role in forests, whether in fenced forest reserves or, where strict criteria for release are met, rehabilitation into the wild.
2. We urge tourists, travel agents and tour operators not to support any attractions that involve captive elephants other than those genuinely operating as sanctuaries.

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